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UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND

INSTITUTE FOR ADVANCED SOCIAL RESEARCH

ADDITIONAL SEMINAR PAPER

TITLE: 'A Thing of Unspeakable Horror' - The History of the Loo in Literature and Life.

BY: COUZENS, T.

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'A THING OF UNSPEAKABLE HORROR'

A HISTORY OF THE LOO IN LITERATURE AND LIFE

by

TIM COUZENS

PREFACE

The title of this book requires explanation. Some years ago I saw a Don Martin cartoon in Mad magazine. It was of one of his crazed-looking, loony characters standing in a laboratory with a test-tube filled with smoking liquid in his hand. He says: 'One drink of this and I shall turn into a thing of unspeakable horror'. He drinks ... and nothing happens. So he throws the failed experimental liquid into a nearby sink. Instantly it turns into ... a loo! As we shall see the cartoon is manifestly slanderous.

I must also own up to a personal interest in the subject. My father was a plumber; my grandfather was a plumber. I hail from a plumbing line. But I was the stupid one of the family - I became an academic. I have never quite managed to become part of the Brain Drain. Instead I must content myself with being, at least today, the Drain Brain. I am, however, no Specialist, and this book should not be taken as the last word on the subject.

The writing of loo history is an ancient and honorable profession and I must thank some of the pioneers in the field whose work I have drawn upon:

Lawrence Wright, Clean and Decent, London, 1960.

Wallace Reyburn, Flushed with Pride, London, 1969.

Frank Muir, A Book at Bathtime, London, 1980.

Mollie Harris, Privies Galore, Wolfeboro Falls and Stroud, 1990.

David Niven, The Moon's a Balloon, London, 1971.

Frank Graham, The Geordie Netty, Rothbury, Northumberland, 1986.

Charles Sale, The Specialist, St Louis, 1946.

The Bodley Head (ed) A New Garden of Bloomers, London, 1967.

Irving Lee, Language Habits in Human Affairs, New York, 1941.

Gladstone Pottery Museum (ed) Water Closets, Past Present and Future, Longton, Stoke-on-Trent, 1989.

Jonathan Routh, The Good Loo Guide: Where to Go in London, London, 1965.

Suetonius, The Twelve Caesars (trans. Robert Graves), London, 1957.

While they are not responsible for what follows I would like to acknowledge the inspiration I have obtained from their work and the comfort I have enjoyed from the fact that they have gone before.

LOO STORY

We all have heard of them - the great men of history - Caesar, Boadicaea, Alexander the Great, Cleopatra, Napoleon, Bismark, Churchill, Popeye etc. But who can put their hand on their hearts and swear that they have ever heard of Sir John Harington, George Jennings or Sir Joseph Bazalgette. I hope by the end of this talk you will never forget them and come to regard them as the true and truly great *Heroes of our Time.*

We can generally say, historically-speaking, that the history of the loo has gone through its booms and busts. The story is not a pretty one for many centuries. This is sad because the beginning was so promising.

In the Beginning

At first people settled near rivers and, generally, water was plentiful for both drinking and bathing. But, due to overcrowding, people moved away from rivers so that drinking took precedence over bathing. The loo and the bath have existed side by side through much of history. While early water-borne sewerage seems to have existed nearly five thousand years ago in Neolithic stone age huts at Skara Brae in the Orkneys, the first known bath dates from about 1700 B.C. and is located in Crete. At King Minos's great palace at Knossos water was supplied via terra cotta pipes. The drainage system was flushed by rainwater. The latrines seem to have been remarkably sophisticated (possibly with wooden seats) and England only saw the like in the eighteenth century. Similarly, in the Indus valley between 2500 to 1500 B.C., water-flushed loos flourished. It will be remembered that Agamemnon, returning from ten years of successful battle at Troy, took a bath and was promptly axed by his good wife, Clytemnestra.

The Romans were into baths. Often public ones. In the fourth century A.D. Rome had 11 public baths, 1352 public fountains and 856 private baths. In 315 A.D. the city had 144 public, water-flushed latrines. It used to supply 300

gallons of water per head per day (compared with 51 gallons per head in England in the 1960s). The public baths of Caracalla were about six times the size in floor area of St Paul's Cathedral.

After the Roman Occupation ended, Britain disappeared not only into the Dark Ages but into the Dirt Ages as well. While some bathing did take place in the monasteries, the practice was not widespread. King John, for instance, was comparatively diligent, bathing once every three weeks. The mediaeval name for the loo was the 'garderobe' and this was usually positioned within the thickness of the walls, above a very large drop to the moat or whatever, and usually consisted of a stone or wooden seat, often somewhat draughty or, to coin a phrase, windy. As one commentator has suggested moats which were formerly defensive now became offensive.

When no water was available, movable barrels or cess-pits or what-have-you had to do. With houses on London Bridge there was a hazardous undertaking known as 'shooting the bridge' and the saying developed that the bridge was 'for wise men to go over and for fools to go under'. The removers of nightsoil from pits were known as gongfermors and at Queenborough Castle in 1375 the gentlemen entrusted to this task rejoiced in the names of William Mokkyng and Nicholas Richendgood. Stairs were often spiral to prevent soiling in the corners.

By the sixteenth century the 'closed stool' became the main alternative to the garderobe, 'cosier for the user but hard on the servants'. There is a particularly plush one at Hampton Court, used possibly by William of Orange covered in crimson velvet, bound with lace and secured by gilt nails, with a lock to dissuade interlopers, and carrying handles.

In 1596 we come to the first of our Great Heroes. In this year Sir John Harington, godson of Queen Elizabeth I, published his book Metamorphosis of Ajax: A Cloacinean Satire (those who know Shakespeare's Troylus and Cressida will know that Ajax, the oafish Greek hero, also provided the opportunity for the pun on 'a jakes', an Elizabethan word for a necessarium). Harington invented a valve water closet nearly 300 years before its Victorian descendant. A prophet before his time, but no profit in his time.

Queen Elizabeth herself took a bath once a month, we are told, 'whether she need it or no'. Because toothpaste and toothbrushes were not invented her teeth were black in old age.

What's in a Name? A Loo by Any Other Name...

