

Michael Wharton

'Peter Simple' - columnist of mordant satire and inventive fantasy on the 'Telegraph' for 49 years

Thursday 26 January 2006

Michael Bernard Nathan (Michael Wharton), journalist: born Shipley, Yorkshire 19 April 1913; married 1936 Joan Atkey (one son; marriage dissolved 1947), 1952 Kate Derrington (died 1992; one daughter; marriage dissolved 1972), 1974 Susan Moller; died High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire 23 January 2006.

Michael Wharton was almost certainly the longest-serving, and quite certainly the most original, newspaper columnist of the 20th century. He wrote as "Peter Simple" in the Daily or Sunday Telegraph for almost half a century and his final column appeared last Friday, three days before his death at the age of 92.

No one could match his gleeful skill in targeting the follies and horrors of the times: and no one could make so many readers laugh aloud over a few square inches of newsprint so often and so consistently. It was his gift to combine a deep conservative seriousness with a fantastic humour that cloaked all but his bitterest onslaughts in hilarious imaginings.

Readers cherished every appearance in his column of his wild gallery of invented characters, each of them personifying some aspect of the modern world which he deemed fit subject for mordant satire. Dr Spacely-Trellis, the go-ahead Bishop of Bevindon and the author of *God the Humanist*, was forever brooding with his "partner" on the need for more sex education. J. Bonington Jagworth, leader of the Motorists' Liberation Front, and his accomplice the Rev John Goodwheel, "the Apostle of the Motorways", warned us against the progressive subjugation of England by the motorcar culture.

One recurrent figure from nightmare, the Hampstead Thinker Mrs Anna Dutt-Pauker, whose luxurious house "Marxmount" was a centre for modish support for Communist tyranny, was eloquent of Wharton's detestation of "the whole left-wing package deal".

Because Wharton was a shy and somewhat melancholy person, few of his readers had a clear picture of the man. He might have become a national figure through television, had he chosen to play the part of tame reactionary; but he loathed television (one of his paragraphs began, "Happening to be in a room with a television-receiving apparatus in it, I found myself watching a programme . . ."). On one occasion he accepted an invitation to submit to a long TV interview by Robert Kee. It was a disaster which he never repeated, nor, I believe, was he ever invited to repeat it.

One reason for the failure of that episode was his far too generous attempt to fortify himself beforehand. He was, as he said, "a lifelong serious drinker", a way of life he embraced before

being sent down from Oxford for "various misdemeanours" (including throwing a Scotch egg at the high table in hall).

But, although he did no work at Oxford (he won a scholarship from Bradford Grammar School to Lincoln College to read Greats), indeed made a close study of idleness instead, he was one of the most widely read of men. He also acquired a marvellously precise prose style. After Oxford he moved, more or less inevitably, into the Bohemian literary circles of pre-war London, selling articles to the old Punch and other magazines. He wrote a strange, surrealist novel, *Sheldrake*, not published until 1958, a fantasy about his native Yorkshire and the city of Bradford (no more fantastic than what has happened to Bradford since then, he once remarked).

Then war came and he enlisted in the Royal Artillery. He served five years in India, achieving the surprisingly lofty rank of lieutenant-colonel. When afterwards he returned to the much-altered London literary scene, he found his way into the BBC as a talks producer. He was not happy there. For one thing, the prevailing left-wing ethos repelled him and he could hardly disagree when, by devious means, he found that his personal file was marked, "He is not really BBC material."

Thus the invitation to become, in 1957, Colin Welch's collaborator on the "Peter Simple" column at *The Daily Telegraph*, although unsought, came happily out of the blue. Three years later he became the sole author of the column. At the age of 43, after a restless and aimless existence, Michael Wharton had found his life's work.

"Wharton" was not, in fact, his real name, which was Nathan. His forebears on his father's side were German Jews who moved to Bradford and flourished in the wool trade. Wharton was the maiden name of his mother, a Yorkshire girl of humble birth, who nurtured a fancy of undiscovered but elevated origins. It was not Michael Wharton's way to talk about his private life; indeed, during a friendship extending over some 60 years, I seldom heard him speak of such matters. It went against his reserved, rather diffident nature to turn a spotlight upon himself, although in his two volumes of autobiography (*The Missing Will*, 1984, and *A Dubious Codicil*, 1991) he revealed much. I think he found it easier on paper.

Perhaps the origins of his rich vein of fantasy can be traced to his solitary childhood. He had no memory, he said, of ever playing with another child; not that he seemed to experience much sense of deprivation, for he filled the void with his own imaginings - inventing stories of the dynasties of the family dogs and cats, or writing plays in which the neighbours figured as grotesques.

It is curious to think that the inhabitants of a respectable West Riding suburb were the authentic precursors of Peter Simple's more memorable creations such as Dr Heinz Kiosk (psychiatric adviser to the White Fish Authority), with his constant cry of "We are all guilty", or Julian Birdbath, discoverer of the "missing" Brontë sister Doreen, or the unforgettable

Alderman Foodbotham, "25-stone, crag-jawed, iron-watchchained, grim-booted perpetual chairman of the Bradford City Tramways and Fine Arts Committee in the great days".

That sheltered childhood also accounts for Wharton's love of obscure and surprising knowledge. Although his parents' house was almost without books, as a boy he had access to the Encyclopaedia Britannica (in the "unmodernised" 11th edition, of course) of which he read large parts, storing in his retentive memory a vast stock of disorganised knowledge. The truth is that despite the fiasco of his Oxford career he had a love of learning and an innate talent for it.

Within Wharton, alongside the satirist and the notional Luddite, was a scholar, with a particular love of the history of the British Isles. This came to the fore on the various "jaunts" he and I made, together with our wives, to explore various interesting corners of Britain. Whether we were returning to the Yorkshire Dales (for which his affection never faltered), or George Borrow's Wales or western Ireland, he acted as a one-man Baedeker (more amusing than Baedeker, it must be said). As befitted a satirist who was wounded by the changes he observed in his country, he had a profound attachment to the land and a true Tory's nostalgia for an idealised vision of its past.

Many of his readers shared those feelings. Those who did not were able to laugh with him and even, perhaps, a little at themselves.

J. W. M. Thompson

Source:
The Independent

<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/michael-wharton-524550.html>