

14th March 1998

LORD Berners, born Gerald Tyrwhitt, seems to have been one of nature's jokers from the start. Punished as a small boy by being shut up in a cupboard, he retaliated by locking all the lavatories in his mother's house and throwing the keys in a pond.

Always a form of protest, his jokes grew subtler and more surreal with time. He was the only child of a semi-detached mother and father whose preoccupations (hunting and the Army respectively) he repudiated, and whose mutual antipathy he failed to dent. Gerald's conception was by all accounts the only time he managed to attract their joint attention. He survived instead on a substantial income from his mother's family, together with a minor but reputable title inherited from a paternal uncle in 1919, when he was 36. (Berners said he came by it because a whole row of Tyrwhitts fell off a bridge or, alternatively, under a bus on their way to a family funeral.)

Short, bald and dumpy, he looked like an egg and cultivated the bland, sardonic stoicism of an upper-class Humpty Dumpty. The First World War made no apparent impact on what was already, in Mark Amory's memorable phrase, a life of planned repression. "Of Berners one can always be sure," wrote Siegfried Sassoon in the 1920s: "He wears the same mask (if it is a mask), and is, to me, consistently inhuman, and unfailingly agreeable."

Wagner had been a formative influence at Eton, crossed later with the Italian Futurists, encountered during a youthful stint at the British Embassy in Rome. For a little over a decade between the wars, Berners composed short but brilliantly inventive, audacious and technically adept ballet scores, song-settings and piano suites in collaboration always with the very best and latest European talent.

Natalia Goncharova designed the cover for his first published score; Diaghilev commissioned his ballets; and Stravinsky singled him out as the finest British composer this century. But Berners himself recognised inhibition as the controlling factor in his art. He told Virginia Woolf that his talent clung like a creeper to a cliff-top, and his musical scores - like his paintings and his novels - were as bright, slight and spiky as rock plants.

"I can always tell when Gerald's weekend guests arrive," said a friend, discussing his music. "There's a sudden clash of cymbals." Passion, human or aesthetic, had long since been eliminated from Berners's life and art. His sexual exploits, ambiguous and inconclusive like much else about him, centred more or less unsatisfactorily on a lifelong live-in boyfriend called Robert Heber Percy. Midway in age between Max Beerbohm and John Betjeman - both of whom became his friends - Berners invested his meagre emotional capital in the weird, elliptical, inconsequential humour which has always been the native English version of surrealism.

It was Berners who referred to Vita Sackville-West as "Wry Vita", and said that a hostile review for Cyril Connolly would be like shooting a sitting robin. In his heyday as chatelain of Faringdon in Gloucestershire between the two World Wars, he built a folly, kept a flock of home-dyed, multi-coloured pigeons, installed a grand piano in his car (in fact it was a travelling clavichord which exactly fitted the Rolls-Royce tool compartment), and observed complacently when complimented on his hothouse peaches: "Yes, they are ham-fed."

After the Second World War, in an age of austerity when luxury had become a dirty word, Faringdon took on in retrospect the aspect of an heroic and beleaguered outpost ("Lord Berners will somehow manage to maintain a secret melon house," Connolly wrote confidently). Feeling lonely, anomalous and disheartened, Berners invented a characteristic riddle: "If the clocks . . . had no one to talk to or keep them going, what publisher would they refer to?" The answer was Chatto and Windus, but the clocks' predicament was of course Berners's own, stranded in a world that had replaced its pre-War cult of the grasshopper with commitment to the earnest and self-righteous ant.

"The world has no use at present for middle-aged grasshoppers," he wrote with the sombre self-knowledge which, as Osbert Sitwell noted, he could never entirely erase from even his most frivolous text:

"Occasionally, very occasionally, I thought I could detect another quality ruffling the surface of it, something sad and understanding that, it might be, he had been at great pains to hide."

Berners's dark secret, if he had one, is safe with his biographer. This slim volume faithfully follows guidelines laid down by its subject, who, in another of Amory's neat phrases, "made the decision against profundity early on and stuck to it". This is the second book Amory has written, each devoted to an old Etonian grasshopper of inimitable panache. His **Life of Lord Dunsany** came out in 1972 and, at the current rate of progress, we should have another deft, debonair, consistently inhuman and unfailingly agreeable biography to look forward to, round about the year 2024.