

THE NEW GLADSTONE REVIEW

an occasional e-journal

September 2023

Issue No. 18

***Informal commentary, opinions, reviews, news, illustrations and poetry
for bookish people of philanthropic inclination***

Editorial BM

- | | |
|--|----|
| 1. Devout Dissenters | BM |
| 2. A cosmic god versus mankind's inherent spirituality | BM |
| 3. Incitement to Insurrection? an unexpected historical parallel | RG |
| 4. Not surfing but browsing | BM |
| 5. A modest request | BM |
| 6. Novacene: Lovelock's last words: a review | BM |
| 7. With Heartfelt Thanks | BM |

Editorial

In keeping with the style which has evolved in producing the Review over recent years, this issue comprises a miscellany of articles which seek both to inform readers and to stimulate reflection on contemporary concerns, many of which have their parallels in fairly recent history. For example, guest contributor Richard Gaunt reveals a remarkable similarity between the events in the USA in 2021 when supporters of Donald Trump stormed and temporarily took control of the Capitol building in Washington DC and plans in Britain nearly 200 years ago when opponents of the Catholic Relief Bill, the legislation enabling Catholic Emancipation, rallied themselves in a range of ways to oppose the government measure. I am most grateful to Richard for his typically insightful article.

In the first article of this Review, I consider the current decline in religious belief in the UK, and examine the ways four prominent Christians found it necessary to reject their earlier religious convictions. In article 6, I review a book (his last before dying at age 103) by the polymath James Lovelock. It is on a highly topical concern - AI, by someone whose views will stimulate reflection by many people. Article 7 expresses my deep gratitude to local doctors for giving me a new lease of life.

Finally, I have reproduced an article (4) which I was originally invited to write for a local literary publication, but which as well as describing my earlier move into a shop in Bull Yard, Southwell, also presented a case for traditional second-hand book shops, which I believe is still valid. I also consider that all the articles here are ultimately about our culture - the underlying rationale for this publication.

BM



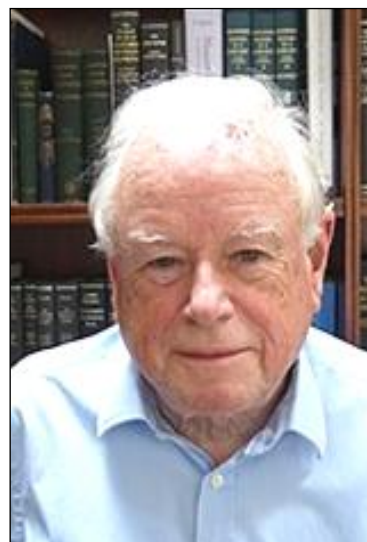
1. Devout Dissenters

A recent YouGov poll showed that in the UK only 27% of people say they actually believe in ‘a god,’ while 16% believe in the existence of ‘a higher spiritual power’ but not ‘a god.’ But as reported by Gallup, in the USA 81% of adults say they ‘believe in God,’ and only 10% do not believe – results which suggest that belief (however defined) is greatly influenced by social and/or cultural factors in one or both countries.

Of course, claimed belief in God can be based on highly disparate criteria, from perceived experiences of *revelation*, upbringing, tradition, or loyalty to historical assumptions, at one end of the spectrum to, at the other end, reticence to ‘go against the grain’ or uncritical acceptance through lack of inclination to consider what is, in essence, a profoundly philosophical issue. Some people, admitting that they lack the confidence to engage in such metaphysical enquiries, are content to leave that to theologians, believing that actions matter more than words, and that their time is better spent in aiming to follow a morally ‘good’ life.

Even so, some feel a need to square their life’s activities with a religious belief system which they find credible, and fundamentally inspirational in guiding the course of their lives. And some, having struggled with the religious assumptions that they had formerly found convincing later decided to admit that they were wrong. This article provides brief sketches of four prominent Christians who now reject their initial beliefs, and the way that decision affected their subsequent adoption of a new, and for them, more-credible system of beliefs.

Sir Anthony Kenny is a British philosopher whose interests are chiefly in *ancient* and *scholastic* philosophy, and the *philosophy of religion*. He has been Master of Balliol College, Oxford; Chairman of the Board of the British Library and President of the British Academy, and is a highly acclaimed expert in *classical philosophy*, the *nature of mind* and *freewill*. Among his books are *Wittgenstein* (1973); *The Oxford History of Western Philosophy* (1994); *What I Believe* (2006) and *A New History of Philosophy* (2012).



He initially trained as a Roman Catholic priest and was ordained in 1955. He then served as a curate in Liverpool and lecturer at Liverpool University. However, by the late 1960s, questioning the validity of Roman Catholic doctrine, he declared himself an *agnostic*, i.e., unable to either believe or not believe in God’s existence

To the extent that theology is grounded in philosophy, it would be difficult to find anyone better qualified to have tested its postulates rigorously – claims, he came to believe untenable. In brief, he can’t believe in a ‘being’ whose nature (including omniscience and omnipotence) is *inconceivable*. For the God people claim to believe in has none of the attributes we ascribe to beings we *do* know, as entities that are both physical and conscious, and express opinions. Despite such significant reservations, in his writings (including those for non-specialist readers) he clearly endorses many aspects of what might be considered a *religious* life.

Don Cupitt is an English philosopher of religion. Formerly an Anglican priest and lecturer at Cambridge University (and Dean at Emmanuel College) he became more widely known as a broadcaster and author of many books which propose his views on a *non-realist* philosophy



of religion. He came to public attention in 1984 with a BBC TV series *The Sea of Faith*, which criticised orthodox Christian beliefs. The series' title came from Matthew Arnold's poem *Dover Beach* (1867), which reflected on the-then widespread decline in religious faith: a decline which has grown much more pronounced since then (as evident in the opening paragraph).