It was in the time of Queen Anne in the early eighteenth century (when the Fleet River ran down the centre of Fleet Street in London and acted as an open sewer) that we come to the probable origin of the name of our revered object. The historian G M Trevelyan elaborates:

> Far overhead the windows opened, five, six or ten storeys in the air, and the close stools of Edinburgh discharged the collected filth of the last twenty-four hours into the street. It was good manners for those above to cry Gardy-loo (Gardez l'eau) before throwing. The returning roysterer cried back 'Haud yer han' and ran with humped shoulders, lucky if his fast and expensive full-bottomed wig was not put out of action by a cataract of filth. The odure thus sent down lay in the broad High Street and in the deep, well-like closes and wynds around it making the night air horrible, until early in the morning it was perfunctorily cleaned away by the City Guard. Only on a Sabbath morn it might not be touched, but lay there all day long, filling Scotland's capital with the savour of a mistaken piety.

But as Dr Johnson said: 'The Scots took good care of one end of a man but not the other'.

The novelist Thomas Smollett in Humphry Clinker gives us a similar but contemporary eighteenth century description in one of his characters' letters.

> And now, dear Mary, we have got to Haddinborrough, among the Scots, who are civil enuff for our money, thof I don't speak their lingo. But they should not go for to impose upon foreigners; for the bills in their houses say, they have different *easements* to let; and behold there is nurro geaks in the whole kingdom, nor any thing for poor sarvants, but a barrel with a pair of tongs thrown a-cross; and all the chairs in the

> family are emptied into this here barrel once a-day; and at ten o'clock at night the whole cargo is flung out of a back windore that looks into some street or lane, and the maid calls *gardy loo* to the passengers, which signified *Lord have mercy upon you!* and this is done every night in every house in Haddinborrough ...

There are other explanations of the origins of the word. One possibility is the anglicised form of the French 'lieu', - meaning 'the place'. Another possibility favoured in the present day is that it derives from 'Waterloo'. An attractive one, however, is to be found in the Penguin Dictionary of the Decorative Arts.

> The bordalou, much used in the eighteenth century by ladies travelling or in other privy difficulties on drawn-out social occasions. Portable in a muff, its artistic quality and its shape have sometimes led to its being mistaken nowadays for a sauce-boat. The name is said to derive from Louis Bourdaloue, the fashionable and prolix Jesuit preacher of Louis XIV's reign. The first known example, made in Delft, dates from 1710- and the article became very much 'the thing'.

Bourdaloue's sermons were reputedly so long-winded that many ladies found such a contrivance necessary. Yet other ideas of where the word comes from are 'leeward' since that is, on a small boat, 'the side one would use', or from 'ablution'.

Nigel Dempster (in the Daily Telegraph, 11 March, 1979) suggests that 'in fashionable circles the term is out and replaced by lav'. In ordinary unfashionable circles 'loo' was still going strong in 1983. The word was already a joke in 1895 as a Du Maurier cartoon in Punch magazine testified. The curate announces to the congregation, 'Now we'll begin again at the Hallelujah and please linger longer on the "lu"'.

Whatever the name it should be noted, however, that a certain dinity was attached to the Royal Stool, especially on the continent, and it was the scene of many dramatic events. It was often treated literally as a throne before which audiences took place. Lord Portland, the English Ambassador to the

Court of Louis XIV, was summoned to this particular throne from which the king announced his marriage to Mme de Maintenon! The revolutionary Marat, like Agememnon, was murdered in his bath; and a King of Naples had a heart-attack and died while sitting on his 'throne', as did George II of England. But the throne later lost its place of honour and frequently was disguised as a piece of furniture. Such a piece was the 'Mysteries of Paris'.

Of course, there was scope for embarrassment. The bidet (coming from a French word meaning a small horse which is easely straddled) first appears about 1710 but was still so unfamiliar by the late 1730s that one dealer mistook its function and advertised it as 'a porcelain violin-case with four legs'. The night commode or jerry had its ancient ancestors but begins to appear in modern form about the fourteenth century. One of its most distinguished appearances (or, rather, non-appearances) was in the Speaker's chair in the House of Commons where a silver pot was concealed so that the Speaker could be present for the entire session and remain po-faced throughout.

The commode gets an anonymous walk-on-part in Canto One of Byron's poem Don Juan. While hero Don Juan, having been seduced by the fair Donna Julia, lies asleep in her arms, her husband Don Alfonso rushes in with curses on his lips and hell in his heart. Nimble-witted Julia flings the bedclothes and Juan into one indistinguishable heap.

> He search'd, they search'd and rummaged everywhere,
> Closet and clothes-press, chest and window-seat,
> And found much linen, lace, and several pair
> Of stockings, slippers, brushes, combs, complete,
> With other articles of ladies fair,
> To keep them beautiful, or leave them neat:
> Arras they prick'd and curtains with their swords,
> And wounded several shutters, and some boards.
>
> Under the bed they search'd, and there they found -
> No matter what - it was not that they sought;
> They open'd windows, gazing if the ground
> Had signs or footmarks, but the earth said nought;

And then they stared each other's faces round:
'Tis odd, not one of all these seekers thought,
And seems to me almost a sort of blunder,
Of looking in the bed as well as under.

By the late nineteenth century some jerries came with concealed musical boxes which played 'appropriate chamber music'. Some, apparently, even played trumpet music.

On occasion a certain amount of improvisation has had to take place, as David Niven recalls in his hilarious autobiography, The Moon's a Balloon. His first regimental dinner nearly proved to be a monumental disaster.

> Round after round of drinks in the anteroom and finally just as I was headed for a most necessary trip to the lavatory, Mr. Gifford announced dinner. Like a lamb to the slaughter, I was led with bursting bladder to my chair next to my Commanding Officer. As he had still not spoken to me directly during my service, I was in no position to ask him if I might be excused, an unthinkable request as officers and gentlemen never left the table under any circumstances until the end of the meal when the King's health had been drunk. Sweat broke out all over me as I contemplated the hours of agony ahead.
>
> I've long since forgotten who was on my right. Whoever he was, he too never directed a word in my direction.
>
> So I sat in miserable silence with crossed legs, perspiration trickling down inside my stiff shirt front, my stand-up wing collar wilting with pain.
>
> Cold soup (more strain on the bladder) was followed by other courses, each washed down by a different wine. I drank everything that was placed in front of me in the vague hope that something might act as an anaesthetic and reduce the torture.

