REVIEW: ‘LETTERS FROM RAYMOND’ BY W. E. MACKAY-SMITH

"Who knows only his own generation remains always a child."
Marcus Tullius Cicero - Roman philosopher

Committed members of Bull Terrierdom must surely acknowledge the debt of gratitude that is owed to Mrs Mackay-Smith by releasing into print her private correspondence from Mr Raymond Oppenheimer (Ormandy) and selected correspondence from Miss Eva Weatherill (Souperlative). The correspondence begins with a letter from Oppenheimer dated 2nd December 1969 and closes with a final letter dated 15th March 1984, he died on 12th August of that year.

In print, Oppenheimer was the author of two influential books on the breed McGuffin & Co and After Bar Sinister. Where the latter left off Mackay-Smith wrote the noteworthy third instalment From James to Jim. In a sense Letters From Raymond is a synergy of the efforts of both authors (to complete the quartet) and should have a ranking of equal importance to the books abovementioned. As mentor, ‘Dutch Uncle’ or ‘Uncle R’ to Mackay-Smith, Oppenheimer was meticulous in the manner of his response. Whether he was penning a ‘treatise’ or passing on small details regarding an impending visit, he tailored his letters specifically to the fine points; always the nub of the issue.

In construction the book is simplicity itself; it is chronological. Together with including Oppenheimer’s personalised abbreviations, readers are treated to transcriptions of his letters including several representations of handwritten letters as chapter headings. Mackay-Smith in italics contextualizes information, elucidates situations known
to her and no doubt obscured to the majority of modern readers. However, more than this Mackay-Smith provides an internal and contemporaneous narrative in which she presents her thoughts and feelings to the material received from both Oppenheimer and Weatherill and the events surrounding it. This narrative is a nuanced filtering of the correspondence and is as important as the letters themselves because Mackay-Smith is the recipient. In certain correspondence names have been omitted, presumably for modesty’s sake or to avoid social injury which could offend. Such omissions change nothing of the content’s value; the only sacrifice being any prurience on the part of the reader.

So, why is this book important and demands to be read by right thinking people? The proliferation of ‘5 minute experts’ in the breed will not take the trouble to read through this material, they will regard it as a history that is ancient, irrelevant or, at best, too specialised and narrow. Their impatience or ignorance will defeat the much needed understanding required. Oppenheimer’s dissection and detailing may very possibly infuriate. Such resistance should be swept aside by discerning readers because as the early Klondike ‘gold-diggers’ were want to say, apocryphally I suspect, “there’s gold in them thar hills!” So too this book.

The compilation of letters and comment provides a distilled picture of a friendship which spanned fifteen years including portraits of people of the time and at its core a gentle confidence that is so thoroughly respectful and generous that it alone could serve as an exemplar of social etiquette. We have moments of genuine sadness, events which are humorous even uproarious, together with sharp and incisive assessment. The correspondence is so chock-full with essential principles of breeding, exhibiting, owning and judging (plus gossip that is so natural to all human beings) that the reader would find him or herself underlining the majority of the printed text.

When invited to stay for a first visit at Waltham Place by Oppenheimer, Mackay-Smith and her husband, Mathew, are met at Heathrow Airport (having arrived from Switzerland) by Oppenheimer’s chauffeur, Culshaw, and from
there they are transported in resplendent luxury, courtesy of the Bentley, direct to Oppenheimer’s home. Upon arrival and afternoon tea a parade of well chalked Bull Terriers took place, and so began a three day visit.

Initial correspondence focussed upon the development and the advent – courtesy of Oppenheimer and the BTC of Great Britain - of The Silverwood Trophy and the issues which, quite naturally, are associated with such initiatives. A slight comedic moment is afforded the reader when Oppenheimer visited the Mackay-Smith family home in Pennsylvania after the Silverwood Show in 1970. Mackay-Smith presented the bitch Charity Cyclamen to the assembled group bathed but un-chalked, clearly to the consternation of Oppenheimer who said in a loud voice and in front of the assembled guests “Haven’t you any chalk?” One wonders what the current do-gooders and busy-bodies harping on about chalking would have said in response in this situation; I imagine nothing given the authorship of the comment!