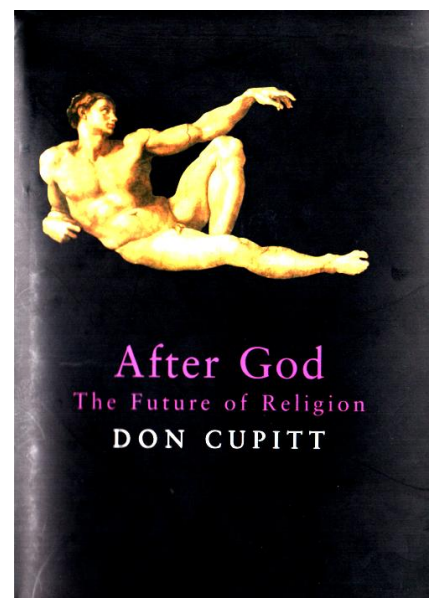
Cupitt's beliefs may be briefly categorised under the following three headings.

- Religion is not true in the *realist* sense, because its language doesn't correspond to entities that exist (noted by Kenny)
- From a *non-religious* standpoint, religion is a system of signs and symbols that we create in order to make sense of the world
- Arguably, religion is a way of finding happiness (however defined) in this world, and about spirituality rather than dogma; about actions rather than beliefs.

According to his reading, Jesus' original message was completely rewritten by the Early Church. Jesus was not the body of God incarnate, he was not the Messiah, nor was he resurrected after crucifixion: a belief which he attributes to hallucinations and exaggerations.

In *After God* (1995), he describes the challenges to religion that came from the changing world order, such as multiculturalism, consumerism (including the power of the media) and the enormous impacts of science and technology. In response, he proposes that if we can't beat post-modernity, we should embrace it.

Thus, Cupitt suggests that a re-definition of religion *will bring us closer to the Sermon on the Mount than any sort of orthodox theology* – and *will aesthetise* religion in the sense that it sees religious living in terms of artistic practice and symbolic expressions. Undoubtedly, religious themes are often portrayed in celebrated works of art, music and drama. He is the author of many books expounding his beliefs, e.g. *The Nature of Man* (Sheldon, 1979); *Crisis of Moral Authority* (SCM, 1985); *Life Lines* (SCM, 1986); *Creation out of Nothing* (SCM, 1990) .and *Theology's Strange Return* (SCM, 2010).



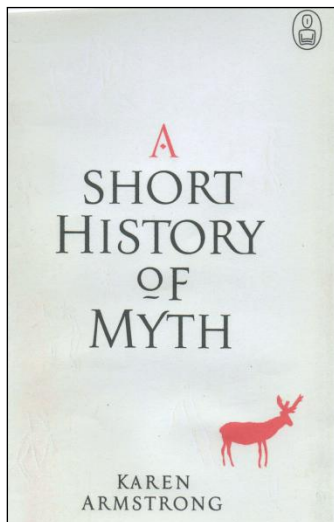
He is currently a key figure in the *Sea of Faith* Network, a group of spiritual *explorers* based in the UK, New Zealand and Australia, who share Cupitt's concerns.

Karen Armstrong is of Irish Catholic descent, who of her own accord in 1962, when 17, entered the convent the *Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus*, where she remained for seven years. She reports that while there she suffered physical and psychological abuse, and was required to mortify her flesh with whips and wear a spiked chain around her arm. When she spoke out of turn, she was forced for a fortnight to sew at a treadle machine with no needle. While at the convent, she attended St Anne's College, Oxford, from where she graduated in English. As she noted subsequently in a TED talk, after leaving the convent, for thirteen years she wanted nothing more to do with religion. But remarkably her harsh experiences had not entirely rejected it – so that later she again recovered inner religious beliefs.

She is now best known for her books on comparative religion, such as *A History of God* (Vintage, 1999) – from reading which the often-acerbic critic A N Wilson declared her *a genius*; *A Short History of Myth* (Canongate, 2005); *The Case for God* (Knopf, 2011) and *Twelve steps to a Compassionate Life* (Bodley Head, 2011). Her work now focuses on those features that are common to the major religions, such as the importance of compassion and the Golden Rule (*Do as you would be done by*).



Perhaps her most notable achievement is to build bridges between the world's major religions, aiming to encourage harmonious inter-faith relationships where, currently, conflict is the usual situation. Thus, philosopher Alain de Botton has described her as *one of the most intelligent contemporary defenders of religion, who wages a vigorous war on the twin evils of religious fundamentalism and militant atheism*, while an article in the *The Washington Post* referred to her as a *prominent and prolific religious historian*, and another notable critic as *arguably the most lucid, wide-ranging and consistently interesting religion writer (sic) today*.



Examples of her interfaith credentials are that: i) she has taught courses at a London [rabbinical college](#) and centre for Jewish education; ii) is a fellow of the [Jesus Seminar](#), a group of scholars and lay people investigating the historical foundations of Christianity; iii) she won the *J P. Blaney Award* for *Dialogue* recognizing her outstanding achievement in *advancing understanding about and among world religions, and promoting compassion as a way of life*; iv) in 2011 she received the *Lucas*

Prize of Tübingen University in recognition of *her contributions to theology, philosophy and intellectual history, and for improving international understanding and tolerance among faiths* and v) in 2018 she was awarded the \$100,000 TED Prize, for drawing up a *Charter for Compassion*, in the spirit of the Golden Rule, to identify shared moral priorities across religious traditions, and foster global understanding and a peaceful world.

Richard Holloway is a prominent Anglican who in 2000, when Bishop of Edinburgh, a position he had held from 1986, publicly declared his *agnosticism*. From 1958, he was a curate, vicar and rector at various parishes in England, Scotland and the USA. He is now regarded as one of the most outspoken and controversial figures in the church.

