

Pink pigeons & blue mayonnaise.

Written by Joseph Epstein. Published in New Criterion Nov 1998

I have a weakness for minor artists. But they must be genuinely minor, by which I mean that they mustn't lapse into minority through overreaching, want of energy, crudity, or any other kind of ineptitude. They must not be failed major artists merely. The true minor artist eschews the noble and the solemn. He fears tedium for his audience, but even more for himself. He sets out to be, and is perfectly content to remain, less than great. The minor artist knows his limits and lives comfortably within them. To delight, to charm, to entertain, such are the goals the minor artist sets himself, and, when brought off with style and verve and elegant lucidity, they are -- more than sufficient-wholly admirable.

Gerald Tyrwhitt-Wilson (1883-1950), the fourteenth Lord Berners, was the very model of the minor artist, a title he would, I think, neither disclaim nor disdain. He painted, he wrote, he composed (for Diaghilev but also for the movies), and he didn't in the least mind being called an amateur or a dilettante, and on occasion declared himself both. When Max Beerbohm rendered Lord Berners at his piano in a caricature -- nicely capturing his bald pate, his monocle, the careful mustache beneath his beaky nose -- the caption read: "Lord Berners making more sweetness than violence." This was Berners's aim, sweetness and light, though in the correct mixture, which meant, of course, not too much of either.

Gerald Berners is a man who tends to show up in other people's memoirs, letters, and diaries. He generally does so in a somewhat oblique fashion, arriving late, leaving early, never the life of but always a guest at the party. He was part of English smart bohemia, where society and art met -- a member of that group of English writers, critics, and composers who came into prominence in the 1920s and gave the prevailing tone to English culture until the early 1950s. His name pops up alongside those of John Betjeman, Duff and Diana Cooper, the Mitford girls, Cecil Beaton, Peter Quennell, Cyril Connolly, David Cecil. Thus, Evelyn Waugh to his friend Christopher Sykes

: "I sought you in White's on Tuesday but found only Berners." Thus, Diana Cooper, in her autobiography: "At Augsburg we joined Emerald Cunard, Gerald Berners, Bertie Abdy, and others." Berners himself brings H. G. Wells and the Baroness Budberg to the Betjemans, and Elsa Schiaparelli to a jumble sale. Harold Nicolson mentions Berners, fleetingly, in Some People. Among the Sitwells, Isaiah Berlin, Siegfried Sassoon, Harold Acton, and David Cecil, there, off in a corner, ubiquitous and omnipresent, sits Lord Berners. Who was this man?

A clear answer is now available owing to the biography of Berners by Mark Amory.⁽¹⁾ Literary editor of the London Spectator, Amory has edited the letters of Evelyn Waugh and those of Ann Fleming, and knows well the terrain upon which Berners romped. Mr. Amory's is a book written with a nice combination of sophistication, knowledge, and good sense. At 237 pages long -- with fewer than twenty further pages given over to bibliography and appendices -- it is also rightly, one is inclined to say just about perfectly, proportioned.

Rightly proportioned, too, is the degree of Mr. Amory's psychologizing. Lord Berners was odd - - and more than a little odd, for his reputation in his own day was that of an eccentric. But he is not presented here all lashed up in psychological interpretation. Mr. Amory, as a literary psychologist, uses a light hand. "The reader of his autobiography [First Childhood]," Mr. Amory writes, "is given no hint that Gerald himself is to be exclusively homosexual.... All this suggests only that Gerald, who was to live openly with a man for almost twenty years, was capable of

being mildly disingenuous to the end." Enough said, and Mr. Amory himself duly says very little more about it, either by way of approval or disapproval, taking his subject's homosexuality as a fact of life, worthy neither of interpretation or speculation.

A composer, painter, and novelist, Gerald Berners was what we should, in an inflationary age, probably today call a Renaissance man. But in Berners's case you have to imagine rather a small renaissance: one in Andorra, perhaps. A shy boy who later became a shy man, he did not go to Oxbridge, but instead was removed from Eton to study for -- and twice fail -- the examination for the diplomatic service. No disgrace, this failure, for, with its concentration on foreign languages and history, it seems to have been much more rigorous than sitting for the standard university examination of the day. He was in any case sent as an honorary attache to Constantinople, where Harold Nicolson was also posted.

