

## THE DUST OF THE PAST

by Robert H. Super

Back in 1819 the author of *Ivanhoe* addressed a Dedicatory Epistle to Dr. Jonas Dryasdust, Antiquary, and in doing so gave the English language a new word. The name of Dryasdust thereafter plays in and out among the pages of the biographies written by that loyal Scotsman Thomas Carlyle, standing in fine Anglo-Saxon relief amongst the Teutonic names of Sauerteig, Teufelsdröckh, and Hofrath Heuschrecke. You may suppose that Carlyle inclined to adopt a rather patronizing tone toward the fellow: "poor Dryasdust" could never get a glimpse of "God's Fact as it was," no matter how hard he tried.

And yet when Carlyle speaks of the Historian *without* naming him, and having defined History as "Philosophy teaching by Experience," it is to the likes of Dryasdust that he turns as the men to gather and record Experience for Philosophy to work upon. And I too this afternoon should like to celebrate that gentleman as something of a hero, in his own way.

He is certainly unfashionable; so much so, indeed, that he inclines to be self-conscious and to try to change his appearance. He used to be regarded somewhat tolerantly on our university campuses, with his threadbare and unpressed suit, his unkempt hair, his ill-fitting spectacles, giving, it seemed to me, a new meaning to the scriptural "Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return!" Nowadays he dresses somewhat better—though never well enough to fool anybody—and professes rather too great tolerance, in my opinion, for the latest that has been thought and said rather than for the proverbial *best* that has been thought and said. And not wishing to be left behind in his praise of our brave new world, he sometimes allows himself to be persuaded that technology can do all that sheer drudgery used to do.

It cannot. And now, having been so categorical in my denial, I must confess how often I myself am caught either forgetful or ignorant of what technology *can* do for me. When I began to learn my trade as a scholar, my pen was busy and my fingers

were numb with copying passages of books that I needed. And when I finally persuaded a librarian to admit the existence of the typewriter, I was still at work copying, though somewhat faster and more legibly. So that only a few months ago, from old habit, I started to copy an article from a journal not available in my own library, and had written more than a page when I checked myself with the embarrassed realization that a few dimes inserted in a machine would do in a few minutes what I was starting to spend some hours upon, and do it without the certainty of error that my own copying would entail. Microfilms and Xerox copies give one a permanent record of things one has seen but cannot take with one. Sometimes—but here they become dangerous—photocopies must serve when one simply cannot spend the time or money to go in person to see the original. As for the computer, it helps the Librarian tremendously with his housekeeping, and in general what helps the Librarian helps the Scholar. The Scholar needs catalogs and bibliographies, and he needs them with as little delay as possible; these the computers can give him. The great defect of the computer for the humanist, however, is that it cannot *foresee* his need, and the characteristic of humane research is that it works not through attempting various permutations of the known but through a constant uncovering of what has been unknown, moving in the direction of a goal that is itself also unknown—as one might make one's way through a hitherto untraveled forest to see what is on the other side without ever being quite sure where the other side is.

There was a time when Dryasdust the Scholar always had his brother in the Librarian's seat. I remember that, when as a student I was introduced to the use of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, I was told that the Bodleian has, among its other collections, a collection of pins; for pins were used as bookmarks in the last century (much as our present undergraduates, I find, use paper clips), and Bodley's Librarian, whenever he found one in a book, laid it aside, and if it was in any way distinguishable from any other pin he placed it in a special container for preservation. Either the same Librarian or another was said to have preserved and given to the Bodleian all his bus and railway tickets, and even the paper in which his sandwich was wrapped if it had printed matter upon it. When a new library was dedicated at the University of Michigan in 1883, the Librarian of Harvard University, delivering the ceremonial address, remarked:

Nothing is more true than that comparatively few books add much to our store of knowledge. . . . [But] a book may have a curious psycho-

logical interest, independent of any addition to knowledge, which it may convey, as representing a type of mind, local peculiarities, or race-structure, which as one of a mass becomes of some importance in the study of mind. *It is always dangerous to say a book is of no value.*

Now, however, Dryasdust the Librarian is gone; Dryasdust the Scholar has merely changed his clothes, but Dryasdust the Librarian is gone. The humanistic scholar no longer works easily with the Librarian, even though most librarians are themselves humanists. For the essence of humanistic scholarship is history, and the study of history (as Carlyle well knew) requires that as little as possible of the past be lost, as much as possible be kept. A librarian friend of mine once pointed out to me that he could remove from the shelves the bound volumes of every technical journal prior to, say, 1930 (it may even have been a more recent date) and no one would even notice that they were gone. He can't do it with journals in the humanistic disciplines, for there the date of publication has no clear or predictable bearing on the usefulness of what is published. And so he must content himself with shelving row upon row of journals that our ancestors who published them may well have regarded as the merest ephemera.

