

And so I began to read ...

Books that have influenced me

Faith Cook



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To my friend
Rachel Knight
who suggested the theme for this book.

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Before you begin to read ...

Fait^h Cook has written 22 books, largely biographical, and they have influenced a great many people. It has been my privilege to appraise draft manuscripts of several of those books and offer constructive comments. But this twenty-third book is unique. It tells us how Christian books have influenced the author herself and it offers rich insights into how she grew as a Christian under their influence. It does more: it challenges the reader to read (or re-read) the books she refers to. In my own case it challenged me to re-read her own *Grace in Winter: Rutherford in Verse* (Banner of Truth, 1989). With better understanding of what drove her to write it, I read it as if I had never read it before!

This book complements her autobiography *Troubled Journey: A Missionary Childhood in war-torn China* (Banner of Truth, 2004)—

and those who haven't read that book will almost certainly want to do so after reading this one.

This book also reveals two other major literary sources that have strongly impacted her life: the writings of John Bunyan, and Christian hymns that have been written down the ages; here you can gain some insights into how she was impacted. If these insights whet your appetite there are two other volumes you might like to read: *Fearless Pilgrim: the life and times of John Bunyan* (Evangelical Press, 2008), and *Our Hymn Writers and their hymns* (Evangelical Press, 2005).

Meanwhile, enjoy this one.

Ralph E. Ireland

April 2016



JOHN BUNYAN

(After White's pencil drawing in the British Museum)

1628–1928.

At first

And so I began to read. I was almost twenty-one. No, it wasn't as if I had never read before, although, as a child of missionary parents in north-west China, I had quickly learnt that books were a luxury hard to come by. Then with the Sino-Japanese war still raging, books were an even rarer commodity, especially when I became a seven-year-old evacuee child escaping with my school to north India from imminent Japanese capture. Unknown to my parents, our boarding school had been forced to flee in haste for the Japanese army was right at the gates of the small provincial town where the school was situated.

Made up of about twenty-five children aged between seven and eleven, the school had to be accommodated in borrowed buildings set in the foothills of the Himalayas, nestling under the shadow of

the mighty Kanchenjunga range. Far from the noise of war, the surroundings were idyllic. And as children we were thrilled to learn that tigers roamed the surrounding jungles—our only grief, of course, was that our parents were far distant.

Scarce treasures

Understandably all books, equipment and even clothing, were in short supply in that remote part of India. This meant that I would read each available book many times over, some becoming great favourites. I even tried to bargain with a member of staff to give me the copy of one she had read to us telling of a lonely wolf that had met a sad death. I offered her a small bookmark I had just made in exchange for *Lobo, the Lone Wolf*. Not surprisingly, I was unsuccessful. However, *The Adventures of Ginger*, a Ladybird book written in appalling doggerel verse about a puppy called Ginger, was my all-time favourite as a seven-year-old. Ginger was born on a farm but sold to a child in London. His mistreatment and eventual escape back to the farm was a story I read and reread until I knew it by heart but still regularly shed tears over the puppy's plight.

Enid Blyton's books were considered unsuitable literature, especially for the children of missionaries, but these I regularly smuggled from a special collection reserved for sick children and read them surreptitiously until my misdemeanours were discovered. Perhaps the most meaningful book of my childhood years was *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame which I read at the age of eleven. Not only did it feed into my love of animals but more importantly it woke my growing sense of the divine. Ratty and Mole's reaction when they caught sight of *The Piper at the Gates of Dawn* could only echo a proper response to a glimpse of the beauty and glory of God.

Then suddenly Mole felt a great awe fall upon him, an awe that turned his muscles to water, bowed his head, rooted his feet to the

ground. It was no panic terror—indeed he felt wonderfully at peace and happy ... ‘Rat!’ he found breath to whisper, shaking, ‘Are you afraid?’

‘Afraid?’ murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. ‘Afraid of Him? O, never, never! And yet—and yet—O Mole I am afraid.’ Then the two animals, crouching to the earth, bowed their heads and did worship.

Clarendon School

After missionaries were peremptorily expelled from China in 1951 following the Communist takeover of the country, our family returned to England. My boarding school in that now distant land was exchanged for a magnificently situated Christian boarding school in North Wales. Even though I was only thirteen and my brother fifteen, my parents wished to return as soon as possible to the Far East, but now to Malaysia instead of China. So Clarendon School became my home and refuge for the next five years of my life.

Although at this point I had access to a wider range of books, our reading material was carefully monitored and largely governed by set books for our state examination timetable. The strong and sincere Christian principles of many members of staff, principles which I quickly absorbed as a young Christian myself, also contributed to my own strictly limited choice of reading material during my teenage years and on into my early twenties.

My understanding of biblical teaching was also limited by the influences that had surrounded me during the formative years of my growth as a Christian. The emphasis was on consistency and godliness among any who claimed to be Christians. Right though this was, it had a strong tendency towards legalism with a constant stress on regulations and forbidden pastimes. I absorbed

this emphasis to such an extent that even the reading of a daily newspaper troubled my conscience.

More than this, I made a deliberate decision to forego any reading of novels, including the classics such as Dickens' work, as I found that the sorrows, misfortunes and misdeeds of the characters in the novel gripped my imagination so intensely that it coloured my thinking day and night to an alarming extent. This, to my mind, robbed me of time and energy to think on better things. To children who had had a 'normal' home background and had attended day schools such early legalistic influences would have had far less effect. If I had been mixing with young people from a wide variety of backgrounds I imagine I would have been more able to compare one set of values against another. But in my case the strictures in my thinking that led me to frown on much secular reading were not helpful. When it came to the basic necessity of mixing freely with my peers or of coping with daily life in a broken and troubled world after I had left my highly protected school environment, I found myself at a loss.

Isolation

With school days over, I started at a teacher training college, but found life perplexing and difficult. I had few points of contact with my fellow students and was therefore quickly isolated from general conversation. More than this I was easily shocked at the mind-set and behaviour of others and fell into unattractive self-righteous attitudes—a stance not likely to make me popular! I became lonely and unhappy, and having no parental care or point of refuge with my parents back in Malaysia, my studies suffered in consequence, especially during my first year.

But with college days completed, I took up my first teaching job in a small village school, and found myself gradually forced to lose some of the inhibitions of earlier days. Then in 1957 a change

occurred—a change that profoundly influenced my attitudes to the whole of life. It was a revolution that has governed, though not limited, my selection of personal reading material ever since—material to which I shall refer in these pages.