Before he was 14 (in 1947), he became a student at Kelham Hall, then an Anglican seminary, the *Society of the Sacred Mission*, near Newark (in Nottinghamshire) that prepared boys for the priesthood. In Scotland, where he was born, he had experienced a lack of religious inspiration, even when walking in the hills above Loch Leven, and felt a yearning for something more. It seems it was his romantic imagination that led him to become involved in the monasticism of Kelham (shown below) and *to love and understand its ethos*.



Later, as priest in charge of Old Saint Paul's, a poor parish in Edinburgh, he achieved a sense of fulfilment, by helping the hopeless and dispossessed, following the rule *the less said and more done' the better*. At this early stage in his priesthood he played at being a sort of social-worker/priest, deciding that, following the early Christians, all things should be held in common – *so that money, time, food etc were all to be shared not only with his curates, but with every vagrant, mad or sane, drunk or sober who knocked on the door*.

But subsequently, Richard Holloway's developing thoughts about the nature and purpose of religion became a constant intellectual struggle – and the more he read about cosmology, psychology and philosophy the more he realised how untenable was much that was expected of the elected *Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church*. Even so, sharing with Cupitt a non-



realist notion of the term God, he insists that Christianity has been a triumph of the human imagination, but became a myth that has served its time. What he values in the narrative is its central figure, Jesus, who always showed pity for human beings and was endlessly subversive, in preferring compassion to rules. *What he came to hate about the church is its insistence on rules, which turns it to cruelty, not pity*. Whatever one thinks about his changed opinions, the fact when

sixty six he had the courage to announce them publicly, might be regarded commendable. The above draws extensively on his autobiographical account in *Leaving Alexandria* (2013).

Undoubtedly an intellectual heavyweight, he was elected a Fellow of the *Royal Society of Edinburgh* (1997) and holds honorary degrees from the universities of Strathclyde, Aberdeen, Glasgow and St Andrews, and a professorship at Gresham College in the City of London. He has written many books e.g. *Beyond Belief* (1982); *Paradoxes of Christian Faith and Life* (1984); *Godless Morality: Keeping Religion out of Ethics* (2000);) and *Stories We Tell Ourselves: Making Meaning in a Meaningless Universe* (2020).

2. The elusive cosmic god *versus* mankind's inherent spirituality

The following is my attempt to capture in verse form the essence of the religious views of the four dissenters discussed above (Kenny, Cupitt, Armstrong and Holloway).

It is a personal interpretation, with which not all of them might agree.

Matthew Arnold,¹ like many others, 'got it wrong – committing too much to the view that God bestrode the Universe and that His will was only accessible through ancient texts subject to constant theological revision, and even then only granted to those offering up petitionary prayers to find personal salvation

From his nostalgic view across the Channel and overlooking Dover Beach, Arnold's experience was as vicarious as that of scrupulous scholars intent on discerning the scriptures' true messages unaware that the meanings of words evolve uncannily

But we surely err in seeking thus the unknown god for the crucial spiritual force lies deep within our individual selfhood and, more than mere suppliant observers, we are each like a lone ship's captain negotiating life's trajectory through the Earth's uncharted oceans, now calm, now turbulent – and typically unforeseen

But that inner spiritual energy, shaped by personal experiences of both joys and grief, for which we sometimes rejoice in quiet satisfaction - but in other moods know we must, and can, endure stoically - has composed our own customised metaphorical scriptures, learning from which in confidence we can grow to live more moral lives

The atheism born of scientific hubris doubts that spirituality exists, brushing aside its ignorance of whence the universe began and where it ends, how best to explain (away ?) Barrow's *anthropic* claims² for its origins, or the roles of Sheldrake's *morphogenetic fields*.³ With Shakespeare's Hamlet we might sigh: *There are more things in heaven and earth than dreamt of in (atheists') philosophy*

But the egregious evil of strictly adhering to ancient religious doctrines, for which claimed respect for their holy scriptures and deities is perversely deemed compatible with murder and torture of alleged dissenters, demands the need for all of us to recognise mankind's inherent sense of compassion, (even evident in other primates⁴) that lies at the very core of human morality

1. In his poem *Dover Beach* (1867), which featured in Issue 10 (October 2020) of this Review
2. The *Anthropic Principle* raises the enigmatic, and unresolved, observation that the precise values of the mathematical constants which determine the relationships between chemical agents that give rise to life on Earth seem, necessarily, to be finely tuned to that outcome. One explanation is that many universes coexist (multi-universes) in which our planet, by chance, sustains life, (Barrow J C & Tipler F J *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* Oxford University Press, 1986; and see article 6 in this issue)
3. The hypothesis that, in addition to other physical fields (gravitation etc), human/animal behaviour is responsive to *resonance* in *morphic fields* undetectable by physicochemical devices (R Sheldrake *The Presence of the Past*, Harper Collins, 1989)
4. See e.g. *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (F de Waal, Norton, 2013)

3 Incitement to Insurrection? An Unexpected Historical Parallel

Richard A. Gaunt

Anyone watching events on Wednesday 6 January 2021, when a group of supporters of President Trump stormed (and temporarily took control of) the Capitol building in Washington DC, may have comforted themselves with the thought that nothing of that nature could ever happen in this country – at least not since the exposure of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. The actions of the assembled crowd, troubling enough in themselves, were magnified by the impression – currently the subject of litigation against former President Trump – that an insurrection had been incited, with the intention of intimidating elected lawmakers against ratifying the election of President Joe Biden.