But he resists, this Librarian, and one reason he resists is economy. It is more than a decade since we reached the point where the shelving costs more than the book we put upon it. And when it comes to paying for personnel to process and preserve books, even though the library staff has almost the lowest pay scale on the campus, the price is prohibitive. So that economics is beginning to make the modern librarian a book-hater. The terrors of the population explosion are as nothing to the man who must find housing for the products of the publishing explosion. It seems to me that more and more of the books I want to put my hands upon are being squeezed off the shelves by newcomers and moved into storage attics or cellars all over the community. And it is foolish optimism to suppose that when once money is found for enlarging the building, these books will come back: the new shelves will be filled to overflowing with new books almost before the workmen have disappeared from the site. It is no wonder that desperate remedies must be sought. A library I know is rather well equipped with runs of nineteenth-century newspapers, both American and foreign. But many of these were stored in the basement of a building that was only lent to the library; and when the proper tenants of the building needed their basement, the Librarian had no place to put his newspapers. And so he burned them. It took quite a while,

but in due course the entire file of the Baltimore *Sun* from its beginning had gone in smoke. When the historians on campus confronted him, he replied simply, "We can easily replace the whole set with microfilms." And when they pointed out that the cost of the film would be upwards of \$50,000, the Librarian was still unconcerned: it was still less than the cost of housing the original newspapers. Besides, he rather shrewdly estimated that he would never be called upon to make good his promise with the actual film.

But why cannot Dryasdust the Scholar be reasonable and take microphotography in his stride? Well, in the first place, every microform I have ever had experience with is harder to read than the page of print from which it was made. The machines have a way of being a good deal less perfect than their manufacturers led us to believe they were; they focus less well, they are hard on the eyes because they entail staring at a source of light, they are at the wrong angle, they take up so much room on the table that there is no space on which to write. The roll of film, which is still the commonest of microforms, is a step backward from one of the greatest inventions of the bookmakers—it returns from the codex, or book bound at the back, to the scroll, from the volume that will open instantly to whatever page one wants, to the roll that must run through all the pages one doesn't want until one comes to the right one. But these are annoyances, no doubt, rather than serious defects.

The defects are there, however, almost insurmountably. There is the matter of eye-span, for instance. One can comprehend a good deal of a two-page spread of a newspaper in a single glance; no microform I have used has ever been capable of showing more than a fragment of a newspaper page at one fix. The best study I have seen of the origins of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "Wreck of the Deutschland" was done by a student who, not content with the reprints of the newspaper accounts of the wreck that Hopkins read, went to the *Times* itself, and found there, on the page *opposite* the description of the wreck, an article which clearly was running through Hopkin's mind as he wrote the poem—an article only fortuitously associated with the subject in his mind, and perhaps only subconsciously, by the accident of his having read it at the same time. The student *could* have made the same discovery if he had used microfilm; he almost certainly would not have done so.

Furthermore, there are times when matters crucial to a study simply cannot be determined from a photograph. In questions of dating, bindings of books may be significant; even more helpful is

the paper, with its color, its watermarks. Neither will show up on a film. No film can show you how a book has been folded and put together. One may assume that photographs of books at least are usually produced with technical accuracy; photographs of manuscripts and letters all too often are made without the kind of delicate care that is needed to straighten out torn and folded margins that obscure words, to reveal lines hidden by the mountings, or even to put together properly leaves of a single letter that have become separated. Letters can be matched with postmarked envelopes by the pattern of their folds—but not on a film.

