

Foreword

There are not many books of which it could be truly said that there is nothing else like them: but this is true of Peacock's novels in general and of *Gryll Grange* in particular. He was never a populist writer but has always had, in the several generations which have now passed since these books were first published, a sophisticated coterie of readers with a taste for oddities and a sense of humour – his sense of humour – who have loved them.

The books are not easy to describe. Ostensibly novels, they do have a narrative but the narrative is not the point. They are told mainly in dialogue, so the action consists (as it often does, for example, in Shaw's plays) in a clash of arguments – with no-one actually convincing anybody. (But in Peacock, unlike Shaw, the arguments are interspersed with robust amounts of eating and drinking).

The characters in the earlier novels tended to be satirical representations of contemporary political and literary figures, but by the time he wrote *Gryll Grange* they have become more filled out as people. Peacock's own political position is hard to define or indeed to determine. Was he a Radical? He hated the pestilential breed of reformers. Was he a Conservative? He provided an answer, of a sort, in a letter written to a Belfast solicitor:

'If I have said nothing lately about the Tories, it arises from my considering them to be as extinct as the Mammoth. Their successors, the Conservatives, as they call themselves, appear to me like Falstaff's otter, "neither fish nor flesh", one knows not where to have them. I could not, in a dialogue, put into the mouth of one of them the affirmation of any principle which I should expect him to adhere to for five minutes.'

If he was not a consistent political animal, was he then a humorist or a philosopher? Again the answer must be that he

was both and neither; an answer which he would have found quite satisfactory. If any character speaks for him, it is *Gryll Grange's* protagonist, the Reverend Doctor Opimian. The book is stuffed with allusions and quotations, and indeed the very first line, introducing Opimian, constitutes an obscure joke which deserves a footnote, for 'Opimian' was the name of a celebrated Roman wine, called after the man who was Consul in 126 BC, the year of its vintage.

Peacock's own biography, though quickly told, and his views, however hard to pin down, are relevant to the fullest appreciation of his books.

Born in 1785, he came, on his mother's side, from a distinguished naval family. He was, however, almost entirely self-educated – with the help of his mother, obviously a strong and educated woman.

As a young man he took life easily and wrote poetry. His poetic gifts are exemplified in *Gryll Grange* by a touching and beautiful poem, 'Love and Age' (page 121). He acquired some literary reputation and became quite a close friend of Shelley. Feeling perhaps the need of a more solid income, he applied for and obtained a job as what was called 'an Examiner' in the East India Company's London office. In due course he succeeded to the position of Chief Examiner with the very considerable salary of £2,000 a year. He deserved it, converting the Company's fleet to steam-powered ironclads and increasing the frequency of the mail service to India from one ship every six months to once a month. He organised the armed protection of the Company's ships when they travelled up Indian rivers. Characteristically, he prepared for these highly practical measures by studying the routes taken to the Far East by travellers of the ancient world. In the office he was punctilious, courteous and amusing. When he retired after twenty years, with a commensurate pension (£1,333 6s 8d per annum), he was succeeded in the post by John Stuart Mill, who held it for

just two years, until the East India Company's responsibilities were taken over by the British Raj.

During those years at East India House, he wrote no books; so when *Gryll Grange* appeared twenty-nine years had passed since the publication of its immediate predecessor, *Crotchet Castle*. Peacock was now in his mid-seventies, living peacefully in his house beside the Thames in Surrey. His opinions had not so much changed as mellowed. The shafts which he directed at old opponents had wit and accuracy but little sting.

Of all the characters in all the books the Reverend Doctor Opimian is the one who speaks most closely for his creator, and there could hardly be a more delightful spokesman. 'His tastes,' we are told, 'were four: a good library, a good dinner, a pleasant garden, and rural walks. He was an athlete in pedestrianism.' His domestic circumstances were ideal; he enjoyed what Peacock, a widower after an illness-plagued marriage, lacked – a good and cheerful wife. 'From the master and mistress to the cook, and from the cook to the tom-cat, there was about the inhabitants of the vicarage a sleek and purring rotundity of the face and figure that denoted community of feelings, habits and diet; each in its kind, of course, for the doctor had his port, the cook her ale, and the cat his milk, in sufficiently liberal allowance.' It was plausible at the time, as it scarcely would be now, to take a rural Church of England clergyman as a natural incarnation of classical knowledge, curious learning and scholarly wit.

