

Johnle Cane

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I am deeply and sincerely touched by this honour. I hope to goodness you have made the right choice. Immodestly, I believe you may have done. I have all the right qualifications for the job, and all the wrong ones.

As a soloist by nature and vocation, I am a perfectly hopeless committee man. I am therefore unlikely to poke my nose into your sober deliberations.

I am too hasty in search of solutions. I have the impetuosity of age.

As a foreigner to Cornwall with a mere thirty years on the clock, I am a stranger to local feuding and fighting, and I intend to remain that way. I live for my work, and my work does not allow me much time to socialise. I like to be asleep by ten. The result is I can't gossip because I've

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nothing to trade. And I always believe the last person I spoke to.

As a writer, I live by the English language. I care for it passionately. As a linguist, I believe no other language approaches it in flexibility or beauty. Its preservation, as well as its day-to-day development, are in my blood.

As a writer, I know also the value of research. And as a computer-illiterate writer, I do know the value of books.

And as somebody who has made a corner out of the secretive nature of our English ways - well, maybe I'm not such a bad committee man after all!

But please forget whatever impression my books may have given you. I am not here to plan assassinations or pursue a secret agenda or satisfy a belated desire for respectability. I want to be useful and that's about the sum of it. And I want to

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be useful here in West Cornwall which, for reasons that are still slightly mysterious to me, has stolen my heart.

And I want to be useful to the future of this library and the books entrusted to our collective care.

Not that I know a great lot about precious books. My critics would certainly say I don't write them. I was brought up in a bookless household, and I have a natural sympathy for people who grow up without the example of reading, or come late to it, or never come to it at all. One of the things I like about living in West Cornwall is that people still ask me what I do for a real job.

I understand the hostility that it is possible to feel towards an intellectual élite. I never wish to be, or appear to be, a member of that élite. It is one of the miseries of English life that the concept of

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education has been hijacked by a concept of class.

As a writer, I am therefore an unashamed populist - most writers secretly are. If a cab driver tells me he couldn't get into my book, I'm chagrined. I feel I haven't served him as I should have done.

And it occurs to me that a good library should suffer a similar sense of insecurity, for it too has a duty to be accessible without vulgarising its own standards.

Good libraries seek to encourage learning by dismantling the barriers of ignorance. Their doors are open to everyone. Everyone should walk out of them feeling a little richer.

My association with the Morrab dates back longer than I care to remember, to a day when I cut a tape following a refurbishment. The sun was shining, something that in March in Cornwall one

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tends to forget can happen. A year or two later, I gave a talk here. The sandwiches were delicious.

Not long ago, I took out a life membership, although I have reached an age where I shouldn't even be buying green bananas.

But I will confess to you that, though I have no hidden agenda, I do have a dream for the Morrab, and to my irritation I find it is already shared by paragraph 2 of our constitution: I want the Morrab to benefit the community, advance education, diffuse knowledge, provide reference and research facilities and public lectures. I want it to enter the next millennium doing exactly that - and for the community as a whole.

I believe that in a region as depressed

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as ours, in times as harsh and competitive as these, the Morrab can play a central and exciting rôle in helping the next generation's thinkers and doers to find their feet.

The contemporary obsession with achievement creates a terrible rift between information and true knowledge. In my world, I meet print journalists who have no English and film-makers who have to have books read for them before they can decide whether to make them into movies. I receive letters from BBC producers, so ungrammatical that their authors should never have passed O-levels, let alone received degrees.

Today it is no paradox to be informed but illiterate.

Any institution that helps to fill that rift is of immeasurable value to the community. The Morrab can be such an institution. That doesn't mean we turn our

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back on modern technology - far from it. It means that with our books, our aims and our tradition, and this splendid house, we can complement the endeavours of students and scholars of all ages, at the same time complementing the efforts of our sister libraries. We do not preserve the past by refusing to keep pace with the present. Our job is to bring the past into the present and the future.

The Morrab is perfectly placed to do this - and do it without losing its identity or its magic.

The burdens upon today's learners are horrendous, far more alarming than anything my generation knew about. The spectre of unemployment is at their shoulder. The gap between winners and losers has never been so great. The safety net gets a little thinner every day. From the youngest to the oldest, working men and women are under constant

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pressure to refine and update their skills and, often in mid-life, switch career.

Yet they are not pursuing knowledge, but As and Bs and - oh Lord - Cs. And if it isn't in the syllabus, forget it.

Many of our community - thanks to crowded classrooms, poor student-teacher ratios or intolerable domestic stress - must catch up on an education they never had. Perhaps they were late developers. Or they were lazy at the wrong time. Or their teachers failed on the job. I have been a teacher too, and wasn't always very good at it.

So it seems to me a thrilling and by no means impossible prospect that this library - having updated its own skills - might in a few years' time be offering to those learners of all ages aid and comfort for their studies, providing them not only with books and the mod cons of the information

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revolution, but with the sanctuary and prestige of this lovely house.

But we can offer more than that. In an age of frenzied specialisation, we can offer the antidote. We can offer what our constitution offers: the diffusion of knowledge, rather than of mere information.

No generation ever placed such a premium on so-called learning and self-betterment as the present one. Few advanced societies have failed its young as gravely in the field of real education in recent years as we have. Even with all the standardisation of teaching methods - by which is meant limitation - we are at the bottom of the European class. By comparison with the United States, our further education system is in the Ice Age. Yet the

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next generation of "learners" will have it even tougher.

I can think of no finer future for the Morrab as it enters the next millennium than this: to be integral to the learning and reading needs of our community; to be equipped with modern communications technology, as a means but not as an end; to be user-friendly to young and old alike; to be a focus for people of all disciplines, a place to meet, study, receive visiting speakers, and kick ideas around. This, I take it, is the gleam in the eye of your committee. And I put it to you that it was in this same positive and courageous spirit that the good townsfolk of Penzance, in 1818, brought our library into being in the first place: thrilled by the future, unafraid of it, but recognising the need for true knowledge in a world that was changing overnight.

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And if we must wait our turn for the University of Cornwall - or if by some grim misfortune it never comes at all - the Morrab's function will be doubly important to our struggling community. We and our fellow librarians could be the only show in town.

Now I'm well aware that our library as presently funded can barely keep its head above water. From all I'm told, it's a small miracle - and surely a great tribute to past and present members and officers of the Morrab - that it has succeeded in staying aloft so long with so little financial oxygen.

But the bald truth is, that to do our job by the books entrusted to us, to preserve them, insure them and add to them

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as we ought - let alone to take the library into the next millennium so that it can perform the rôle for which it was established - we are living in a state of genteel and dangerous poverty.

And that should sound depressing - but it isn't at all. Because providentially, your tenacity has paid off. There has never been a better climate in which to raise money for projects as worthwhile as the Morrab.

But in order to qualify for the funding we so desperately need, we must now summon the same enthusiasm for our task, and the same clarity of vision, and the same optimism, that informed our forebears.

We have to prove that the Morrab is an essential cultural, social and educational resource, bringing light and true knowledge to a disadvantaged community, in the spirit of our constitution.

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Those who have kept the precarious flame of the Morrab burning through the difficult years know how nearly it went out. Now, improbable as it may seem to them, they can now look forward to a double reward. Having preserved its past, they can preserve its future.

Mr. Chairman, I thank you again that you have given me the opportunity to play a part in furthering that process.