An intriguing historical parallel arises from events in British political history during the spring of 1829. At the time, the passage of Catholic Emancipation – the right for Catholics to be elected as MPs – was dominating public affairs. The issue of granting political rights to Catholics touched a raw nerve which went back to the Reformation and the subsequent history of hostility between Protestants and Catholics. The opponents of the Catholic Relief Bill, the legislation enabling Catholic Emancipation, which was introduced to parliament in February 1829, rallied themselves in a range of ways to oppose the government measure. Brunswick Clubs, named after the British ruling house (the Hanoverians) were formed (although not in Nottinghamshire), open-air public meetings were convened (addressed by pro- and anti-Catholic speakers), petitions were circulated for signature and subsequent presentation to both houses of parliament, and parliamentarians who had strongly-held convictions on the issue, were unrelenting in their opposition to the ‘act of betrayal’ entailed in granting Emancipation.

The 4th Duke of Newcastle, of Clumber Park, was a noted ultra-Tory opponent of reform. In 1832, his electoral patronage at Newark was the means through which the young W.E. Gladstone commenced his parliamentary career. To his credit, Gladstone appears to have supported both Catholic Emancipation and the extension of political rights to Nonconformists, but, like Newcastle, he was vehemently opposed to parliamentary reform.

Newcastle was particularly incensed by the fact that Emancipation was being legislated for by a Tory government headed by the Duke of Wellington. Wellington had decided to introduce Emancipation after Daniel O’Connell, the catholic lawyer who headed the Irish Catholic Association, was elected as MP for County Clare in July 1828. Faced with this direct legal challenge to the status quo, Wellington reached the conclusion that, if Emancipation was not speedily granted, Civil War in Ireland might ensue.

Opponents quickly realised that one of their best hopes of resisting Emancipation was in making a personal appeal to King George IV, whose coronation oath to uphold the Protestant faith had always been a barrier against introducing the measure. The King, ensconced with his favourites at Windsor (including his mistress Lady Conyngham), had only reluctantly assented to a Catholic Relief Bill being debated in parliament, and opponents of the measure now directed their attention towards him. In the middle of February 1829, Newcastle was approached by the Secretary of the London and Westminster Protestant Club to present their petition (estimated at 100,000 strong) to the King at Windsor. The petition was to be delivered to Newcastle by a large procession of coaches, and he would then present it to the King. In his diary, Newcastle described the scheme as ‘beyond all precedent but also of such prodigious magnitude that I am sure that no Minister can stand against it - The whole machinery is excellent’. Somewhat portentously, Newcastle observed, ‘this will do & we shall now see who shall be master - & whether we shall preserve our religion & our Laws’. Nothing

more was heard of this scheme until Newcastle's tart observation on 30 March that he had received 'an odd letter' from Wellington which Newcastle had answered 'in his own way, which he will not admire - He wishes to lord it over Every one, he shall not do so with me'.

What had happened in the interim? Newcastle told Wellington that he had only seen the petition for the first time the preceding evening: 'it was not what I Entirely approved of, but being in circulation, it was impossible to Suppress it'. Newcastle noted that the petitioners wished:

to mark their respect [my italics] by attending their Petition in carriages to Windsor, where I was to have received it from them & to have laid it before the King - It was, however, Subsequently understood that this mode of *Shewing their respect* [my italics] on Such an occasion would not be agreeable to the King, & the Scheme was, in consequence abandoned.

It was an established privilege for peers of the realm to request a personal audience of the Crown. This was a device which Newcastle had previously used for political purposes. Wellington suspected that it was being used as cover for an attempt to stiffen the King's resolve against his ministers and against Emancipation.

Having gone to Windsor to pre-empt the scheme, Wellington learned that the King had not given explicit permission for the presentation of the petition. The Duke proceeded to launch a shrewd counter-assault. According to the cabinet minister, Lord Ellenborough:

[Wellington] impressed upon the King the danger of the Precedent; & Showed the object was to collect a Mob to overawe Lady Conyngham and Persons residing under his Protection. He showed the King the Act of Charles II limiting the number of Persons who might present a Petition.

Under the Act against Tumultuous Petitions of 1661, any petitions with more than twenty signatories had to have the consent of three Justices of the Peace to be legal, and only ten people could appear to present them. Having adroitly raised the prospect of a threat to the safety of the King's mistress, Wellington secured royal approval to dissuade Newcastle against proceeding with the plan and instructed him to send the petition by way of the Home Secretary, Robert Peel. Wellington left open the possibility of a personal audience between Newcastle and the King.

Newcastle had - from misjudgement or from ignorance - found himself drawn into the centre of a potentially incendiary situation. For Wellington, it raised serious constitutional consequences. Wellington told the King that it was a dangerous precedent to allow peers to present petitions at audiences because 'if they Gave answers in the King's name they became responsible for these answers, & in fact usurped the functions of the Secretary of State'. Catholic Emancipation was finally passed in April 1829 - an act for which the ultras never forgave Wellington, whose government was driven from office a little over eighteen months later.

Recent events in the United States remind us that the proper functioning of representative government depends upon a careful negotiation between power and authority. The potential for incitement and insurrection raised by Newcastle's presentation of the London and Westminster Protestant Club petition, during March 1829, reminds us that this negotiation continues to be a central part of our own history too.

Richard Gaunt is Associate Professor in British History at the University of Nottingham and has published, amongst other works, a two-volume edition of 'Political Selections from the Diaries of the 4th Duke of Newcastle-under-Lyne' (2006 and 2021).

4 Not surfing but browsing

Ben Mephram extols the serendipitous nature of second-hand bookshops

I was invited to write this article for publication in the Southwell *Folio* arts magazine, by the-then editor Penny Young, who inserted the above subheading. It appeared in Issue 31 (Autumn, 2015) and served as an announcement of the opening of the Gladstone Books shop in Bull Yard, as well as making the case for second-hand bookshops in general.