It is books, then, books on the shelf, that Dryasdust wants and will feel most comfortable among. If he tries to evaluate a library for his purposes, he will be less interested in the size of the budget for purchasing current books than in the Librarian's program for buying books from the past—not merely, not primarily, rarities, but very ordinary books, books often not worth the expense of cataloging in the bookseller's shop. A young library, like the Library of Rice University, has an almost insurmountable disadvantage over a library a hundred years or more older than itself, which acquired so many books when they were current that are now almost impossible to find. Fortunately, the Fondren Library has always been aware of the need to recover lost opportunities; its shelves of nineteenth-century English periodicals, for example, are a sheer delight to work with. And yet there are some rather important ones unrepresented; the task of procurement cannot yet be abandoned. For purposes of some kinds of study, one must go back to the pronouncement of the Harvard Librarian of 1883, that "it is dangerous to say that any book is of no value." No doubt a line must be drawn somewhere. But the *where* is not easy to determine. Certainly not by any mechanical conception of separate disciplines. Because unfortunately Dryasdust, pedant that he is, likes to be pedantic in an almost unpredictable range of fields. It is no doubt a safe prediction that theological studies will not soon occupy a central place among the academic disciplines at Rice University, and one does not often turn to theology of the past for illumination of one's personal religious problems today; yet theology has been so constantly in the forefront of man's thinking that Dryasdust may find himself unable to work effectively in a library that is ill equipped with theological literature. The classics have occupied so central a place in man's intellectual life in the past that most libraries of any size, even in universities that hardly teach Greek or Latin, are moderately well equipped there; on the



other hand, the modern European literatures are almost always very poorly represented in our collections. Yet for the scholar, the humanities retain a catholicity that will not be bounded within a specialist discipline.

On the practical question of *how* the librarian gets the books that will keep Dryasdust happy, I wish I had more to say. There is a bookplate that turns up from time to time in the library of my own university, proclaiming that the volume in hand is one of the collection assembled for the first University of Michigan Library by Professor Asa Gray, who toured Europe in search of books. Professors and librarians still do occasionally tour Europe on buying expeditions, but usually for rare books. One can think of worse ways of spending money, even for the procurement of ordinary books.

I myself am engaged upon a project of editing the works of a nineteenth-century author whose range of interest and reading is perhaps unusually wide, and I conceive of the editorial function as being not merely to make accessible what my man wrote, but to make his meaning as clear as I can to the modern reader through explaining the context within which he wrote and showing what his source materials were, what the positions were against which or on behalf of which he was arguing. Editing of this sort may seem at first glance to be a somewhat special activity—so special that librarians would be unwise to pay much attention to the needs of my kind of scholar. But as anyone in the profession knows, it is an activity that is being more and more engaged in, in response to a genuine need of the readers of the great texts of the past. Even novelists, though belatedly, are getting something of this sort of treatment, and as we read the edition of *Vanity Fair* with its excellent historical and explanatory notes by Professors Geoffrey and Kathleen Tillotson, we realize how much we have missed in the understanding of Thackeray in the past. My work with Matthew Arnold leads me again and again to see how the modern student has entirely misunderstood the direction of an argument through not knowing the explicit historical circumstances upon which it was based. A very fine scholar of Arnold, for instance, has asserted in a widely-used textbook edition that Arnold's advocacy of drastic restraints upon the power of making wills, which he asserts in the essay on "Equality" in 1878, is a reversal of his position in *Culture and Anarchy* ten years earlier when he ridiculed the Real Estate Intestacy Bill introduced by the Liberals into the House of Commons. The scholar was misled (as no one acquainted with the

operations of legislative bodies should be) by the title of the bill: Arnold's position had been taken long before and never changed, but he ridiculed the Real Estate Intestacy Bill because it was a mere gesture, an infantile toddling pretending to be a giant's stride, and where a giant's stride was needed. To find this out, incidentally, Dryasdust must ask the Librarian to provide him either with a set of *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates* for the nineteenth century or with a file of the *Times* for the period; and preferably he will have both.

To make a little clearer by example the range of books Dryasdust needs to do his work, let me give some indication of what I have had in my hands in the preparation of one volume of Arnold's prose, the one upon which I am at present engaged: sets of the principal literary periodicals of the United States, England, France, and Switzerland in the nineteenth century, together with one theological journal from Holland; sets of the London daily newspapers, and of the weekly newspapers published by the Church of England and the nonconforming religious sects, as well as Parliamentary debates, journals, and bluebooks; a fairly complete library of mid-nineteenth-century scholarship upon the history of Scripture and of the development of Church Dogma from primitive times, in English, French, and German; the works of the Church Fathers in Greek and Latin; the theological and ecclesiastical writings of the English theologians from the Reformation through the eighteenth century; the writings of Descartes, Michelet, Taine, Béranger, Pascal, and of an obscure nineteenth-century French dramatist named François Coppée; a pamphlet by the Belgian economist Laveleye and one on the introduction of a school savings bank scheme in Belgium in the 1870's; the correspondence of Niebuhr and Bunsen, and the complete works of Goethe, together with records of Goethe's conversation with Eckermann and Müller; the Bible in Greek, Latin, German, and English; a library of the Greek and Roman classics—even the obscure authors and those who survive only in fragments; the principal nineteenth-century histories of Greece and works of nineteenth-century scholars upon Greek and Indo-Germanic philology; the works of Locke, and also the much more obscure nineteenth-century textbook on logic by Bishop Whately; two now forgotten French works upon Persian religion and literature. I have not exhausted the list; but if I were to take in works needed in preparation of other volumes, it would extend the range very greatly to demonstrate my point that Dryasdust insists upon being a pedant in many languages and many