Some things, however, have not changed. Peacock disliked and distrusted paper money. Who is to say that he was wrong? He disliked the idea of appointments made by competitive examination, which, he said, would have kept Marlborough out of the army and Nelson out of the Navy. 'Competitive examination for clerks, and none for legislators,' asks Dr. Opimian, 'is this not an anomaly?'

We first see Opimian engaged in conversation with his friend Squire Gryll. 'I am afraid we live in a world of misnomers,'

Gryll says. 'In my little experience I have found that a gang of swindling bankers is a respectable old firm; that men who sell their votes to the highest bidder are a free and independent constituency; that a man who successively betrays everybody that trusts him, and abandons every principle he ever professed, is a great statesman, and a conservative, forsooth a *nil conservando*; that the test of intellectual capacity is in swallow, and not in digestion; that the art of teaching everything, except what will be of use to the recipient, is national education; and that a change for the worse is reform . . . While we are on the subject of misnomers, what say you to the wisdom of Parliament?'

'Why, sir,' Opimian replies, 'I do not call that a misnomer. The term wisdom is used in a parliamentary sense. It is not like any other wisdom . . .'

And so this excellent conversation flows on. Some of the satire reads rather differently in a modern light. Opimian toys with the idea that science might destroy the whole world. It never occurred to him – or to Peacock – that such a thing might happen literally. He makes fun of fashionable sociologists whose theories threaten the ordered structures of society but Peacock did not, could not, foresee how far the social order really has been destabilised by rabid sociologists and their doctrines of improvement. What were jokes to him have become harsh reality for us.

Gryll Grange is the mature fruit of Peacock's old age. Many, probably most, of his admirers would choose it as their favourite among his works. It would have been a masterpiece at any juncture, but for it to have ripened after so long a period of literary silence must surely be astonishing. He wrote no more books, although he lived, in good health, for another six years.

We have several charming glimpses of him during this retirement. A young man, rowing past on the Thames, observed to his companion 'This must be old Peacock's place.' A head of

white hair suddenly popped up from behind a hedge, and announced 'It is – and this is old Peacock!' A Scottish poet, Robert Buchanan, who had met him long before with Shelley, decided to visit him. After walking several miles through green fields and lanes, he came to a lawn beside the river. At the bottom of some garden steps a boat was swinging idly. Peacock, instantly recognisable with his shock of white hair, sat just outside an open library door, 'while a little maiden of sixteen rested on his knees the great quarto "Orlando Innamorato" of Bojardo, and, following with her fingers the sunlit lines, read soft and low, corrected ever and anon by his kind voice, the delicate Italian he loved so well.'

Peacock liked to see friends and loved the company of his children and grandchildren but had no desire to go into London or mingle in society. When Thackeray called unannounced he received him courteously but was not pleased. He supervised the household and its purchases and was learning Spanish.

In the winter of 1865-6 a fire broke out on the roof of his bedroom. He was taken to the library, but when it was suggested that he should leave the house altogether, he exclaimed 'By all the gods, I will not be moved!' The fire was extinguished, but Peacock took to his bed and died a few weeks later.

'I will not be moved' sums up his philosophy rather well. It is generally considered a misfortune to have been born outside one's proper time. Peacock was not so much born out of his time as born into his time – and stayed there while the world moved on. It would, however, be wrong to see him as representing any particular period, any coherent body of doctrine, literary, political or philosophic. Rather, he was in the business of smiling at life and its absurdities.

The best summing up is by Edith Nicolls, his favourite granddaughter. 'As he advanced in years,' she wrote, 'his detestation of

anything disagreeable made him simply avoid whatever fretted him, laughing off all sorts of ordinary calls on his leisure time. His love of ease and kindness of heart made it impossible that he could be actively unkind to anyone, but he would not be worried, and just got away from anything that annoyed him. He was very fond of his children, and was an indulgent father to them, and he was a kind and affectionate grandfather; but he could not bear anyone to be unhappy or uncomfortable about him, and this feeling he carried down to the animal creation; his pet cats and dogs were especially cared for by himself, the birds in the garden were carefully watched over and fed, and no gun was ever allowed to be fired about the place.'

Edith Nicolls gives us as good a picture as any with which to leave him: 'May Day he always kept in true old English fashion; all the children of the village came round with their garlands of flowers, and each child was presented with a new penny, or silver threepenny or fourpenny piece, according to the beauty of their garlands; the money was given by the Queen of the May, always one of his granddaughters, who sat beside him, dressed in white and crowned with flowers, and holding a sceptre of flowers in her hand. He loved to keep up these old English customs.'

He was a happy man and a cause of happiness in others. Happily we can still be drawn into his conversation by *Gryll Grange*.

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