By the time we arrived at the cheese, I was desperate, past caring. As far as I was concerned my career could end in a pool right there under the polished mahogany and the regimental silver, but succour was at hand. Mr Gifford bent over and whispered in my ear, 'With Mr Trubshawe's compliments, sir, I have just placed an empty magnum underneath your chair.' Relief, when I heard his words, did not flow over me - it spurted out of me. In an apparently endless stream, but thanks to a firm grip on the bottle with my knees, I was able to aim with one hand and leave the other available to crumble, nonchalantly, a water biscuit. This proved just as well because suddenly the Colonel zeroed in on me and spoke to me for the first time. I was so unnerved by this sudden reversal of form that I nearly released my grip on the warm and by now heavy receptacle below the table.

His words were few and his point was made with admirable clarity. 'I have,' he said, 'fucked women of every nationality and most animals, but the one thing I cannot abide is a girl with a Glasgow accent. Pass the port.' He never spoke to me again.

In Lancashire there were many ancient remedies for sicknesses. For instance, for warts and other excrescences on the neck, the touch of a dead man's hand was a sure-fire cure. For whooping cough, a child should be passed nine times around the neck of a she-ass. But what about bed-wetting? Until late into the nineteenth century in the same county children were still cured of this by being fed fried mice.

The opposite problem to peeing in the bed - being unable to relieve oneself - was noted on one occasion by the seventeenth century writer Richard Burton in his famous Anatomy of Melancholy who also noted an ingenious cure.

The pleasantest dotage that ever I read, saith *Laurentius*, was of a Gentleman at Senes in *Italy* who was afraid to pisse, lest all the towne should bee drowned; the Physicians caused the bells to be rung backward, and told him the towne was on fire, whereupon he made water, and was immediately cured.

Loos Change

Although the population of London increased by half between 1750 and 1800 the death rate actually fell. But the death rate was still extremely high in nineteenth century England. Of 1000 children under five, 240 died in the country, 480 in the city - nearly half! The fleet Ditch was as filthy in 1840 as it was in 1340, though in 1841 it was at last covered. In 1850 there were 80000 waterless houses in London. Although Richard II had introduced a statute which forbade dung-dumping, the first public health act dealing with closets in England was only introduced in 1848 and made illegal the building of any house without a sufficient w.c. or privy or ashpit (with a fine of twenty pounds for non-compliance).

By 1830 cholera had spread from India and reached western Russia. At first it was thought 'incapable of attacking a decent Englishman, until it struck London with sensational effect in 1832, and again at intervals until 1866'. (In 1849, 14000 died of it; in 1854, over 10 000; in 1866, 5000). To give an indication of what this meant to the man in the street, we need only refer to a letter from William Knott in 1840 which was written as part of the on-going agitation following the 1831 cholera epidemic in Sunderland.

> I beg respectfully to make known to you a serious existing abuse viz: - the fact that the street lamps are extinguished generally two or three hours before daylight at this time of the year which is a source of considerable danger ... there are some awkwardly-situated public privies adjoining the river; four men have been drowned within a short space of time when going to these early in the morning, the lamps being out at the time; and I know, from personal observations, that individual collisions, and consequent brawls, are of frequent occurrence.

It was only by the 1870s that the death rate began to fall decisively. Who do we have to thank? Largely, the Chief Engineeer of the Board of Works, Joseph Bazalgette who not only constructed both the Albert & Victoria Embankments but also the vast drainage and sewerage system that was completed by 1865. Hail to thee, Joseph Bazalgette!

We now come to the highwatermark of loos - the late Victorian Age.

When Victoria came to the throne (the real throne I hasten to add) in 1837 there was no bathroom in Buckingham Palace. This was soon remedied. George Jennings - there's a name to conjure with - insisted, despite opposition, that the Crystal Palace be fitted with loos for the Great Exhibition of 1851. No fewer than 827,280 people paid for their use. To Jennings therefore we owe the expression 'spending a penny'. And largely to Jennings do we owe that useful place 'the public convenience'.

The Golden Age of loos begins in 1870, the "annus mirabilis" (annus with two n's). For nearly a hundred years Joseph Bramah's valve closet had performed yeomen service. But in 1870 T W Twyford produced his Washout Closet; Hellyer the 'Optimus' Improved Valve Closet; and J R Mann the 'Epic' Syphonic Closet. Jennings's 'Pedestal Vase' was able to flush regularly at one sitting - no flush in the pan this - no fewer than 10 apples, 1 flat sponge, plumber's "smudge" coated over the pan and 4 pieces of paper. Mr Shanks (do you remember the graffitti on many urinals next to his trade-name: 'No Shanks, I don't shink I oughter') went further at a demonstration of one new model by snatching the cap from off an apprentice's head, throwing it in and pulling the chain, happily crying 'it works!' as the cap disappeared.

In 1885 this hitherto shameful thing finally came out of the closet. Porcelain maker Twyford brought out his 'Unitas' model - no longer encased, no longer disguised as a chair, a cupboard, or surrounded by woodwork. The thing itself, pure, pristine. The advantage? It could be easily cleaned and did not trap dirt in unwanted corners.

And then we have a last, great Hero. The man who developed the modern w.c. cistern. His biographer explains:

> In the old days the water for a flushing toilet was provided from a cistern in which there was a valve at the outlet to the flush pipe. When you pulled the chain it simply lifted up that valve and released

the water. In other words you just pulled the plug out. Some people would tie the chain down so that the valve was perpetually open and the water flowed ceaselessly.

Obviously, the waste of water was prodigious as no valve ever worked properly. So the modern cistern was developed, with its 'Pull and Let Go' action. The name of the inventor - Thomas Crapper.

Crapper lived with other artists like Turner, Rossetti and Whistler in Chelsea. He did much of the plumbing at Sandringham House (when it was built by Prince Albert for Edward, Prince of Wales), and at Westminister Abbey. Crapper also devised ways to cut down on the curse of the loos - noise. You may not have thought about it much but there are at least four distinct noises connected with the domestic thunderbox.

