

"Oh my! O my! Oh my!" The words are those of Mole, in Kenneth Graham's still attractive anthropomorphic young person's book *The Wind in the Willows*. He is expressing his complete delight as he surveys the site where he will have his first ever spring picnic with the Water Rat. They are not his first words, for in the beginning of the tale we have caught him diligently whitewashing his underground burrow. But, as Graham writes, "Spring was in the air above and in the earth below and around him, penetrating even his dark and lowly little house with its spirit of divine discontent and longing" (p. 1). And so he has flung down his brush, exclaimed "Bother!" and "O blow!" as well as "Hang spring-cleaning," and clawed his way up and out onto the sun-warmed grass of a great meadow. It is a pre-World-War I meadow (Graham's book was first published in 1908), even a pre-lapsarian meadow, in a world where friendships are immediately made, evil is put down, and plentiful food and drink are consumed. The occasion, to which I shall return, can serve as a starting point for this paper, which I call,

EATING OUT

OR LUCUBRATIONS UPON CERTAIN LITERARY PICNICS AND OUTINGS.

The term "picnic" is fairly recent in English, and its current practices even more so. It apparently takes its rise in France in the 17th century and turns up in English in the 18th, but according to the OED, it does not refer to an English institution until about 1800. It doesn't reach Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* until a late edition of 1868. Originally it suggested different kinds of food contributed by the participants in the occasion, which later is more likely to occur outside the home than inside. In any case, one can assume that the practice of picnicking presupposes a society and a place in which there is a degree of leisure, security, and a special pleasure in the countryside. Pleasure as a motive is essential. The workmen with their lunchboxes in the wonderful Lewis Hine photograph of lunchtime astride the girders of the growing Empire State Building are not "picnicking." They are having lunch. Before the useful arrival of Beowulf in that early poem which takes his name, Hrothgar and his lady were unlikely to go picnicking in the countryside, bleak or not, lest they themselves be gobbled up by Grendel. One may have a picnic, but one doesn't want to be one. Which brings up the transferred meaning of our word. One's wife may have been out playing bridge with cheerful old friends and return to say that she has had a picnic even though the game was indoors, there was no food, outside it was raining cats and dogs, and she has lost two dollars and thirty cents.

One runs into picnics in various artistic modes. We have probably all seen the Manet "Dejeuner sur l'Herbes," with its lounging gentlemen and unabashedly nude lady at their woodsy pleasures. Perhaps we have also seen its startling sculptural reproduction in painted bronze by J. Seward Johnson. Or the elaborately more sedate and fully clothed celebrants in Monet's picture of a similar name, which I understand has recently served as the inspiration for a ballet. And there are other picnics, such as the crucial one in the musical "Oklahoma," or that in William Inge's play, "Picnic," as well as the occasion for the beautiful and mystifying film "Picnic at Hanging Rock." Checking "picnic poems" on Google brought up enough thousands of possible sites that the search would be nearly endless, and I preferred not to think further upon them. As for actual picnics, Henry James comments from his somewhat elevated perch that the food "is [characteristically] not so good as to fail of an amusing disorder, nor yet so bad as to defeat the proper function of repasts." That reference is from the redoubtable English writer on food, Elizabeth David, and goodness knows where she found it. She has other things to say about conducting picnics, including recollections of a pre-World War II practice so pleasantly revealing that I shall read the whole passage:

On picnic days a large party of children and grown-ups would be assembled in the hall. Led by our host and hostess we proceeded through the exquisite formal Dutch garden, across the lane and over a fence into a coppice. Close on our heels followed the butler, the chauffeur and the footman, bearing fine china plates, the silver and tablecloths, and a number of vast dishes containing cold chickens, jellies and trifles. Arrived at the end of our journey, five minutes from the house, our host set about making a fire, with sticks which I suspect had been strategically placed by the gardener, over which we grilled quantities of sausages and bacon, which were devoured amidst the customary jokes and hilarity. The picknickers' honour thus satisfied, we took our places for an orderly meal, handed round by the footman, and in composition resembling that of an Edwardian wedding breakfast. (*Summer Cooking* [1955], pp. 233-34)

These proprieties remind me of an occasion many years ago when my wife and I were walking in some gentle part of the English Lake Country. We assumed isolation amidst the green grass, occasional trees, blue sky and frequent sheep. But we rounded a bend, and there not far ahead, in the middle of the path where the land was more or less level, were a tweedy couple sitting on folding chairs on either side of a folding table, on top of which were laid out linen, silver, and china, and all the parts of a proper tea. No footman in sight, but the proprieties were being maintained. Picnics are a generally cheerful part of our culture, and I suspect that the memories of many of us are cluttered with them.

