

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1501369/Peter-Simples-infamous-50-year-war-on-reality.html>

24 Oct 2005

As the quirky column clocks up a half century, Christopher Howse profiles its author

Michael Wharton has fought what he calls an "infamous war on reality" in his Peter Simple column since the mid-1950s. It is an astonishing achievement to write a column, practically single-handed, for five decades, most of the time four days a week.

The world he produced is even more astonishing. It is essentially conservatism expressed by way of a dream world of thought-forms, of the kind projected by R S Viswaswami, the naked sadhu of lovely, sex-maniac haunted Sadcake Park, the famed "iron lung" of the Stretchford conurbation.

If there are "straight" pieces of political comment in Peter Simple, it has always been as a fantasist that he has excelled. Yet conservatism is implicitly present even in the Homeric epithets that habitually accompany the Whartonian inventions. They are of the nature of skaldic formulae, passed on by firelight through the generations.

Thus Alderman Foodbotham has to be identified as "the 25-stone, crag-jawed, iron-watch-chained, grim-booted perpetual chairman of the Bradford City Tramways and Fine Arts Committee"; Dr Spaceley-Trellis as "the go-ahead bishop of Bevindon"; J Bonington Jagworth as "Britain's most eminent motorist and chief of the Motorists' Liberation Front".

Michael Wharton is a supreme stylist, as his two volumes of memoirs confirmed. Take, for example, the dying fall in the following sentence from a columnar item about Dep Supt J S Harrogate, 52, the police fan club supremo and chairman of the local Pre-Raphaelite Circle: " 'We are dealing with imponderables here,' he stated, eyeing the plate of cold meat on his desk with unmistakable foreboding while Blackie, the squad cat, nine, stared at him with baleful yellow eyes through peacock feathers and dried sunflowers in a tall, strangely wrought magenta vase."

That item is no less effective for being at the same time a parody of newspaper reporting. There is here, as Wharton has acknowledged, an affinity, not with madcap Beachcomber, but with Myles na Gopaleen, the Irish Times pseudonym of the novelist Flann O'Brien. Wharton's world has, though, its own distinctive character.

The Peter Simple column (as it was always referred to even when it still bore the title "Way of the World") has been a long-stay home for lost causes, provoking such letters from readers as: "Dear Peter Simple - You have the gift of expressing what I think but have no words to express. You are an oasis of sanity in a mad world; more power to your elbow."

Michael Wharton received that letter 40 years ago when, in the midst of a remarkably complicated private life, which an old friend described as a "horror comic", he had no roof under which to spend the night. He and his wife had lost the lease on their maisonette in Hampstead, partly because of their noisy late-night parties, which sometimes included dramatic performances with such set-pieces as "The Russo-Japanese War" and "The French Revolution". The column with its "traditional values" was not merely the columnist set in type.

Michael Wharton, at the age of 43, first stepped over the threshold of The Daily Telegraph to take up his duties on the Peter Simple column on New Year's Day 1957. "I had had scarcely any sleep; I had passed the night in a drunken phantasmagoria, partly with my wife Kate, partly with others mostly unremembered, in pubs, clubs and other places barely identifiable at the time, now a confused blur."

The column had been started by Colin Welch on Oct 18 1955. ("It is important to get dates right," says Wharton.) Welch, who died in 1997, was clever, funny, a political thinker and professionally ambitious. He soon departed, eventually becoming deputy editor of the paper. The column was a "dead end", he warned Wharton, who, more than 30 years later, reflected that "it was a dead-end that suited me".

There was no historical inevitability in Peter Simple surviving for 50 years. Michael Wharton first served under the editorship of Sir Colin Coote, "a portentous figure in his late sixties, large, rubicund, very healthy-looking, but with a hint of the sardonic and choleric in his expression". He distrusted the column, especially as it had been the idea of the brilliant deputy editor Donald McLachlan, of whom Coote had a low opinion. A measure of McLachlan's eccentric outlook is indicated by his suggestion, on becoming the first editor of The Sunday Telegraph, of appointing the blind T E Utley as its television critic. "It will help him to give a balanced view," he said.

The closest shave in the column's survival came when a new deputy editor, John Applebey, wanted to turn it into a vehicle for notes taken from visits to different parts of Britain. Wharton was thrown into dread and confusion, but was delivered by amazing news. Applebey, a fit man of 40, had died of a sudden heart attack. "Was I responsible?" Wharton wondered. "Was I the possessor of supernatural powers, evil powers at that?"

Considering how highly Peter Simple has been valued by its admirers, for so many years, it has sometimes been shabbily treated. The early anthologies of the column were published only through the enthusiasm of a Dr Johnson. For the publication of the second anthology, in 1965, Johnson had arranged a party. It was in the upper room of a pub in distant Sutton, Surrey.

Michael Ffolkes, the illustrator, was the only other person Wharton knew there, and there was nothing to drink except beer, and nothing to eat but crisps and peanuts. "There was a general air of bewilderment," Wharton remembers. "What was it all for? As we came out into the rain, Ffolkes said it was probably the worst party he had ever attended."

Ffolkes provided from the first the small, neat, swirling, mannered illustrations for the columnar world. His image of Peter Simple was of an aristocratic, dandified man of letters who knew about fine wines. Michael Wharton, even in those days, was a bespectacled man in a raincoat who might lunch off a corned-beef sandwich with two large brandy and ginger ales.

Ffolkes's real name was Brian Davis. He adopted a working-life to match his pseudonym. He had a studio in Soho decorated by a ridiculous but delicious French painting of nude women. He drove a Bentley and drank champagne, which eventually overtook his spirit. He died in 1988.

Michael Wharton, though he has enjoyed drink and had often been drunk (and invented "passive drinking" as a satirical health-scare), faced a different enemy: melancholy. "Nameless Dread" is entertaining to read about in an account of Mountwarlock Park; it is not so funny to encounter on a weekday morning in Putney.

Wharton's disposition to malignant sadness, explored in his memoirs - *The Missing Will* (1984) and *A Dubious Codicil* (1991) - dogged him for years. There was an allied doubt about his own work.

Today, we might think, is a day for celebration. Peter Simple is 50 and surrounded by his brainchildren: Mrs Dutt-Pauker, the Hampstead thinker; General Sir Frederick "(Tiger)" Nidgett, founder of the Royal Army Tailoring Corps and Dr Heinz ("We are all guilty") Kiosk.

But they would surely not have been achieved with such Brocken-spectre vividness had their author never seen that "glimpse of the Void from which our ordinary daily lives are so thinly separated".

Long may he thrive this side of it, till he come happily to a better place.