1. The sound of the flush itself - the downrush of water to the pan.
2. The gurgle which occurs at the end of the flush.
3. The hissing sound of the water coming in to refill the cistern.
4. The noise of water coming under high pressure to the cistern through the pipes.

Everytime you hardly hear the loo - think of the silencers fitted (known as the Marlboro Silent Water Waste Preventer) and offer up a hymn of thanks to Thomas Crapper. My own grandfather, I am told, invented a silent cistern and went to England to get financial backing for it but failed because the system, designed for South African bungalows, could not cope with the British double-storeys. And if you are inclined to dismiss this achievement please remember the story told by Crapper's biographer, Wallace Reyburn, in his book Flushed With Pride.

At the coronation of our present Queen the organisers of the occasion were concerned, among other things, about the matter of the special needs of the great number of Peers who would be assembled at Westminister Abbey, many of whom were well on in years and not able, with the best will in the world, to stay settled in one place for long periods, as the lengthy ceremony demanded. It was known that the very

aptly named 'peer's bladder' would come to their aid, but there was more to it than that. So an additional 'range' of toilets, as they call it in the trade, had to be installed to cope with the expected increased demand.

Then somebody got the frightening thought that at the vital moment of the ceremony, when the whole Abbey would be in hushed silence as the crown was being placed on the Queen's head, there might be one of those terrible coincidences whereby all the toilets happened to be occupied and all their ocupants pulled the chain at the same time.

Would the strains of that symphonic flush penetrate into the body of the Abbey and create one of the major embarrassments in the history of British Royalty? There was nothing for it but to have a test.

A detachment of Guards from nearby Wellington Barracks was pressed into service, and as technicians borrowed from the BBC, each armed with a decibel meter, were stationed at various key points in the main part of the Abbey, the troops were deployed along the long line of toilets. It is not known what form of drill was evolved for this unique exercise. It was probably something like: 'At the command, "Chains - PULL" ... wait for it!' Anyway, as the order rang out all the toilets were flushed simultaneously and the good news from inside the Abbey was that nothing could be heard of the noises off. The heading Time magazine put on their story about it was 'Royal Flush'.

So Crapper and Twyford have given us the loo as we know it today - the pan and the cistern, separate but equal. When the 'Unitas' came out in 1885 it provided a way for British subjects to show their loyalty.

The Angel Hotel in Doncaster were among the first proud possessors of a Unitas and the management were even more proud when Queen Victoria on a visit to the town made use of it. Wishing to capitalise on this, they were placed in rather a quandary. Numerous Inns around the country displayed notices to the effect that 'Queen Elizabeth Slept Here' but they could not very well make capital out of Queen Victoria's brief

visit by erecting a sign on something of the same lines. However, it did not become necessary. Word of mouth, as ever, proving the best form of advertising, the news soon got around and each day saw the good ladies of Doncaster making their way to the Angel and queuing up to use the same toilet that had been graced by their beloved Queen.

(W. Reyburn)

Not only was the w.c. out in the open, but it was also a thing of beauty, a joy almost for ever. Names, too, reflected a poetic age, the age of Tennyson and Browning, Reyburn tells us.

(1) THE 'HARD SELL' NAMES, such as the Deluge, Cascade, Tornado and Niagara. These were obviously aimed at the slice of the market which demanded that a toilet should be seen and heard to do a good flushing job.

(2) THE SPEED AND EFFICIENCY GROUP, like the Rapido, the Alerto and the Subito. I think Alerto is a wonderful name for a toilet. It conjures up a picture of it standing there poised to leap into instant action at the very touch of the chain.

(3) THE COMPOUND NAMES. These are made up from taking part of the manufacturer's name and part of the location of his works, as for example the Twycliffe (made by Twyfords of Cliffe Vale) and the Sharcote (Sharpe Brothers of Swadlingcote).

(4) CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY. This gave rise to obvious ones like the Pluvius and the Aquarius. More subtle were the Aeneas (he got his association with water through being reared by a Sea Nymph) and the Nereus (he was a sea diety, son of Oceanus).

But by far the largest single category are -

(5) CRAPPER'S STREET NAMES. His toilets include the following:

Marlboro
Walton
Ovington
Cadogan
Sloane
Onslow
Lennox
Manresa
Culford

These are all Chelsea streets, avenues and squares immediately adjacent to or within a stone's throw of the site of his original works in Marlborough Road.

For Those in Peril on the Seat

Few people have associated plumbers with courage. But they have not only changed history, they have also braved it. We have already seen how dreaded disease (plague, cholera, typhoid, smallpox) lurks in the sewers of the world. But many a plumber, unsuspecting of the noxious and toxic gases, has peered into a recalcitrant cesspit with a lighted match and blown himself to Kingdom Come - or beyond.

There are other physically dangerous episodes that have been recorded, one by the always-alert and entertaining Wallace Reyburn.

> An incident in modern times ... was what was to become known as the Palestinian Explosion of 1947. I was told about it by an acquaintance of mine who had been with the Medical Corps attached to the First Infantry Division during the Palestine troubles just after World War II. In his camp there was a permanent latrine which might well have been termed historic, since it had obviously done service for several wars. It was a huge concrete-encased, circular pit, the concrete having been continued up above ground to form a parapet across which the seat-boards were laid. The occupants, divided by wooden partitions, sat outward looking in the style of the garderobes still to be seen in old English castles. The edifice was topped with a corrugated iron roof.
>
> At that time DDT had just come into being and the Disinfestation Officer decided to put some of this to work on the foul smelling accumulation down below. The DDT was in a solution with a paraffin base and he poured in a couple of gallons of this. There had been complaints from late night users of the latrine about the disconcerting sound of rats down there, so he thought it would be a good idea to complete the operation by burning them out. He threw in a lighted match and was not prepared for what happened. When the paraffin caught alight it ignited

the mephitic fumes and the force of the explosion was such that the concrete parapet split open like the petals of a flower and the tin roof was sent a considerable distance into the air. And the aftermath of this atomic-like detonation was that fall-out, in the form of toilet paper, was still drifting down out of the sky four hours later.

Somewhere I have read that ten thousand accidents occur in English bathrooms annually. The hazards of the bathroom are, indeed, legion, as James Thurber discovered.