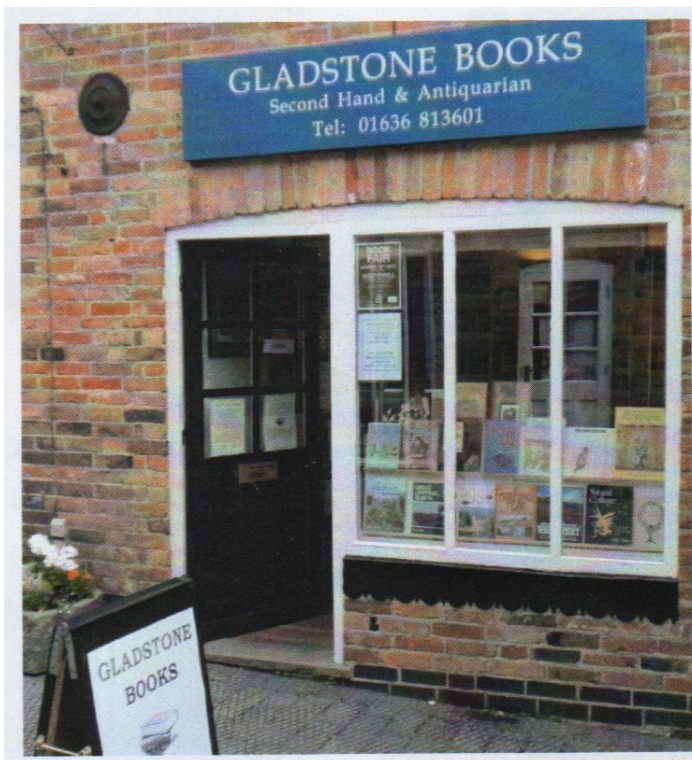
Only slightly edited to account for changed circumstances, I reproduce it here because its principal claim seems to me to be just as appropriate now as it was in 2015. [*The original photo of the interior of the shop is replaced here by a view of the current book room.*]

At a time when electronic devices have not only become the commonest means of information retrieval but also appear to be inexorably dominating all forms of interactive communication between people, setting up a new bookshop might appear as foolhardy as it is eccentric. Some people claim that this fear is unfounded, for it is argued, aggregate book sales are not in decline, as other aspects of the ‘media’ stimulate people’s interests in current concerns -with the result that, for example, celebrity biographies are a lucrative source of revenue for high street bookshops as well as many supermarkets. But second-hand book shops rarely benefit from such passing fashions.

Perhaps the major reason is that the distinctive character of the second-hand bookshop is so little appreciated. The concept of ‘financial value’ in relation to anything old is that the primary role of the experts who examine artefacts in the popular *Antiques Roadshow* television programme is to assign to

each a monetary price that ‘*you should get at auction.*’ As I peruse the treasured books on the shelves of my own library, the chance discovery of some of which set me back all of 50p, I can hardly suppress a self-indulgent smile – for, to me, they have often proved to be immeasurably valuable. To misquote Omar Khayyam: ‘*one can only wonder what the bookseller buys one half as precious as the goods he sells.*’

So what is so special about second-hand, in contrast to new, bookshops? In two words, their uncommonly wide *range* of contents (both chronologically and usually in terms of subject matter) and their delightful *unpredictability*. Thomas Carlyle, the 19th century Scottish philosopher and satirical essayist, opined that *the true university*



In Bull Yard, Southwell

of these days is a collection of books. Despite its antiquity, I believe that, when expressed the other way round, Carlyle’s assessment continues to provide a valuable insight into the real significance of

the printed word. That is to say, arguably, a well-stocked second-hand bookshop might be said to provide easy access to all the literature required to support a truly liberal university education. But, unfortunately, with few exceptions, modern day students are unlikely to be encouraged to read about, or discuss, ideas outside the specialism they have been enrolled to study. As a former university teacher for 40 years, I believe their engagement with 'knowledge' is usually largely restricted to prescribed web-based articles and print-outs of Power-Point lectures. But my argument doesn't only refer to officially-registered students; because in a very real sense (at least in Western societies), almost all thinking people have had to become 'perpetual students,' in that we are exposed to a constant flood of images, sound bites, news flashes, tweets etc, and are forced to notice, analyse and make judgments on this incessant barrage of information and opinions.

In consequence, my aim in opening Gladstone Books¹ in Southwell is, in however small a way, to provide a means of coping with this information overload, to enable people to regain a sense of perspective that characterised less-frenetic times, and derive insights and pleasure from the quiet contemplation of informed, perceptive and creative writing. For I believe that the real value of the second-hand bookshop is that it allows ready access, at modest cost, to aspects of the broad range of literature that contributes to human culture in its widest sense. High street bookshops selling the latest publications 'hot from the press' simply do not occupy the same literary territory.

At Gladstone Books in Bull Yard [*now, of course, at a private address*] within an area of about 250 square feet you will find a



A corner of the Book Room at the current site of Gladstone Books

carefully chosen selection of about 3000 books on history, classical fiction, essays, poetry, natural history, biographies, local studies, crafts and various forms of artistic expression. But the collection also includes some books on more specialised (often academic) interests, such as philosophy, theology, politics, sociology, medicine, agriculture, technology, ecology and the various branches of science; and many other books in stock are not on display. Some are quite old (e.g. from the 19th century) and some are brand new. On principle, I aim to include books written from different perspectives, e.g. from left to right in political terms, from fundamentalist to atheistic ends of the theological spectrum, and from classical and *avant-garde* in fiction and the arts.