fields. And of course I have not even mentioned such an indispensable work of reference as Larousse's nineteenth-century *Dictionnaire universel*, or the *DNB*, or the British Museum Catalogue, or the commoner tools that every library has as a matter of course, or the writings of the standard English poets. No library, not even the British Museum, has quite everything I need to illuminate only one book of Arnold's; but a library that lacks *most* of these things is obviously not a library in which I can profitably try to work.

I know of course that not every library can even attempt to keep Dryasdust happy. But the history of European and American humanistic scholarship has always been pretty much the history of European and American universities; the teaching and research have been honorably combined not only in the same communities but in the same men. The separation of the two functions would be an incomparable loss to both research and education. The library is the humanist's research laboratory as well as his teaching laboratory, but the university that is energetic in finding funds for the scientific or engineering laboratories, and even for the library as a *teaching* laboratory, is far less frequently willing to respond to the needs of the humanistic scholar's research. Here my own experience as your guest a few years ago, and the very occasion that brings us together today, provide ocular proof that Rice University intends to be an exception.

Dryasdust, then, wants books, millions of books, ranged upon shelves to which he has access. But who wants Dryasdust? More people, I think, than you may suppose, though they may not always realize that they do.

For the humanist scholar *will* reflect and *will* write; it is his nature. If he cannot find the materials he needs to push forward our explorations into history, he will use what he does find. And so one is forced to read, today, from the academic world, book after book that is merely a summary of other books published in the last few years, with the slightest deviation or faintest touch of originality and debate that appears to give the new book its justification. Or else the scholar reads a book or two of imaginative literature—even a poem or two—in the privacy of his study, and tells the public what he has read, all too often less gracefully than he might, always less economically than his author has already done it, and not infrequently with misunderstandings he could have avoided if his community had provided him with more books. Give him the tools, and this man can genuinely illuminate what he



touches.

For Dryasdust does not really look to the past, he looks to the present. When I said earlier that the essence of humanistic research was history, I was, I think, being precisely correct; but history, after all, is simply a way of looking at the present in a context of time. The humanists in the history department seldom have to defend themselves; neither, curiously enough, do the historical scholars in the department of fine arts. But we in the departments of literature are often challenged, like our friends in the department of music, on the ground that what really counts is the esthetic impact of a work of literature or music upon the modern reader or listener, and with this impact history, we are told, has nothing to do. As regards music the tremendous fruits of historical research within even the last twenty years have utterly belied popular prejudice by making available to the modern listener a range of music, a range of esthetic experience, entirely unavailable before. In literature, the expansion is less startling and less apparent; it is rather an expansion of the grounds of understanding and appreciation than of the actual range of literary works. No man has an immediate, naïve, intuitive esthetic apprehension of any piece of literature. Readers of the book which we constantly hear described as "the world's best seller" would be amazed if they knew how little of what they understand is on the page before them and how much is the work of commentators and translators governing their interpretation in ways they hardly suspect. Let them only read their Bible in the context supplied by the *best* commentators and the best of other great imaginative literature, and their esthetic apprehension of the Bible may be much altered. A great comic genius like Aristophanes is almost inaccessible to us, even though we have his text; he must be rewritten in a modern frame of reference before he is anything but tedious to us, and we dutifully take his greatness on faith—because Dryasdust has not had the materials from the past to make Aristophanes as he was intelligible to us. Homer may stand in an apparent splendid isolation, yet anyone who has glanced at the progress of his reputation knows how much it has depended upon the researches and theories of scholars—researches into areas where, alas, there are still too few materials to give us the satisfaction we need. And there is no work so modern or so immediately compelling that it is not modified by its context. That context Dryasdust tries to supply, and it is a library like the one we are celebrating today that will give Dryasdust what he needs to be of service to us.