I am sure that many a husband has wanted to wrench the family medicine cabinet off the wall and throw it out of the window, if only because the average medicine cabinet is so filled with mysterious bottles and unidentifiable objects of all kinds that it is a source of constant bewilderment and exasperation to the American male. Surely the British medicine cabinet and the French medicine cabinet and all the other medicine cabinets must be simpler and better ordered than ours. It may be that the American habit of saving everything and never throwing anything away, even empty bottles, causes the domestic medicine cabinet to become as cluttered in its small way as the American attic becomes cluttered in a major way. I have encountered few medicine cabinets in this country which were not pack-jammed with something between a hundred and fifty and two hundred different items, from dental floss to boracic acid, from razor blades to sodium perborate, from adhesive tape to coconut oil. Even the neatest wife will put off clearing out the medicine cabinet on the ground that she has something else to do that is more important at the moment, or more diverting. It was in the apartment of such a wife and her husband that I became enormously involved with a medicine cabinet one morning not long ago.

I had spent the week-end with this couple - they live on East Tenth Street near Fifth Avenue - such a week-end as left me reluctant to rise up on Monday morning with bright and shining face and go to work. They got up and went to work, but I didn't. I didn't get up until about two-thirty in the afternoon. I had my face all lathered for shaving and the wash-bowl was full of hot water when suddenly I cut myself with the

razor. I cut my ear. Very few men cut their ears with razors, but I do, possibly because I was taught the old Spencerian free-wrist movement by my writing teacher in the grammar grades. The ear bleeds rather profusely when cut with a razor and is difficult to get at. More angry than hurt, I jerked open the door of the medicine cabinet to see if I could see a styptic pencil, and out fell, from the top shelf, a little black paper packet containing nine needles. It seems that this wife kept a little packet containing nine needles on the top shelf of the medicine cabinet. The packet fell into the soapy water of the wash-bowl, where the paper rapidly disintegrated, leaving nine needles at large in the bowl. I was, naturally enough, not in the best condition, either physical or mental, to recover nine needles from a wash-bowl. No gentleman who has lather on his face and whose ear is bleeding is in the best condition for anything, even something involving the handling of nine large blunt objects.

It did not seem wise to me to pull the plug out of the wash-bowl and let the needles go down the drain. I had visions of clogging up the plumbing system of the house, and also a vague fear of causing short circuits somehow or other (I know very little about electricity and I don't want to have it explained to me). Finally I groped very gently around the bowl and eventually had four of the needles in the palm of one hand and three in the palm of the other - two I couldn't find. If I thought quickly and clearly I wouldn't have done that. A lathered man whose ear is bleeding and who has four wet needles in one hand and three in the other may be said to have reached the lowest known point of human efficiency. There is nothing he can do but stand there. I tried transferring the needles in my left hand to the palm of my right hand, but I couldn't get them off my left hand. Wet needles cling to you. In the end I wiped the needles off on to a bath-towel which was hanging on a rod above the bath-tub. It was the only towel that I could find. I had to dry my hands afterwards on the bath-mat. Then I tried to find the needles in the towel. Hunting for seven needles in a bath-towel is the most tedious occupation I have ever engaged in. I could find only five of them. With the two that had been left in the bowl, that meant there were four needles in all missing - two in the wash-bowl and two

others lurking in the towel or lying in the bathtub under the towel. Frightful thoughts came to me of what might happen to anyone who used that towel or washed his face in the bowl or got into the tub, if I didn't find the missing needles. Well, I didn't find them. I sat down on the edge of the tub to think, and I decided finally that the only thing to do was wrap up the towel in a newspaper and take it away with me. I also decided to leave a note for my friends explaining as clearly as I could that I was afraid there were two needles in the bath-tub and two needles in the wash-bowl, and that they better be careful.

I looked everywhere in the apartment, but I could not find a pencil, or a pen, or a typewriter. I could find pieces of paper, but nothing with which to write on them. I don't know what gave me the idea - a movie I had seen, perhaps, or a story I had read - but I suddenly thought of writing a message with a lipstick. The wife might have an extra lipstick lying around and, if so, I concluded it would be in the medicine cabinet. I went back to the medicine cabinet and began poking around in it for a lipstick. I saw what I thought looked like the metal tip of one, and I got two fingers around it and began to pull gently - it was under a lot of things. Every object in the medicine cabinet began to slide. Bottles broke in the wash-bowl and on the floor; red, brown, and white liquids spurted; nail files, scissors, razor blades, and miscellaneous objects sang and clattered and tinkled. I was covered with perfume, peroxide, and cold cream.

It took me half an hour to get the debris all together in the middle of the bathroom floor. I made no attempt to put anything back in the medicine cabinet. I knew it would take a steadier hand than mine and a less shattered spirit. Before I went away (only partly shaved) and abandoned the shambles, I left a note saying that I was afraid there were needles in the bath-tub and the wash-bowl and that I had taken their towel and that I would call up and tell them everything - I wrote it in iodine with the end of a toothbrush. I have not called up yet, I am sorry to say. I have neither found the courage nor thought up the

words to explain what happened. I suppose my friends believe that I deliberately smashed up their bathroom and stole their towel. I don't know for sure, because they have not yet called me up, either.

This is not to mention the artistic dangers of loos such as happened to the famous music composer, Eric Coates. While he was relieving himself in a public lavatory Coates heard the man next to him whistling Coates' own composition, 'Knightsbridge March'. The man kept sounding the wrong note, however, and Coates leant over and tried to put him right. The man mistook his attentions, however, and it was only after an unfortunate scene that Coates was able to establish his innocence.

The historical researcher into loos is not immune, either. I have often wondered how my own actions have been perceived when I used to take people on social history tours of Johannesburg. One of the mandatory stops was at the Fordsburg Men's Toilet to see the urinals with their bullet-holes from the 1922 Revolt. The furtive shapes of several females being sneaked in for a quick peek might well be recorded in the notebooks of the Vice Squad or Special Branch.