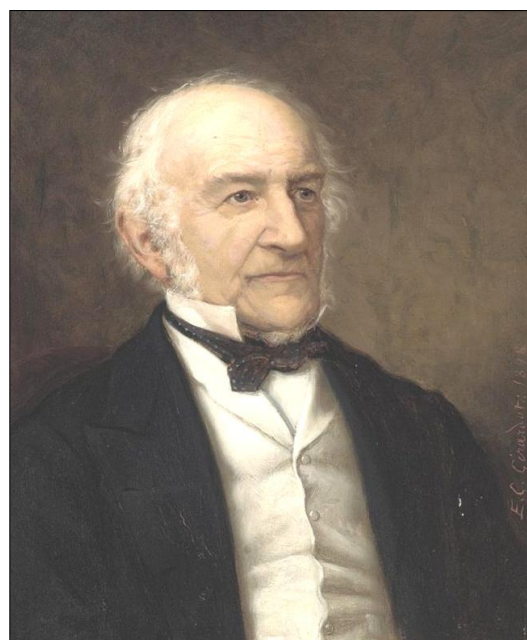
¹ The shop is named after William Gladstone, the Victorian politician, bibliophile and polymath, who was first elected as MP for Newark on Trent at the age of 23, and subsequently served as prime minister on four occasions.

Bona fide browsers are very welcome and though I respect some people's preference to browse in silence, I have enjoyed many a congenial chat with customers who like to share ideas. [*In the new setting, I leave customers to browse on their own, but respond to their requests if they summon me from the house with questions or comments.*]

But despite the relaxed atmosphere, second-hand shops can still elicit a *frisson* of excitement when a book is discovered which strikes a chord with personal sympathies, or reminds one with pleasure of long forgotten experiences. Tension is further raised by the realisation that, unlike shops selling new books, a snap decision on whether to purchase a particular book is required: for it may well have been sold before the next visit is made. The apt word for some such experiences is, of course, *serendipity* - which describes the act of making delightful but unexpected discoveries. Or perhaps, browsers are engaged in a form of hunting, but one surely of the most benign type unimaginable.

If my personal enthusiasm is all too evident, it is doubtless because I have spent a lifetime 'buried in books' - as author, editor, reviewer, collector and latterly, dealer. It is no exaggeration to claim that the evolution of my professional academic career, from the biological sciences to philosophy and ethics, has been in no small measure due to chance discoveries made in second-hand book shops - those alternative, accessible source of education and inspiration.

Genuine browsers can be assured of a warm welcome at Gladstone Books: and it is with a, hopefully not too optimistic, belief that the venture will be of some value to the local community, that I have sought, by opening this new shop, to buck the current national trend of increasing closures.



As Mr Gladstone opined

Books are delightful society. If you go into a room and find it full of books, - even without taking them from the shelves, they seem to speak to you, to bid you welcome.

5 A Modest Request

In the past, several people have made favourable comments about my book stock and the reasonable prices charged. But since Covid and my change of site, local visitors and their registered comments have not regained the former frequency. Registering such opinions on the *Book Guide* website:

<https://www.thebookguide.info/bookshops>

would make more people aware of this service. In recent months, I have received a number of visits to the Southwell book room from people, sometimes travelling some distance, who had only learned of its existence by reading comments on that website. You can read some of the previous comments posted there, and/or via a link on my website:

www.gladstonebooks.co.uk

Many thanks, in advance, to those who avail themselves of this opportunity!

BM

6 Novacene: James Lovelock's last words: a review

James Lovelock, who, unusually, was an *independent scientist*, free from the usual affiliations with academia or industry, died in 2022 on the anniversary of his 103rd birthday. I wrote an article about him in Issue 14 (December, 2021) of this Review, which, accessible via the website www.gladstonebooks.co.uk, provides a useful introduction to this account. For even to *list* his scientific achievements and the ideas that constantly burst from his fertile mind would far exceed the space available. But some minor recapping is perhaps necessary.

Raised in Brixton, in a working class family, after graduating in chemistry from Manchester University he made several seminal contributions in a wide range of fields, e.g. the transmission of respiratory infections and methods of air sterilisation, the roles of calcium and other ions in blood clotting; damage to living cells caused by freezing, thawing and thermal shock, and methods for preparing sperm for artificial insemination. His electron capture detectors are the most sensitive ever made and are now widely employed to detect pollution caused by residual halogen compounds. He invented several chemical methods, such as gas chromatography, now used in the investigation of everything from planetary atmospheres to the role of blood lipids in causing arteriosclerosis in humans. And his study of ways of detecting life on other planets by atmospheric analysis, was extended to global pollution problems. Over this period, he was employed by the National Institute for Medical Research in London and several commercial organisations, but adopting the mantle of *independent scientist* was to herald his recognition as a truly innovative thinker – and a polymath according to any definition of that word.

His theory of the Earth acting as a biological organism – rather than an inert lump of rock – attracted some favourable but, more commonly, hostile reactions from the scientific community. According to the *Gaia hypothesis* (from the Greek goddess of Earth, suggested by a neighbour, the Nobel Prize-winner for Literature, William Golding) the Earth acts in a physiological manner to maintain relative constancy in its environment – a phenomenon called *homeostasis* in animals.

He illustrated this by inventing a simple theoretical model *Daisyworld*, populated by two types of daisy, one being white (a colour which reflects incoming solar energy) and the other black, which absorbs energy. Essentially, all the energy the Earth receives, or has received, comes from our Sun, but had the Earth been just a lump of rock, the variation in energy received would have been too great to sustain life. But if the radiant energy received was very high, in response, white daisies would have predominated, cooling the Earth; and if the energy received was too low, increased growth of black daisies, would have maintained life. In principle, the same mechanism operates to maintain our blood pressure, and to regulate the temperature of our houses by the signals controlling the thermostat. *Gaia* is, of course, a metaphor; he was not suggesting that the Earth was conscious – although we can't be sure that it isn't. The hostility which occurred initially has abated, and many people now highly aware of the frequent and devastating impacts of raised global temperature, are drawn to the notion of Gaia, and the need to protect it from collapse.

