Logan's letters

by Barbara Strachey Halpern

A Chime of Words: The Letters of Logan Pearsall Smith. Edited by Edwin Tribble. New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1984. Pp. xl, 200. US$22.50.

THE ART OF letter-writing is virtually lost nowadays, murdered by the convenient but evanescent telephone and the distractions of television. This is a great tragedy, in fact, and one which will hit us increasingly hard in the future as we come to look back and try to assess the talents and personalities of people now alive.

It applies most of all, of course, to writers, who might be expected (though the expectation is not always justified) to be the best correspondents. Let us therefore enjoy while we may the letters of those who have practised the art with great wit and fluency, such as Logan Pearsall Smith.

Pearsall Smith was not a writer of wide fame, but *Trivia*, his collection of bittersweet aphorisms and *Unforgotten Years*, his entertaining memoirs, will continue to live and be enjoyed by those who relish the *mot juste*, the contrasting double flavour of smooth style and tart content which was his speciality.

Although born into a family of brilliant and copious letter-writers, Logan did not take naturally to the form. Furthermore the family was a matriarchy in which males (he was the only surviving son) were not as highly valued as females. It would have been understandable if he had tried to react by abandoning writing altogether. He did react against his formidable mother's religious preoccupations, and early acquired the nickname "Ye Cynic", but he was always determined to be a writer. He did not believe himself to be greatly gifted, but it was his lasting ambition to write exquisitely and beautifully, and he worked long and hard to succeed in this aim.

His letters illustrate and counterpoint his efforts in a fascinating way, as well as being highly enjoyable in their own right. John Russell was the first to edit a selection of them in *A Portrait of Logan Pearsall Smith Drawn from His Letters and Diaries* (1950).

Edwin Tribble has most diligently assembled a new selection from widely scattered sources. The collection covers sixty years and a wide and distinguished collection of recipients, some in Italy and America, but most in England, where he chose to spend his life. Tribble has—wisely, I believe—decided not to present them in chronological order or by recipient, but by topic. Thus early and late letters are shown side by side again and again, and the growth of Logan's character and technique becomes more and more apparent.

At first he was hesitant, inhibited, and except with his sisters, distinctly shy. At the end of his life his letters, particularly to young friends, are often masterly—witty, wise, impish and eminently readable.

There is very little that is personal in the letters, however. Logan was always a great gossip, indeed a lover and spreader of scandal, but he firmly avoided exposing his own emotions. Anyone wishing to trace his professional progress and tastes would find much that was valuable and enlightening, but if he wished to construct a life story he would find very little material for it.

The juxtapositions inevitable in Tribble's assemblage illustrate this admirably, but they do tend, I think, to conceal the little there is to be discovered of the nature of the man. Behind his scandal-mongering and his undeniable snobbery, and despite the sad confusions and failings brought about by his deteriorating health as he got older, Logan was a kind man, and his care and affection for his sister Alys, particularly when she was in trouble with her husband Bertie Russell in 1902, and later in 1911 when they separated and he took Alys to live with him, were unobtrusive but undoubted. His letters to Bertie himself are all early and a little stiff, but those to Alys in the spring and summer of 1902, for instance, when she was having a nervous breakdown brought on by trying to deny to herself that Bertie's love for her had died, are, without being explicit in any way, frequent, comforting and delightful.

Though he was sharp with those who could defend themselves, such as Virginia Woolf, and sharp *about* most of his friends at one time or another, he was genuinely helpful to young writers, including Cyril Connolly, Hugh Trevor-Roper, to whom many of the last and best letters were written, and Kenneth Clark.

He was a manic-depressive, suffering from alternating periods of euphoria and dull misery, and as he got older these swings became increasingly evident in his letters, some of which, in his euphoric periods, are almost hysterical in tone. Despite his depressions, however, he was fortunate enough to lead exactly the kind of life he enjoyed, to the end. As he wrote to his sister Mary, in 1943 when he was seventy-seven, "On the whole, considering life and all its fantastic passions and real terrors, I am inclined to agree with the septuagenerians who say that old age is the best period of existence, with only one drawback—there is so little of it to enjoy."

The principal note, however, which recurs again and again in his letters, is his enormous love, not only of books, as he confessed in

Trivia—"People say that life is the thing, but I prefer reading"—but of the English language, of good style and of words, which he found endlessly fascinating. In particular his letters to his fellow enthusiast Edward Marsh celebrate this theme.

Edwin Tribble is to be congratulated on seeking out and preserving these riches. The book is excellently laid out, the notes are tactful and informative, and there is an interesting foreword by John Russell, his friend and literary heir.

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