Elizabeth David's menu and the circumstances of which it is part return me to Mole on his warm spring afternoon and the fictional pleasures of his first meeting with Rat. It is still a

beautiful spring afternoon in the English countryside. Mole is discovering the pleasures of boating in the convenient river. Rat has staggered out of his hole with a "fat, wicker luncheon basket," and tells Mole that it contains cold chicken as well as well as

"coldtonguecoldhamcoldbeef-pickledgherkinsaladfrenchrollscressandwidgespotted meat gingerbeerlemonade-sodawater——" this is typographically all one deliciously laden word, which could evidently continue, but "'O stop, stop,' cried Mole in ecstasies: 'This is too much!'"

"'Do you really think so?' inquired the Rat seriously. 'It's only what I always take on these little excursions; and the other animals are always telling me that I'm a mean beast and cut it very fine!'" {*The Wind in the Willows*, 1933, p. 10)

The two arrive at a spot which might have been abstracted from a painting by Constable, leaving out human laborers, straining oxen or damaged boats. It is all pleasure and beautiful enough to produce Mole's "O my! O my! O my!" As a special favor Rat allows him to spread out the table-cloth and unpack the food, eliciting more "O my's." Shortly they will be joined by the Otter, the Badger, and later by the moneyed and immensely foolish Toad of Toad Hall and will set off on their adventures, which I'll not go into. I shall, however, take the picnic of Mole and Rat as a benchmark. Picnics and related outings are perhaps always departures from the usual, in this case from the trammels of civilization, which require spring cleaning and such, into a most pleasant version of nature. I have called the setting pre-lapsarian, and so it is, but we remember that the serpent was in the garden along with Adam and Eve. And the group of cheery beasts in *The Wind in the Willows* will ultimately have to rout out the weasels and the ferrets which have taken over Toad Hall in the extended absence of its owner. The possibility of Evil—even if it is a comic version—is always there, like the tombstone among the trees and curious shepherds in Poussin's painting, "Et in Arcadia ego." So the little episode of Mole and Rat contains what I want to consider a bit further: The pleasure of being in nature, or at least of escaping the strictures of the ordinary, the pleasures of food and drink, however mean, however various, and the establishment or maintenance of friendship and easy sociability. All these comprise my ideal picnic. I've gathered several more examples of literary picnics, significant in their fulfillment or failure in these areas. Let us see what some other writers—American as well as British—do with picnics or outings. We know that there is something called "practical criticism"; perhaps this is an exercise in "impractical criticism."

However firmly established picnics might be in twentieth-century England, they had evidently no hold in mid-America in the earlier nineteenth. That at least was one of the discoveries which Fannie Trollope made when she came to Cincinnati in 1828 and reported in

Domestic Manners of the Americans in 1832. Albert Pyle kindly suggested her book to me for an exemplary picnic of a kind. Whether I found precisely what Albert had in mind/I don't know, but I found what I wanted. Mrs. Trollope is a perceptive and vigorous writer whose picture of western America is not unlike that of Dickens in *Martin Chuzzlewit*. She is not displeased when she leaves the place.

Having found a house in the country somewhat removed from then Cincinnati, she and her family enjoyed clearer air than in the growing city and an absence of mosquitoes. Attempting a full experience of local pleasures, they were, she says, "determined upon having a day's enjoyment of the wildest forest scenery we could find" (p. 79). She continues,

So we packed up books, albums, pencils, and sandwiches; and, despite a burning sun, dragged up a hill so steep, that we sometime fancied we could rest ourselves against it by only leaning forward a little.

It is a strenuous and exhausting climb.

Still [she continues] we were determined to enjoy ourselves, and forward we went, crunching knee-deep through aboriginal leaves, hoping to reach some spot less perfectly airless than our landing-place. Wearied with the fruitless search, we decided on reposing awhile on the trunk of a fallen tree; being all considerably exhausted, the idea of sitting down on the tempting log was conceived and executed simultaneously by the whole party, and the whole party sunk together through its treacherous surface into a mass of rotten rubbish, that had formed part of the pith and marrow of the eternal forest a hundred years before.

We were by no means the only sufferers by the accident; frogs, lizards, locusts, kattiedids [sic], beetles, and hornets, had the whole of their various tenements disturbed, and testified their displeasure very naturally by annoying us as much as possible in return: we were bit, we were stung, we were scratched; and when, at last, we succeeded in raising ourselves from the venerable ruin, we presented as woeful a spectacle as can well be imagined....