Of course, there are dangers in haste, as the eponymous hero (in Laurence Sterne's eighteenth century novel Tristram Shandy) discovered in his early childhood in his encounter with a window-sash:

> ___'Twas nothing,__I did not lose two drops of blood by it__
> ___'twas not worth calling in a surgeon, had he lived next door
> to us___thousands suffer by choice, what I did by accident.
> ___Doctor *Slop* made ten times more of it than there was
> occasion:___some men rise, by the art of hanging great weights
> upon small wires,___and I am this day (*August* the 10th, 1761)
> paying part of the price of this man's reputation.___O'twould
> provoke a stone, to see how things are carried on in this world!
> ___The chamber-maid had left no ******* *** under the bed:
> ___Cannot you contrive, master, quoth *Susannah*, lifting up
> the sash with one hand, as she spoke, and helping me up into the
> window-seat with the other,___cannot you manage, my dear, for

a single time, to **** *** ** *** ******?
I was five years old.___*Susannah* did not consider that
nothing was well hung in our family,___so slap came the sash
down like lightning upon us;___ Nothing is left,___cried *Susannah*,
___nothing is left___for me, but to run my country.___
My uncle *Toby's* house was a much kinder sanctuary; and so
Susannah fled to it.

There are even political dangers: In his biography of Winston Churchill, William Manchester tells the following story. The Labour Prime Minister Clement Atlee met the then Leader of the Opposition in the House Men's Room, 'Atlee, arriving first, had stepped up to the urinal trough when Churchill strode in on the same mission, stood at the trough as far away from him as possible. Atlee said, "Feeling standoffish today, are we, Winston?" Churchill said: "That's right. Everytime you see something big, you want to nationalize it."'

There is always, too, potential for legal disasters. Lord Campbell in his lives of the Chief Justices wrote in the 1850s:

> In those days retiring-rooms for the use of the judges were unknown, and a porcelain vase, with a handle to it, was placed in a corner of the court at the extremity of the bench. In the King's Bench at Guidhall the students' box (in which I myself have often sat) was very near this corner. One day a student who was taking notes, finding the ink in his little ink-bottle very thick, used the freedom secretly to discharge the whole of it into My Lord's porcelain vase. His Lordship soon after having occasion to come to this corner, he was observed in the course of a few moments to become much disconcerted and distressed. In truth, discovering the liquid with which he was filling the vase to be of a jet-black colour, he thought the secretion indicated the sudden attack of some mortal disorder. In great confusion and anguish of mind he returned to his seat and attempted to resume the trial of the cause but, finding his hand to shake so much that he could not write, he said that on account of an indisposition he was obliged to adjourn the court. As he was led to his carriage by his servants, the luckless student came up

and said to him, 'My Lord, I hope Your Lordship will excuse me, as I suspect that I am unfortunately the cause of Your Lordship's apprehensions.' He then described what he had done, expressing deep contrition for his thoughtlessness and impertinence, and saying that he considered it his duty to relieve His Lordship's mind by his confession. Lord Kenyon: 'Sir, you are a man of sense and a gentleman - dine with us on Sunday.' Lord Ellenborough pursued the same practice. I myself have often heard his large seals dangling from his watch-chain rattle against the vase, as he took it in his hand *coram populo*, decorously turning his back upon them.

Finally, there are professional and social dangers, too. Witness the experience of Wallace Deuel (which he described in the Chicago Daily News, 10 January, 1941). Deuel was a young doctor called out to visit a rich patient.

Any doctor would have been glad to be called to this house, one of the most beautiful old homes in the city. I felt that my standing in the community was at stake and that it was an important moment.

At the conclusion of the examination I wanted to talk privately with the stiffly starched and immaculate nurse who was in attendance, who, too, was apparently making every effort to be perfect in her professional attitude. I wanted to give some instructions to the nurse and asked the family to excuse us for a moment while I talked to her privately. The nearest and most obvious place was the old-fashioned bathroom adjoining and I asked her to go in. I closed the door.

'Sit down,' I said pointing to the bathroom stool, and then, as she took it, I noticed that the only place left for me was the indispensable one in any bathroom, which was covered by a gold and white lid.

I seated myself and talked for several minutes while the family waited anxiously outside for the verdict. Finally she rose and as I, too, rose, my hand automatically grasped the ornate pear-shaped knob at the end of the chain hanging beside me - and I pulled.

Why I pulled the cursed thing I'll never know except, of course, from force of habit. Instantly the place resounded with the familiar screeches and hisses of flushing water.

'Oh doctor!' she gasped, 'what will they think? - And the door shut! - What can I do?'

'Hell, woman,' I said, my dignity ruined, 'Don't ask me what you can do. I don't even know what I can do!'

I was never asked to return.

Loos Talk

The loo has provided the subject for immense linguistic creativity. People will do anything to avoid naming names. You can think of many for yourself: the Elizabethans called it 'the place of easement'. Now we have: 'the little girl's room'; the 'chamber of commerce'; the 'cloakroom'; the 'long-drop'; the 'Ladies & Gents'; the "smallest room"; the Geordie 'netty' (from Italian 'gabinetti'?); the 'dunny' (originally from the British dialect 'dunnakin', but now Australian); the South African p.k. (from 'picannin kia', meaning 'little house') etc. The act of going there is also concealed with a dainty nicety. I'm going 'to wash my hands'; 'see a man about a dog'; 'powder my nose'; 'No. 1 and No. 2' (I never knew which was which!). During the Second World War a favourite was: 'I'm going to telephone Hitler'. The Australians are marginally less restrained - 'Im going to splash the boots ... point percy at the porcelain ... shake hands with the wife's best friend' etc. In South Africa we have even gone through a phase of having 'International Toilets'.

I myself believe we should not sweep this thing under the carpet. I believe we should be open and honest. We must, as they say in America, 'cut the crap' and be brutal and forthright and ask of our hosts, 'Please take me to your euphemism'.

This failure to avoiding calling a shovel a shovel can, of course, lead to trouble, as is evident in a story which appears in many forms and contexts (often passed around surreptitiously in school classrooms), but with its basic shape unchanged. It is perhaps best told by an informant of Mollie Harris's with delightful whimisicality.