Berners's next posting was at Rome, where he met and befriended Ronald Firbank: an instance of the shy meeting the terminally shy. "The flashes of brilliance that animated his conversation and made his company so delightful are impossible to reconstruct," Berners later wrote. "One might as well attempt to record the hovering of a humming-bird or portray the opalescence of a soap-bubble. There was an intriguing irrelevance, a delightful, fantastic silliness in all he said or did." In his own career, Berners would not be without his own Firbankian flashes.

Gerald Berners grew up, an only child, in rather stuffy, late Victorian opulence. His mother, who was, by his own account, utterly without a sense of humor, loved him; his father, who had a caustic sense of humor, did not. In First Childhood, he recalls his mother instructing his father to beat him for some delinquency or other, and his father saying that he was busy and couldn't be bothered. ("I remember," Berners notes, "feeling a little offended by his lack of interest.") Berners believed his father also did not care all that much for his wife, but then "he did not seem to be the kind of man who could ever have been seriously in love with anyone." His mother would much have preferred Gerald excel at horsemanship than anything else, and rather discouraged his early passion for music. Neither parent had a clue about what interested their son, which was fine with him. At preparatory school, his headmaster warned him not to allow his music to get in the way of his studies. Such an upbringing, if one survives it, leaves one with a sense of detachment and distance that can have its artistic uses.

But his upbringing also had its sadness. In First Childhood, Berners wrote:

Those who say that their childhood was the happiest period in their lives must, one suspects, have been the victims of perpetual misfortune in later years. For there is no reason to suppose that the period of childhood is inevitably happier than any other. The only thing for which children are to be envied is their exuberant vitality. This is apt to be mistaken for happiness. For true happiness, however, there must be a certain degree of experience. The ordinary pleasures of childhood are similar to those of a dog when it is given its dinner or taken out for a walk, a behavioristic, tail-wagging business, and, as for childhood being carefree, I know from my own experience, that black care can sit behind us even on our rocking-horses.

Berners came into his title, money, and property in 1918, when he was thirty-five. Out of the financial wars, he would never again have to worry about earning his own income. He kept houses in Rome and London, but was most often at home -- and most at home generally -- in

Faringdon, his estate in Berkshire. A less intellectually distinguished crew gathered there than at Lady Ottoline Morrell's, though it was a much more amusing one. Here it was that Berners earned his reputation as an eccentric. He dyed the pigeons around Faringdon bright colors (using a dye that did them no harm). He had an occasional penchant for monochromatic meals. Stravinsky recalled that "if Lord Berners's mood was pink, lunch might consist of beet soup, lobster, tomatoes, strawberries," with pink pigeons flying outside; Stravinsky's wife sent Berners a powder that allowed him to make blue mayonnaise. He built a so-called "folly," an isolated tower with no reason for being other than his desire to have it built, and to it he appended the notice: "Members of the Public committing suicide from this tower do so at their own risk." He allowed Penelope Betjeman's horse Moti into his drawing-room for tea. (Mr. Amory prints a picture of the horse sipping tea out of his mistress's saucer at Faringdon.) He installed a portable piano in the back of his Rolls-Royce. As befits such behavior, Berners's outward demeanor was utterly conventional; he wore suits with vests and bow ties, even when painting.

Shy though he was, Berners said many witty things, a goodly number happily recorded by Mark Amory. Berners it was who said that T. E. Lawrence seemed "always backing into the limelight." He claimed to have gone to the House of Lords once only, because a bishop "stole my umbrella and I never went there again." When an Australian newspaper claimed that it was sad to see the once noble city of Venice full of beggars, Berners offered the corrective that it was a misprint and supposed to read "buggers." He invented frivolous riddles, of which Mr. Amory quotes the following: "if the clocks were to feel that they had no one to talk to or keep them going, what publisher would they refer to? Answer: we have no one to Chatto and Windus." Sometimes his wit could take a socially cruel (if still amusing) turn. He sent the following invitation to Sybil Colefax, who was noted for her social climbing:

I wonder if by any chance you are free to dine tomorrow night? It is only a tiny party for Winston and GBS. I think it important they should get together at this moment. There will be no one else except for Toscanini and myself. Do please forgive this terribly short notice.

The joke came in Berners making both the signatory of this note and the address on the envelope excruciatingly illegible. Poor Sybil Colefax.

Analyzing Gerald seemed to be a game Berners's friends all took a hand at playing. The best efforts were made in the fiction of his friends. Berners is Lord Merlin in Nancy Mitford's Pursuit of Love, where he plays a cameo role as an eccentric and a host for the world of smart bohemia (not much invention here). Of Merlin, the Nancy Mitford-like narrator remarks: "As Lord Merlin was a famous practical joker, it was sometimes difficult to know where jokes ended and culture began. I think he was not always certain himself."