As a tireless campaigner for a sustainable environment, Lovelock has continued to expand his sharp reasoning to consider what we can do to avoid the cataclysmic events which, according to current trends, mankind is destined to experience if a ‘business as usual’ mentality persists.

In the book *Novacene*, his last written words, he characteristically puts it bluntly, but with meticulous attention to detailed analysis. In the following, I shall try to capture examples of his reasoning and conclusions, but to some extent that will involve a degree of cherry-picking, because each of the 24 chapters (mostly only 3-4 pages long) bristles with new and challenging, yet concisely-presented, ideas, that for some people could open up novel and stimulating lines of thought.

Building on the concept of Gaia, he stresses the importance of human activity in being a crucial element in evolution. It has not only happened ‘out there’ due to chance genetic mutations, but we, unwittingly, have greatly determined its course by e.g. countless technological innovations, military conflicts and globalised trade.

He characterises the pivotal role of sunlight’s energy, as proceeding through three phases; namely, by being converted into i) chemical energy which sustains life (e.g. by photosynthesis), ii) physical energy (e.g. by engines using coal and fossil fuels), and iii) information processed by computers. To clarify these points, alongside quoting from



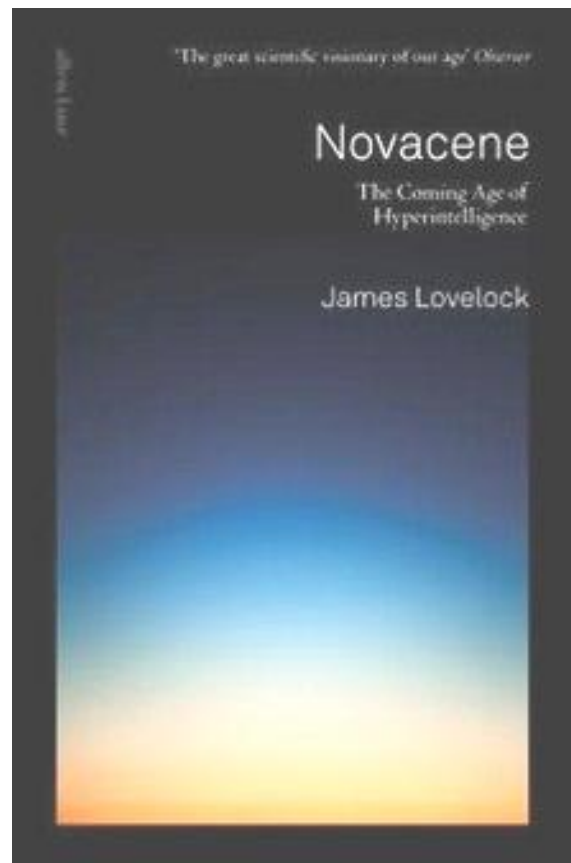
Wordsworth and praising the 18th century natural historian, Gilbert White, he invented the word *Novacene* to indicate the new era humanity is entering, from the earlier *Anthropocene*, which he dates from when we acquired the ability to shape the environment to human ends, as in the Industrial Revolution. During the Novacene epoch he believes mankind will witness the development of super-intelligent *cyborgs* (his name for robots) which by thinking thousands of times faster than we can, and at an exponentially increasing rate, will shape the future of life on this planet.

One of his most unfamiliar proposals, at least to the vast majority of modern-day scientists, is that *intuition* often plays a crucial role in our decision-making. (It’s a factor that in my own writing, I have suggested plays an unrecognised element of our thought processes, as proposed by Michael Polanyi’s reference to *tacit knowledge*). Lovelock notes that we often react instinctively, rather than by deliberative reasoning, in making important decisions: e.g. if someone unexpectedly encounters a sharp cliff edge - slipping on which would end in certain death. Measurements of the speed of such avoidance reactions have been calculated as 40 milliseconds – far faster the speed of reasoned thinking.

Another challenging assertion is that the conscious life which humans (and perhaps other primates) experience is very probably unique in the universe. And this is not because, as generally-understood, it was ordained by God, but is based on scientific evidence derived from the remarkable set of physical constants involved, any one of which, had they been only fractionally different, would have meant we would not have existed. Advanced by the-late John Barrow and Frank Tipler in *The Anthropic Cosmological Principle* (1986) and based on impeccably-sound data, it has been welcomed by some theologians as evidence for their beliefs. But for others it is just a remarkable coincidence or due to the fact that there are many universes (the theory of multi-universes, of which we are totally ignorant), ours happening to be the only one which fortuitously permits the emergence of sustained conscious life on our planet.

Alternatively or additionally, to quote Lovelock, *in attempting to describe the cosmos, it must be the kind of entity that can produce thinking beings like us. Our theories are limited by the fact that we are here to dream them.* Moreover, *for it to exist perhaps information is an innate property of the Universe, and therefore*

conscious beings must come into existence. He proceeds: *I think we are chosen people, but not chosen directly by God ... instead we are a species that was naturally-selected.*



The subtitle of this book is *The Coming Age of Hyper-Intelligence*: and it is in this context that the foregoing comments should be considered. Contrary to the suspicion that Lovelock's measured, data-based approach would have left him cautious and unimpressed by those scientists and others who praise artificial intelligence (AI) for its future benefits to humanity, with them, he regards it as the likely saviour of us and all we value. His point is that given the rapid changes to which we, the environment and human culture are largely exposed, human intelligence alone is limited in its capacity to deal with both future foreseen and unforeseen threats to survival.