So they move "a few paces" and sit again, this time on solid earth, where they are attacked by "a cloud of mosquitoes" and losing all patience, they get to their feet, "firmly resolved never to try the *al fresco* joys of an American forest again." (1984, Oxford University Press, pp. 79ff).

It is not the terrain alone which discourages picnics in the midwest. However coarse Mrs. Trollope finds the manners of early nineteenth-century western American men, their women must avoid any appearance of grossness. Mrs. Trollope questions the depth of the fastidiousness of American females, but it nonetheless makes for uneasy communication between the sexes. It is surely destructive of the attitudes which encourage picnics:

I once mentioned to a young lady that I thought a picnic party would be very agreeable [one must assume not in a heavily forested area] and that I would propose it to some of our

friends. She agreed that it would be delightful, but she added: "I fear you will not succeed; we are not used to such sort of things here, and I know it is considered very indelicate for ladies and gentlemen to sit down together on the grass." (p. 114)

Mrs. Trollope's summary on the matter is firm and discouraging:

What we call picnics are very rare, and when attempted do not often succeed well. The two sexes hardly mix for the greater part of a day without great restraint and ennui; it is quite contrary to their general habits; the favourite indulgences of the gentlemen (smoking cigars and drinking spirits) can neither be indulged in with decency nor resigned with complacency.

Certainly by the end of the century the far American west knew picnics. Two crucial ones appear in Frank Norris's clumsily compelling novel *McTeague*, which was published in 1899. Subtitled "A Story of San Francisco," it is also the story of a number of rather dim and greedy San Franciscans who come to sticky ends. McTeague himself is a young mine worker who, with a bit of inherited money, has become an uncertified dentist. The degree of his skill, strength, and intelligence is suggested by the pleasure which he takes in extracting teeth by his thumb and forefinger. He becomes infatuated with one of his patients, a young woman named Trina, who is unfortunately the girl friend of his best friend, Marcus Schouler.

When McTeague confesses to Marcus his passion for Trina, Marcus, impulsively relinquishes any claim. The two men accidentally meet Trina's Swiss-German family off on their weekly picnic at the seaside and are invited to join them. Says Trina, "Don't you think picnics are fine fun, Dr. McTeague? . . . You take your lunch; you leave the dirty city all day; you race about in the open air, and when lunchtime comes, oh, aren't you hungry? And the woods and the grass smell so fine!" (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960, p. 49). McTeague must confess that he has never had the pleasure. The day is nonetheless a great success, and the food is overwhelming. In a west coast Germanic version of Rat's menu there are chowder made from freshly dug clams, "huge loaves of rye bread," Wienerwurst, frankfurters, unsalted butter, pretzels, cold underdone chicken, dried apples, beer, and "the crowning achievement, a marvelous Gotha truffle" (p. 56). And the picnic determines that Trina is henceforth McTeague's girl.

Briefly, they marry. She discovers that she has won \$5000 in a lottery. Marcus, regretting that he gave up Trina and jealous of what he takes to be McTeague's luck, becomes increasingly estranged. There is another family picnic which Marcus, again accidentally, joins. He and McTeague become involved in contests of strength and skill, which end in a wrestling match in

which Marcus becomes enraged at McTeague's show of strength and bites his ear. Maddened, McTeague breaks Marcus's arm and is controlled with great difficulty. From that point everyone's luck turns bad. Marcus leaves town for the south, having first informed the authorities that McTeague is practicing without a license. McTeague can find no other job in the city, and he and Trina become increasingly impoverished, though she still hoards her \$5000. McTeague beats her to death, takes her money, and sets out for southern California, escaping to the mining life from which he came.

Marcus, meanwhile, has turned to the life of a cowboy. News of Trina's murder filters south, and jealous, greedy, and now vengeful, he joins a posse formed to hunt down McTeague. At the mine where he has found employment, McTeague sniffs danger in the air and lights out prospecting on his own. He presumably strikes gold, but again sensing some undefined danger, blunders on with a mule carrying the bag still filled with Trina's twenty-dollar gold pieces. He wanders towards Death Valley, at the edge of which Marcus has found his trail. Ultimately, of course, the two men meet in the desert. The mule eats loco weed and runs off with the bag of gold. McTeague kills Marcus, but somehow in the struggle becomes handcuffed to his body. The novel ends with McTeague, alone and anchored in the desert, the deadly consequences unspecified but perfectly clear. Two picnics: The first confirms a relationship which results in an ultimately unhappy marriage; the second exacerbates an enmity which will result in the deaths of the three central characters.