Berners is at the center of Osbert Sitwell's story "The Love-Bird," where, as the character Robert Mainwroth, Sitwell subjects him to extended analysis. "To those who did not care for him, Robert Mainwroth gave an impression of being a scoffer, one who was rather eccentric and outside life. To those, on the other hand, who liked him -- and, as his sensitiveness gradually evolved round itself the defensive armour of a perfect but laughing worldliness, they formed a steadily increasing band -- he was a pivot of very modern, if mocking activity." The element of gentle mockery, I think, is the key one.

There is further talk of Mainwroth-Berners's "natural air of quiet, ugly distinction." Sitwell adds that "he was, in fact, a dilettante, but one in the best sense: for he aspired to be nothing but

what he was." He could be happy for long periods, for he was not often bored, "and made a continual use of his continual leisure: in addition to writing and painting, he read an enormous amount." Yet "there is little doubt that he was pleased at having created this false impression of brutal lack of sentiment." He is a man, Sitwell avers, who tended to "divest himself of everything that did not appeal to him personally, either aesthetically or through humour -- and his senses of aesthetics and humour were perilously akin."

Osbert Sitwell has it right when he says that it is humor that furnished Lord Berners with his aesthetic and that is behind so much of his art. As for that art, although he took immense pleasure in creative work, Berners referred to his endeavors in this line as "my little hobbies, writing, painting, and music." Although his oeuvre is small, it is, in its modest way, impressive. Stravinsky called Berners the most interesting British composer of the twentieth century; Clive Bell wrote the introduction to the catalogue of his one show of paintings; he had a ballet, *The Triumph of Neptune*, produced by Diaghilev and choreographed by Balanchine; he published poems in *Horizon*; he wrote an opera, plays, six slender novels, and two autobiographical works.

Had he not been wealthy, Berners would doubtless have turned out much more. "I don't feel very inspired at the moment," he wrote to Diaghilev. "However I bought a very pretty Renoir this morning and I hope things will now go much better." Although Berners's greatest promise was as a composer, at one point the pleasure he took from his music departed, and so he turned to painting. According to Virginia Woolf, in her diary, Berners "met a painter, asked him how you paint; bought 'hogsheads' -- (meant hogs' bristles) and canvas and copied an Italian picture, brilliantly, consummately, says Clive Bell. Has the same facility there [as in his music]: but it will come to nothing he said, like the other." To walk away from something one is very good at seems a strange act, but perhaps it is less strange if one's purpose in life is, above all, to elude boredom.

Yet it's difficult not to be impressed with Berners's prowess at musical composition, especially given how little actual training he had. His attraction to music, he wrote in *A Distant Prospect*, the second of his two brief autobiographical volumes, was initially to "the sight of musical notation on the page" -- he was attracted to it, that is, "pictorially." Apart from rather rudimentary piano lessons as a boy, his only other instruction appears to have been four sessions on counterpoint taken with Donald Tovey. He seemed to show genuine progress as a composer, at least enough to earn the support of the great London Times critic Ernest Newman, who had earlier been a detractor. Much of this was owing to Berners's quite marvelously lucid grasp of what lay behind artistic problems. Mark Amory quotes from an unpublished Berners essay that shows how much the cerebral and highly conscious musical artist he could be:

There are no hard and fast rules to determine the exact length a piece of music should be; nor are there canons to govern the timing of entries, the length of development or the exact amount of suspense to be inflicted on the ear before it is relieved by resolution. These are matters which depend on the tact and sensibility of the composer. If he is lacking in this sensibility, the music that he produces is apt to be unsatisfactory in that, if he errs on the side of length, it will seem to drag; if on the side of brevity, it will appear spasmodic or trivial.

Berners had a quick musical intelligence, owing in part to his general aesthetic sophistication. He has been called the English Satie, though Satie, Mr. Amory notes, was less than pleased

about this, saying Berners was an amateur. I have not heard all of his music, but all that I have been able to acquire on compact disc gives pleasure. It is lively, high spirited, often parodic, and filled with witty surprises of the kind light -- but still serious -- music ought to provide. It is never tedious. An important quality, the absence of tedium. In his novel *Far from the Madding War*, Berners has a character who is a composer (supposedly modelled on William Walton) and who has written a symphony that lasts an hour and a half, of which another character (one modelled on Berners himself) remarks: "Francis believed in catharsis through boredom."