If cyborgs, relying on super-intelligence and intuition, recognise the importance of humanity in the process of shaping evolution on Earth, we may become, as it were, *watched over by machines of loving grace*. But he does introduce several caveats, e.g. he regards it as *exceptionally stupid* to permit development of autonomous weapon systems (such as AI-piloted drones) that could make their own decisions on which people to kill. But on the whole, as with his rejection of the arguments of Greenpeace against use of nuclear power, he considers that AI is the *best-worst* option available.

He concludes the book with the following act of faith: *We are now preparing to hand the gift of knowing onto new forms of intelligent beings....Do not be depressed by this. We have played our part. Take consolation from the poet Tennyson:*

*Tho', much is taken much abides; and tho'
We are not now that strength which in old days
Moved earth and heaven; that which we are, we are ...*

That which we are, we areThat is the wisdom of great age (presumably referring to himself), the acceptance of our impermanence while drawing consolation of what we did, and what, with luck, we might yet do. And, perhaps, we can hope that our contribution will not be entirely forgotten as wisdom and understanding spread outwards from the Earth to embrace the cosmos.

My brief assessment

These are startling ideas, which I don't believe should be accepted uncritically simply because they are the opinion of someone who has studied the progress of science with such distinction. While many people might welcome the prospect of such a benevolent and rosy picture, the validity and vision of Lovelock's argument are highly questionable in that they rely on optimistic foresight when untested AI powers are unleashed into an unknown future.

Crucial in evaluating scenarios is the extent to which autonomy is granted to robots, which it is often assumed will interact with us – *biological* beings - to increase their beneficial influence on both themselves and us. But there are serious doubts that it will be possible for robots to 'read' our thoughts accurately, because much of our supposedly logical 'reasoning' is affected by biological influences (e.g. when we are stressed, excessively elated or under the influence of alcohol) - conditions other humans might well recognise and allow for. It also depends on *good intents* and numerous *checks and balances* for humanity and the environment, when it is not too difficult to imagine that the chaos that currently pervades the global scene - politically, economically and environmentally - would become even more pernicious if control of AI were to be left in the hands of future despots like those who already misrule large sections of our planet.

A return to a more ecologically-sustainable environment and much fairer societies, with all the advantages – and ideally none of the disadvantages – of a reconnection with our inherent biological natures, would doubtless not include many of the extravagant frills of modern lifestyles, but it would surely provide richer lives for future generations - in a deeper sense than that commonly understood in terms of cash-flow. The necessary cultural revolution to move towards the envisaged *organic*, rather than all-embracing *computerised*, life style might sound disruptive in the extreme. Yet many, such as our own grandparents and/or parents, in enduring the privation of the 1939-45 world war, found strength in their close-knit communities, which was to herald in a new order. (For me, born during the war, the experience was, of course, just 'normal.') Moreover, without any doubt, we owe it to future generations, given the currently tarnished state of global resources and the indefensible divide in life's opportunities between and within so-called developed and developing countries.

BM

7. With Heartfelt Thanks

To many people, the idea that a bit of the body that serves the sole purpose of pumping a liquid through fine bore tubes (the design of which would have been a credit to any Industrial Revolution inventor) has close associations with our emotions might seem quite incongruous. But when those emotions are expressed in words such as *heartfelt*, *hearty*, *heart-broken*, *heart throb*, *from the bottom of the heart* etc, it is difficult, even for someone like me, who graduated from university with a degree in physiology, to totally ignore such sentimental associations. How did the naming of these emotions arise?

The explanation might well lie in a theory that the ‘greatness’ attributed to certain philosophers and scientists was directly related to the period of time over which their views remain unchallenged – such was the authority assigned to them. Although Aristotle (384-322 BC) is usually thought of as a philosopher, he also made some important discoveries in the field of animal biology, so that historians of science often call him *the founder* of the science of biology. But that status has drawbacks if it is assumed that in getting so much *right*, his rare *flawed reasoning* was also accepted uncritically because of his acclaimed eminence.

In reasoning about the role of the heart, Aristotle suggested that rather than the brain, it was the heart that was the source of thoughts which caused certain actions and ideas. This was based on the observation that the heart responded sensitively to changing circumstances (e.g. by beating rapidly or slowly) whereas the brain appeared unresponsive to any sort of physical stimulation. Instead, he speculated that the brain’s role was to *cool* the blood by a process involving the production of phlegm. This idea was challenged by many scientists of the time, especially Herophilus: but without a profile as high as Aristotle’s their claims were largely ignored.

As is now widely known, the role of the heart in the circulation of the blood was largely discovered by William Harvey, as described in his *De Motu Cordis (on the motion of the blood)*, published in 1628 AD. In humans, the heart comprises four chambers -two atria and two ventricles - which bring about the oxygenation of blood as it passes through the lungs, its distribution to the body organs via arteries and capillaries and its return to the heart via the veins. But the heart’s efficiency as a pump depends on all its components working effectively and finely-coordinated with the periodic muscular contractions and relaxations. A fault in just one component can throw them all out of synchrony – resulting in heart *failure*, a condition I have suffered from for several years. But recently, treatment by the relatively non-invasive technique of *key hole surgery* has enabled a significantly reduced leakage of the mitral valve between the left atrium and ventricle – with the prospect of patients surviving for, at least, a few more years. Remarkably, for me this improved heart function was accomplished in just a two-day stay at a Nottingham hospital.

So this is where I feel it quite appropriate to acknowledge that those emotional associations – *heartfelt thanks*, on which Aristotle (erroneously) speculated - are from the *metaphorical* site of my sincere gratitude for the skill, care and warmth shown by all the staff involved in my recent treatment. But it is very clear that NHS staff at all levels, from cleaners to consultants, deserve much greater remuneration than they currently receive, and with much greater urgency than other, far less-worthy, beneficiaries. The Government is extremely short-sighted in failing to realise that their inaction poses serious threats to the very survival of the NHS.

BM