> An English lady was to stay in a small German village. Not knowing any German she secured the help of a German schoolmaster, and wrote to him for information. One of her questions was to ask, was there a w.c. attached to her lodgings? The schoolmaster, not familiar with the abbreviation, thought that w.c. might mean Wold Chapel - which means 'Chapel in the Woods'. Thinking that she must be a devout Church-goer, he wrote her the following letter:
>
> > The w.c. is situated some seven miles from your lodgings, in the midst of beautiful scenery, and is open Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Sundays. This is unfortunate if you are in the habit of going frequently, but you will be interested to know that some people take their lunch with them, and make a day of it, whilst others go by car and arrive just in time.
> >
> > As there are many visitors in the summer, I do advise you to go early. The accommodation is good, and there are about 60 seats, but if at any time you should be late arriving, there is plenty of standing room. The bell is rung 10 minutes before the w.c. is open. I advise you to visit on a Friday as there is an organ recital on that day.
> >
> > I should be delighted to secure a seat for you and be the first to take you there. My wife and I have not been for six months, and it pains us very much - but it is a long way to go.

Hoping this information will be of some use to you.

Yours sincerely ...

LOOS AND LITERATURE

Now we come to loos and literature. The history of loos is, of course, much more important than the history of poetry and has therefore taken hiterto deserved precedence in this book. There are two ways literature can be connected to the loo: functionally and by content.

Loos Leaves

The functional connection must be linked to the history of toilet paper. Before toilet paper, people used a variety of articles. The Romans, for instance, used sponges; others, particularly in deserts, sand or stones; in his book The Specialist Charles Sale suggests that, in the American countryside, one should have a box of corn cobs next to the loo, or a mail order catalogue hanging behind the door of the outhouse. In most loos in South Africa, in dire emergency, one could probably use The Specialist itself!

In 1747 in his Letters to his Son Lord Chesterfield gave this advice: 'I knew a gentleman who was so good a manager of his time that he would not even lose that small portion of it which the call of nature obliged him to pass in the necessary-house; but gradually went through all the Latin poets, in those moments. He bought, for example, a common edition of Horace, of which he tore off gradually a couple of pages, carried them with him to that necessary place, read them first and then sent them down as a sacrifice to Cloacina; thus

was much time fairly gained; and I recommend you to follow his example. It is better than only doing what you cannot help doing at those moments and it will make any book which you shall read in that manner, very present in your mind.'

The Roman poet, Catullus, was fearful that his writings would end up this way.

In the old days, incidentally, as far back as the eighteenth century, books were used so prevalently in this manner that they came to be called bum-fodder. Which is where the word 'bumph' comes from.
Which reminds one of the story of the man in England who went into a loo and stayed there a very long time and when he was asked why he took so long said: 'Well, I started pulling on the toilet roll and all it said was Boots, Boots, Boots and I was waiting for it to say ... something else.'

Reviewers of this book should be warned of the famous retort to reviewers: 'I have your review in front of me. Soon it will be behind me.'

The literal use of literature must have been popular for many years after Lord Chesterfield's personal discovery. The roll of toilet paper started playing its role in history only in the late Victorian times. It was in 1880 that perforations (made by the British Perforated Paper Company) revolutionised the genre. Up till then it was squares and often the dreaded hard and slippery paper.

Even the coming of rolls was not without possible embarrassment.

Trader Horn's daughter Marie has a nice story about her uncle Tom Smith (Trader Horn's brother), who was a Catholic priest in Lancashire.. He always had a housekeeper. Marie loved going shopping with one of them, a young one. The first item on the weekly shopping list, always announced in a loud voice by the housekeeper, was 'A

small box of Beecham's pills and a roll of toilet paper on Father Smith's account!' All his parishioners must have known that Father Tom was a man of regular habits!

It must be remembered in passing that the words sanitary and sanity have the same root: physical health and mental health. It probabaly explains the quality of writing of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant who suffered from chronic constipation.

Mentioned in Dispatches

While all this is crucial, we mustn't forget literary content, or honourable tributes. We have seen the potty in Byron just as Don Alfonzo saw it. Loos and related activities take their bows of course, in Chaucer and Shakespeare, Sterne and James Joyce. The Great Panjandrum himself, Dr Johnson, was unequivocal. No quilted seats or fancy plastic for him. 'There is nothing as good as the plain board'. Wooden seats are warmer.

You have to have sympathy for Compton McKenzie when he writes in Greece in my Life: 'I think I should sigh for the old Grande Bretagne Hotel in spite of the squalor of the loo which was no paradise for dysentery'. Especially when one thinks of those loos on the Continent where one squats on two platforms for the feet while the maelstrom swirls around like Scylla & Charybdis. We used to call them 'starting-blocks'. Richard Burton II, the nineteenth century explorer, would shock people by leaving out on his desk a book he was writing called A History of the Fart - he may not have seriously intended to write it.

The Wind in the Willows

Had he done so, however, Burton would quite likely have started with the Roman Emperor Claudius, a humanitarian man according to the historian Suetonius.

> Some say that he planned an edict to legitimize the breaking of wind at table, either silently or noisily - after hearing about a man who was so modest that he endangered his health by an attempt to restrain himself.

He could not have failed to include the sad story of Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, which is told in the seventeenth century biographer John Aubrey's wonderful book Brief Lives.

> This Earl of Oxford (writes Aubrey), making of his low obeisance to Queen Elizabeth, happened to let a Fart, at which he was so abashed and ashamed that he went to Travell, 7 yeares. On his returne the Queen welcomed him home, and sayd, My Lord, I had forgott the Fart.

This is an even more wonderful story if it is true, as some contend, that de Vere was actually Shakespeare. The whole of literary history would have to take into account this exile and its cause.

The French novelist Balzac said that he would like to be 'so well known, so popular, so celebrated, so famous, that it would permit me to break wind in society, and society would think it a most natural thing'.

Burton might well have ended with David Niven's account, when he was a young man in Bermuda, of an attempted seduction.

> We were never out of the water and became burned the colour of mahogany. I fell slightly in love with a dark haired beauty of eighteen from Richmond, Virginia. She wore a camellia in her hair on the night I took her for a romantic drive in the full moon. Joe Benevides, though himself the soul of tact on these occasions, sitting bolt upright in his box and staring ahead oblivious to what was going on behind him, had unknowningly sabotaged my very delicate preliminary moves by feeding his horse some wet grass.

moves by feeding his horse some wet grass. It is quite impossible to impress a beautiful girl with your sincerity if your carefully worded murmurings into a shell pink ear have to compete with a barriage of farts.