I have never seen a painting by Gerald Berners. In his book Mark Amory provides rather poorly reproduced versions of a few of them along with some of his illustrations for books and sheet music. Amory is not very high on Berners the visual artist. Nor was Evelyn Waugh, who, with his customary charity, wrote to a friend: "Gerald Berners had an exhibition of pictures and sold them all on the first day which shows what a good thing it is to be a baron." The consensus seems to have been that Berners's painting was rather too predictable. Christopher Wood, a younger painter, noted that he found Berners's work "just too perfect." Amory quotes a reviewer in the magazine *Apollo*: "One views his pictures with delight, only tempered by regret that being so good they are not just a little better...." "Too perfect," "so good" -- it sounds, Berners's condition as a visual artist does, like an incurable case of want of inspiration.

As a prose writer, Berners is more impressive. He was the product here of literary self-cultivation. David Cecil said Gerald Berners was the best-read man he had ever met. As he grew older, his reading narrowed. "Are you a reader of Henry James?" Berners asked a friend, "I read practically nothing else now." Yet Berners did not at all write like James. His writing tended to be plain, traditional, a model of ironic understatement. A not untypical sentence from *First Childhood* reads: "The only real drawback to the school [his preparatory school] was the fact that the headmaster happened to be a sadist." He had, as Mr. Amory says, "a gift for being pleasurablely readable."

Lord Berners's bibliography includes eight books. Two are autobiographies, the second of which, *A Distant Prospect*, takes his life only up to his departure from Eton. Six are works of fiction. All are quite brief, some fewer than a hundred pages. Until very recently, all were out of print.(2) The most difficult to acquire remains the novel called *The Girls of Radcliffe Hall*. This is a highly campy performance intended for private circulation in which many of Berners's friends are turned into girls and Berners himself into the headmistress of a girls school in which everyone has a crush on someone else. For people in the know, Mark Amory writes, it was a roman with a very clear and patently homosexual cléf. The hero/heroine of the story, Cecil Beaton, was said to have been so angered by it, Mr. Amory reports, "that he went round acquiring copies and destroying them, in an attempt to suppress it."

A more characteristic performance is Berners's novel *Far from the Madding War*. Mr. Amory calls the plot of this delicate novella "slender, indeed inadequate." All the more interesting, therefore, that it is charming and delightfully readable. It is written, to use a musical term, with perfect pitch. Lend an ear, please, to this, its opening paragraph:

Miss Emmeline Pocock sat, intently bending over a large piece of embroidery, surrounded by good taste and silence. The room she sat in was as elegantly appointed a room as anyone could wish to see, although a highly attuned connoissance of decorative subtleties might detect, here and there, a blemish: a somewhat too deliberate juxtaposition of objects; colour arrangements that envisaged artistic ideals without quite achieving them. But, on the whole, the general effect was one of harmony, discretion, lack of pretentiousness, and there was none of that absence of comfort that

good taste so often entails.

Emmeline is the daughter of the Warden of All Saints College

, and the novel opens as World War Two has just begun. She hates the idea of war, with its great destruction, but feels that, like everyone else, she must do something for the war effort. What she decides to do is to unravel, knot by knot, stitch by stitch, a large fourteenth century German embroidery that is in her possession. "Focussing a swivel lamp on a corner of the embroidery, she took up a small pair of scissors and, drawing up a chair, she sat down before it and began slowly, deliberately to unravel the tiny threads of silk, offering a mental prayer to God to grant her the requisite strength to persevere in her minute labour of destruction until not a single thread remained of this unique, almost monumental work of art." And, you might think, we are off.

Except we are not, for not much happens in the novel. Chiefly characters are wheeled in and out, mined for their comic content. Early among them is one Professor Trumble, a very great bore whom Emmeline wishes would undergo a reverse psychoanalysis that would give him some social inhibitions. He and his wife's "leave-takings ... were as protracted as the finale of a Bruckner symphony."

Mr. Jericho appears to be based on Isaiah Berlin, and provides perhaps the last playfully disrespectful portrait of this great English social eminence. He pops up like a cuckoo out of a clock, with eyes, behind large steel-rimmed spectacles, that had "an explanation for everything," missed nothing and "often saw a good many things that weren't there"; he suffers not from the absence but from "an excess of tact." Then there is the inevitable character based on the Oxford classicist Maurice Bowra, who prefers to talk with friends over the telephone, about Greek antiquities, moral philosophy, or local gossip, rather than in person, for over the telephone he was "unable to see his victims wince, he was less tempted to wound, and conversation was carried on in a kinder, less provocative tone."