I had hoped that Jane Austen would go picknicking for me. She enters my scene earlier than Fanny Trollope, of course, but she was aware of picnics. I'm not sure that she entirely approved of them, however, at least for fictional purposes. Perhaps they were too new (as they might have been, according to the OED), perhaps there was too much that might get out of control, or perhaps it was their departure from the proprieties of life. There are plenty of outings in her novels, but as far as I'm aware picnics are met with some disdain. There is a reference to that kind of occasion, but without the word, in *Sense and Sensibility*, in which the ladies of the Dashwood family in time of need are offered the rental of a cottage by a landed gentleman. He is described as a friendly but somewhat inconveniently sociable gentleman who is said to have

delighted in collecting about him more young people than his house would hold He was a blessing to all the juvenile part of the neighborhood, for in summer he was forever forming parties to eat cold ham and chicken out of doors, and in winter his private balls were numerous (London: Chatto and Windus, 1908, 1, 40).

To the best of my somewhat limited knowledge her one use of the word *picnic* itself in a

novel is in *Emma*. It occurs in a late episode which is of immense importance to the development of the heroine's character and of the plot of the novel. Its function as an example of a picnic is limited, but there. If you have read the book you are unlikely to have forgotten its interesting heroine, Emma Woodhouse, "handsome, clever, and rich," who suffers unbeknownst to herself from "having rather too much her own way," and thinking "a little too well of herself" (Modern Library, 2001, p. 3). Late in the novel she hopes to arrange an outing to a place called Box Hill. In contrast to the new wife of the local vicar, a Mrs. Elton, who is a kind of parodic Emma, she envisions it in "a quiet, unpretending, elegant way, infinitely superior to the bustle and preparation, the regular eating and drinking and picnic parade of the Eltons" (p. 256). There is that word, and it's not even given the dignity of being a noun. Her plans are scotched by Mrs. Elton and others who are said to be caught up in discussing "pigeon pies and cold lamb."

The occasion is neither a social nor a gustatory success. Quite the contrary. "There seemed," says our narrator, "a principle of separation between the... parties, too strong for any fine prospects, or any cold collation ... to remove" (p. 267). It is a dull business, and Emma, trying to enliven the occasion, engages in a rather foolish parlor game. Trying for wit, she mispeaks in a way which brings pain to an old friend and subsequently brings a longtime admirer to offer her a just reprimand. This in turn leads her to survey the attitudes and actions which have characterized her through the course of the novel, finally with the full realization of her nature. She matures and can marry in what, in the fashion of such novels, promises happiness.

Bear with me while I try one more picnic just because it is too good to neglect. The picnic in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, which was published in 1924, is surely the most complex and negatively productive such affair that I am aware of. It occurs precisely in the center of the novel, and the events which follow it are pretty much the consequences of what happens—or is thought to happen—on the occasion. The epigraph of Forster's earlier novel *Howard's End* is "Only connect." It has been suggested that one for *A Passage to India* might well be "Can one connect?" (Oliver Stallybrass, in the introduction to his edition of 1978, p. xxvii.)

Forster sets the problem by introducing two English ladies to an outpost of the British Empire in India called Chandrapore. The much older, Mrs. Moore, is chaperoning the younger, Adela Quested, on a visit to one of her sons, to whom Adela is engaged and who is a young magistrate at the English Station. The two ladies profess an interest in India, but they find that, generally speaking, the British consider the Indians not to be known or liked but only to be treated as servants or subjects. The Indians themselves are divided by religion and caste, and they face the British with ignorance and suspicion. "Connecting" is not an easy matter.

In this context, Mrs. Moore accidentally meets a young Muslim doctor, Aziz, and they immediately do "connect" in Forster's terms. They meet again at the British College. There the principal, Cyril Fielding, who has been developing a friendship with Aziz, has invited them for tea, along with Adela and his colleague, an enigmatic Brahman, Professor Godbole. In the superficially easy exchange at tea Aziz impulsively invites the others on a picnic excursion to the caves in the Marabar Hills.

When Aziz attempts to honor his invitation, Forster's narrative voice remarks, "Trouble after trouble encountered him, because he had challenged the spirit of the Indian earth, which tries to keep men in compartments" (p. 120). He faces many questions: What does one serve two English ladies, an English schoolmaster, and a Brahman for a picnic breakfast? Must he provide whisky and sodas and ports? Godbole, as a strict Hindu has dietary restrictions, and if anything is cooked, it must be by a Brahman, nor should anyone eat beef in his presence. Aziz's own religion discourages pork. His menu for a proper English breakfast on an immensely hot day finally includes porridge and mutton chops, with "some Indian dishes to cause conversation" (p. 142). He has been warned that the English never stop eating, and so on the short pre-dawn train ride which they must take to the hills, a friend's borrowed butler emerges from the men's room with a tray bearing tea and poached eggs. Poached eggs and tea again appear when they reach the caves. All this besides melons, guavas, potatoes. To top it all is an elephant, providentially not to eat, but to carry the party from the train stop to the caves, the proud result of Aziz's successful negotiation of a vast network of arrangements.