Loo Tenants

There are not many poems directly addressed to the topic of the loo. An exception is the following, with its dilemma as to whether God is everywhere - even in the kleinhuisie. Sir John Harington, with true Renaissance dexterity, turned his hand from plumbing to the poetry of plumbing and piety.

A godly father, sitting on a draught
To do as need and nature hath us taught,
Mumbled (as wax his manner) certain prayers,
And unto him the devil straight repairs,
And boldly to revile him he begins,
Alleging that such prayers were deadly sins
And that he shewed he was devoid of grace
To speak to God from so unmeet a place.

The reverent man, though at the first dismayed,
Yet strong in faith, to Satan thus he said:
Thou damned spirit, wicked, false and lying,
Despairing thine own good, and our envying,
Each take his due, and me thou canst not hurt,
To God my prayer I meant, to thee the dirt.
Pure prayer ascends to Him that high doth sit,
Down falls the filth, for fiends of hell more fit.

There is at least one poem, however, (by A Y Campbell), which does pay proper respect to the profession of plumbing:

Plumber is icumen in;
Bludie big tu-du.
Bloweth lampe, and showeth dampe,
And dripth the wud thru.
Bludie hel, boo-hoo!

Thawth drain, and runneth bath;
Saw sawth, and scruth scru; -
Bull-kuk squirteth, leake spurteth;
Wurry springeth up anew,
Boo-hoo, boo-hoo.

Tom Pugh, Tom Pugh, well plumbes thu, Tom Pugh;
Better job I naver nu.
Therefore I will cease boo-hoo,
Woorie not, but cry pooh-pooh,
Murie sing pooh-pooh, pooh-pooh,
Pooh-pooh!

Until recent times, if we do not know what Scotsmen wore under their kilts, we do know what ladies wore under their dresses. Nothing. And many no doubt suffered for it from chills and worse. Until an American social reformer came along by name of Mrs A Bloomer. In 1850 a certain kind of drawers took her name. No doubt because of their voluminous character and potential for embarrassing discussion, the name came, by metaphoric extension or some other route, to mean an embarrassing faux pas. If the feminine origin is appropriate then it is fair to point to one of the more embarrassing bloomers in literature - from none other than Jane Austen and in Pride and Prejudice:

On entering the room, she found the whole party
at loo, and was immediately invited to join them ...

For a writer so sure of her touch, so delicate in sensibility, this is a lapse of monumental proportions. Like Mme de Pompadour she may well have said, 'Apres moi, le Deluge.'

Even the poet laureate himself, Alfred Lord Tennyson sometimes let his knickers show, as in his well-known poem, 'Locksley Hall'.

> In the spring a young man's fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love.
> Then her cheek was pale and thinner than should be for one so young,
> And her eyes on all my motions with a mute observance hung.

The mind boggles at what they thought they were doing. Humourist Frank Muir has suggested the poem might have been inspired by a two-seater loo.

Imagine, too, the sensation that would be caused if any Royal Shakespeare Company director took literally the words of the sentry, Francisco, in Hamlet when he says at the beginning of the play, 'For this relief much thanks'.

Hail to Thee!

But the loo and the sewerage system, in the form of drains, does get an honorary mention in the greatest poem in the English language. You might think that Paradise Lost is the greatest poem in the English language and it is true that we do find that plumbing is accorded a place in Book One.

> As one who long in populous city pent,
> Where houses thick and sewers annoy the air,
> Forth issuing on a summer's morn to breath
> Among the pleasant villages and farms
> Adjoin'd, from each thing met conceives delight.

But Paradise Lost is not the greatest poem in the English language. What is the greatest poem in the English language? The greatest poem in the English language was written by Captain Hamish Blair, probably a Royal Navy officer, when he was stationed at Scapa Flow, in the isles north of Scotland. The greatest poem in the English language is called 'The Bloody Orkneys' and goes thus

THE BLOODY ORKNEYS

This bloody town's a bloody cuss-
No bloody trains, no bloody bus,
And no one cares for bloody us-
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody roads are bloody bad,
The bloody folks are bloody mad,
They'd make the brightest bloody sad,
In bloody Orkney.

All bloody clouds, and bloody rains,
No bloody kerbs, no bloody drains,
The Council's got not bloody brains,
In bloody Orkney.

Everything's so bloody dear,
A bloody bob, for bloody beer,
And is it good? - no bloody fear,
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody flicks are bloody old,
The bloody seats are bloody cold,
You can't get in for bloody gold
In bloody Orkney.

The bloody dances make you smile,

The bloody band is bloody vile,
It only cramps your bloody style,
In bloody Orkney.

No bloody sport, no bloody games,
No bloody fun, the bloody dames
Won't even give their bloody names
In bloody Orkney.

Best bloody place is bloody bed,
With bloody ice on bloody head,
You might as well be bloody dead,
In bloody Orkney.

If you think of it a book is, as Aristotle would say, a kind of catharsis. It begins with preliminary pangs, it entails great turmoil and struggle, it brings, certainly by the end, great relief - especially to the readership. Writing a book is like pulling the chain - you never know if it will work (Readers are cranky as chains). And then there is the washing of the hands. But before I wash my hands of this subject I want to point out The Greatest Mystery of All.

The idea came to me when I read a saying of Christopher Morley, who is over one hundred years old today if he is still alive. Following, I suppose, John Donne's saying that no man is an island, Morley is the man who said: 'No man is alone while eating spaghetti.' A man who can say that must be one of the most profound thinkers in the world - ever. So we must take careful note of another thing he said. It is a saying of deep religious insight. He said, and suddenly we see into the Mystery of the Universe: 'A human being is an ingenious assembly of portable plumbing.' In the light of this we cannot deny ourselves. We have created the loo IN OUR OWN IMAGE. It is no wonder that the euphemism is the most mysterious room in our homes; it is our most private world; it is, as some people have recognised, the 'holy of

holies'. And what is it we do when we go inside, close the door, lock it, turn round and bow down? What is it we do? We recognise OURSELVES.

Three cheers for the Loo. Hip, hip ...

oOo

EMERGENCY NOTES