Throughout the course of their friendship and correspondence Mackay-Smith noted that Oppenheimer never missed providing her with the results from every championship show accompanied by a description of the dogs involved. Ever the wit and charmingly self-deprecating at times, Oppenheimer wrote critically about himself referring to a photo in which he featured, appearing as if a “harmless but gibbering mental defective!” In another letter he provides Mackay-Smith with highly detailed instructions as to how she and husband Mathew are to leave Heathrow Airport; how to sit in the Bentley and upon arrival to expect, in his own words, to be greeted by “an elderly grey haired geezer.” The final letter of 1970 is an itinerary ahead of her visit and it is clear that Oppenheimer was, self-evidently, not only a list maker, but an organiser and for whom such matters were important.

Obviously, I do not intend to cover all of the correspondence (I hear you sigh with relief), but just as Oppenheimer provided detailed commentary to Mackay-Smith on shows he also expected the same back from her. 1971 opened with a letter wherein she is chided by him for not providing a full and detailed accounting of a show. Rather than taking offence she recognised the
importance of such reporting as it trained the eye to follow the judging closely and critically. (It is worth noting that certain modern day fanciers mistakenly associate critical, factual observation with rudeness. So few are able to be openly and factually critical, yet seem eminently capable of being abusive as a ‘mob’ or in their private cliques!) Oppenheimer concludes his letter to Mackay-Smith with the admonition of a school-master: “On arrival you will write out 50 times on double ruled paper ‘I must be more careful and accurate in future!’”

Permit me to mention, if only in passing, Mackay-Smith’s crafted description of staying at Oppenheimer’s home, Waltham Place, and the format associated with it. The detail and regard in which guests were held is almost Wodehousian in its concern for detail and manner. As Mackey-Smith mentions regarding dog discussion at the dinner table, Oppenheimer was a stickler for “getting it right.”

Time and again Mackay-Smith makes reference to the essential guidance provided by Oppenheimer and his truisms for breeding; though for hands-on management it was always Eva Weatherill who provided the clearest, practical guidance.

Make no mistake Oppenheimer could be withering in his criticism whether it be of individuals or the activities of an entire continent as he wrote in 1977 “the last year has made me totally + absolutely pallid with indifference to trying to help American Bull Terrierdom since I think it is totally unhelpable” (page 201). I would also refer the reader to page 207 (letter dated June 30, 1977) and Oppenheimer’s unvarnished description of a dog in his kennel. It is an example of honesty, advice and unbiased observation we could all benefit from putting into practice when looking at or describing our own dogs. Not wishing to leave Eva Weatherill out from our consideration, Mackay-Smith made emphatic mention of her (page 211) “Eva was a strong and positive force in my mentorship. She was a good correspondent, and I often got a different perspective from her than I had from Raymond ...” Indeed I found Weatherill’s letters entirely breezy, affectionate and prepared to range over
various topics, whereas Oppenheimer was characteristically focussed on a specific goal, more often than not.

The correspondence, by 1982, at times reflected illness and infirmity which had sadly afflicted both Weatherill and Oppenheimer. There was no undue moaning, rather an attitude of management and getting on with things, despite the inconvenience. In a letter on page 295 Weatherill describes her mobility issues but finishes her letter with “It’s about 6.30pm. I’m having a small scotch + water + then am going for my walk up to the kennel door! My love to you dear girl, + Matt + Emily. Eva.” Even coping with the resulting symptoms occasioned by a stroke Weatherill, at her core, maintained an abiding love for her dogs and a sense of duty toward them.

The final letter from Oppenheimer in March 1984 exhibited his dark humour yet enduring courtesy “Excuse scribble, am busy having pleurisy! Thank you so much for the photos, interesting + amusing. Much love. R”. This private yet affable and accomplished man had been a beacon within Bull Terrierdom for decades; exhibiting a passion for the breed and an influence only the foolhardy would ignore. His books, sadly now out of print, should remain an important part of any fancier’s library and my personal favourite is and remains After Bar Sinister. These letters were and, it seems obvious to say, remain private as neither Oppenheimer nor Mackay-Smith envisaged, I suggest, at the time of writing that they would find their way into the public domain. Clearly there may have been some editing, and this is alluded to when it occurs in an honest fashion by the author. Yet, as I have mentioned, the content or effect is not diminished and we should regard ourselves as not only fortunate but should also respect and applaud the effort and care that has gone into producing Letters from Raymond. I know that I shall reread the letters many times and with each visit will find, I am sure, new insights. There is a quotation attributed to the early Hollywood actress Mae West: “You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough.” In Raymond Oppenheimer’s case he certainly proved that to be true; a life thoroughly and purposefully lived as we are able to witness.

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