The entire affair is altogether too ramshackle to hold up, and in fact it goes wrong from the beginning. Fielding and Godbole miss the train, delayed by the length of Godbole's morning prayers. The caves themselves are the scene of disaster. Mrs. Moore suffers immediately—an old lady overcome in their first cave with darkness, heat, and the presence of a terrifying mass of natives who have trailed after the party. She withdraws to rest. For the remainder of her time in the novel she will give way to a kind of aged despair, shortly to die at sea on her way back to England. Adela and Aziz continue to explore. Attempting what she conceives to be polite conversation, she asks Aziz if he has one wife or more. Aziz, whose wife is dead and who finds the question offensive to his advanced Muslim mind, is rattled and ducks into a cave to settle himself. Adela blunders into a cave of her own. It will turn out that having wandered into the darkness alone and thinking about her engagement to Mrs. Moore's son and implicitly about sex, she believes herself followed and molested. And by whom else but Aziz? She rushes out hysterically and makes her way down the hillside to the road. There she is picked up and taken

back to Chandrapore by another young English woman who has been joy riding in a car borrowed (in Huckleberry Finn terms) from her Indian employer, and has chanced to give the absent Fielding a lift to the picnic. Aziz meanwhile knows nothing of this. Emerging from his own cave and wondering about Adela, he glimpses her far below being driven away and hopefully assumes that she has met a friend and simply gone off. With the arrival of Fielding, he thinks that all is well, gives the new arrival a drink and triumphantly leads his remaining guests by way of the elephant back to the train—an Indian who has successfully entertained the English. On their arrival in Chandrapore, he is immediately arrested for unspeakable crimes and subsequently goes to trial.

To finish quickly, the whole fragile structure of relationships collapses after the picnic. Mrs. Moore fretfully disappears to die. Adela, at the wonderfully tragi-comic trial of Aziz, will finally know that she was mistaken and will withdraw her accusation. Her engagement is broken off as a result and she is angrily rejected by all the English except Fielding, who shortly leaves to return for a period to England. Godbole takes a position at the court of a native Indian state, where Aziz becomes physician to the ruler, having determined to be done with the English henceforth. The lesser British characters, having become something of an embarrassment to the crown, will retire or be shuffled off to duties elsewhere. So, can one connect? Well, according to Forster, "not here, not now."

Does all this breaking of picnic butterflies upon wheels take us anywhere? Well, perhaps not far, but somewhere. If nothing else, I have demonstrated that synopses of novels are likely to do what Samuel Johnson said of footnotes to Shakespeare's plays— they "refrigerate" the mind. *Emma* and *A Passage to India* particularly are handsomely written and moving novels. We need the immediate warmth of the books themselves.

I have taken my ideal picnic as combining sociability and food in some pleasant place, probably outdoors, but in any case somewhere pleasurable by being outside the normal run of things. So considered, all except that in *The Wind in the Willows* are in one way or another flops. And *The Wind in the Willows* is properly a young person's book: "Where ignorance is bliss, 'tis folly to be wise." A point about the pastoral sandwich-eating attempted in Mrs. Trollope's book is that as an episode in a piece of expository or descriptive writing, the discomforts suffered in it are isolated and not significant of character or necessary to a continuing action. In the novels by Norris, Austen, and Forster, the discomforts, which are contrary to the spirit which ought to prevail in a picnic, serve to further the development of action and character. It is true that the picnic in *Emma* ultimately leads to happiness, but that is induced by discomfort during and after

the occasion. Any conclusion drawn from such a partial survey as mine must surely be suspect. But the possibility occurs that if a picnic is to have a significant function in a fictional structure, it is likely to depart from the ideal pleasures which I have identified. The tombstone needs to be in Arcadia. The serpent needs to be in the garden.

So much for impractical criticism. While you all think of novels which contain immensely happy fictional picnics with nothing but happy outcomes, consider ourselves. We have departed from our weekly procedures and through the generosity of Ethan Stanley and Taylor Asbury have been enjoying the physical pleasures of both an outing and an inning. We have enjoyed the immense pleasures of food and drink provided by Nicola and his family and staff. And we are once more enjoying the pleasures of our society. What could be better? We must be grateful that we are not an episode in a novel.