Far from the Madding War contains a murder and a suicide, but as killings go they are as nothing next to the character analysis exhibited by the novel's author. The most analyzed character in the novel, in fact, is Berners himself, who is called Lord FitzCricket. To him is given the line: "It may well be that the proper study of mankind is man, and the study of mankind is discouraging." Certainly Berners, in this self-portrait, proffers a discouraging picture of himself. He describes himself as "completely bald," so that "when he was annoyed he looked like a diabolical egg." "He composed music, he wrote books, he painted; he did a great many things with a certain facile talent. He was astute enough to realise that, in Anglo-Saxon countries, art is more highly appreciated if accompanied by a certain measure of eccentric publicity. This fitted in well with his natural inclinations."

FitzCricket-Berners goes on to report on the way that the war "poleaxed" him. He ceased composing, writing, painting. The war, he felt, not altogether incorrectly, meant the end of people such as himself. "You see, I'm all the things that are no use in war. My character is essentially pacific and hedonistic. I like everything to be nice and jolly and I hate to think of people hating one another.... I'm an amateur, and fundamentally superficial. I am also private spirited. I have never been able to summon up any great enthusiasm for the human race, and I am indifferent as to its future. I have also led a self-centered, sheltered life, and my little world consists of my hobbies and personal relationships."

As this passage suggests, the war sent Berners into a royal blue funk from which he never quite emerged. He went into psychoanalysis -- in his excellent story "Percy Wallingford," the young diplomatist narrator based on Berners speaks of having suffered from "nervous depression" -- but one imagines him too witty for it to have much helped. (People with strong humor don't often do well in therapy. One recalls George S. Kaufman firing his psychotherapist because he asked too many damn personal questions.) He had a relationship with a younger man that lasted twenty years, though one senses that this relationship, though important to him, was never quite at the center of his life. There were rumors that Berners planned to propose to Clarissa Churchill, but nothing ever came of them.

Perhaps Berners's problem was to be found in an emptiness at the center of his outwardly pleasant life. One half feels he might have wished that this emptiness could have been filled by religion, only because the subject of religious faith does come up a fair amount in his published writing. In *A Distant Prospect*, he describes the young intellectual at Eton who "did a good deal to undermine my religious faith," which, he goes on to explain, "had never been a very healthy one." He speaks in the same book of having "no aptitude for religious faith," and of the absence of "any latent talent" for religion. He also allows that he could not "understand in what way suffering fortified the soul."

In *Far from the Madding War*, Berners plays religion for laughs. When Emmeline in that book is asked if she had ever tried to find God, she replies that "I felt I wouldn't know what to do with him if I had found him." She also remarks that, when a child, she "used to think that the Day of Judgment meant that we were all going to judge God, and I still don't see why not." After Penelope Betjeman had converted to Catholicism, she tried to bring Berners into the Church, but it was no sale. "I don't mind Penelope as long as we don't have any of that God nonsense," he told a friend.

After the war, Berners's health and interest in life began to give out, though it is a bit unclear which came first. He felt he had become distinctly a back number. And he was right. Probably always a mistake to attempt to make of one's life a work of art. A life, as opposed to art, wouldn't endure, for one thing; and, for another, old age so rarely supplies a dramatic, or even nicely understated, elegant ending.

Lord Berners, the man who so greatly feared boredom, became, in the recollection of some friends, a bit of a bore himself. He might earlier have contended that pleasure was the true end in life, yet toward the end of his own life he asserted that "the highest pleasure is creative work." As a reader and a listener, I, for one, wish he had exerted himself to have turned out more work. Did, one wonders, he wish it, too?

But life, never without its tricks, had dealt Berners too good a hand. Not needing to work, he could live in luxury and fall back on charm. Berners died, at sixty-six, a fairly easeful death, apparently not in the least fearful of what lay beyond. In the postscript to his excellent biography, Mark Amory reports that the doctor who had attended Lord Berners "during his last years refused to send a bill, saying that the pleasure of his company had been payment enough." Now there is a test of charm none of us would wish to have to pass.

(1) Lord Berners: *The Last Eccentric*, by Mark Amory; Chatto and Windus, 237 pages, 20 [pounds sterling].

(2) Berners's two autobiographical writings have now been reprinted in handsome paperback editions by the Turtle Point Press and Helen Marx Books (*First Childhood*, 243 pages, \$14.95 & *A Distant Prospect*, 186 pages, \$12.95). They will also be issuing Berners's *Tales and Fantasies* in Spring, 1999.

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