

ARTS & CULTURE



C R I T I C U S

Olla Podrida

B Y G . B . T E N N Y S O N

IT'S TIME again for the summer roundup, Criticus's annual *olla podrida* of oddities and outrages that is best eaten with a long spoon. In case you didn't know, an *olla podrida* is a Spanish dish "composed of pieces of many kinds of meat, vegetables, etc., stewed or boiled together," a hodge-podge, and therefore figuratively any sort of heterogeneous mixture, a medley, a jumble, and not always of the most savory kind. After all, the term translates literally as "putrid" or "rotten pot." How else describe the follies that come to Critical attention in his pursuit of the Good and True?

PC Watch

It was about a decade ago that Criticus in these pages felt obliged to explain to readers the meaning of the term "PC," revealing that it didn't signify solely personal computer. Since that time the term has come into such wide use that it seems to have been around forever. What is more, there are so many others who now regularly point out this or that PC excess that one is tempted to drop coverage of it alto-

gether and leave it to talk radio and cable news hosts. But something always draws Criticus back to the topic, especially if he comes upon some PC-ism that has not been widely reported. Ergo ...

In the same spirit that some years ago moved China to rename Peking as Beijing, leaving that poor little flat-faced dog without a place of origin, and to transform Canton into Guangzhou, leaving Chinese restaurants more or less wordless, India has decided that it must throw off the yoke of colonialism fifty years after the fact and revert to the original names of its cities. Thus Bombay is now to be Mumbai and Calcutta is to be Kolkata. These are troublesome enough, but how can we possibly handle Madras as Chennai and Trivandrum as Thiruvananthapuram? Not that there has been much call outside India to speak of Trivandrum, but I for one will continue to refer to the Black Hole of Calcutta as just that. I think I may also stick with the Spanish names of two of the Balearic Islands that the tourist board there wants restored to their Catalan versions. Thus instead of Majorca they urge the use of Mallorca and for Ibiza they want Eivissa. No thanks. But across the world I would gladly see Ho Chi Minh City restored to Saigon.

In the early stages of the bombing of Afghanistan,

G.B. Tennyson is CPR's official Snapper-up of Unconsidered Trifles, which he saves for his annual putrid pot.

PC-sharpened eyes caught a picture of a bomb the Navy was about to drop, on which bomb was an insulting message to the enemy written in the style that goes back at least to World War II. The PC-ers complained to the U.S. Navy, which in turn apologized and ordered commanders of "Operation Enduring Freedom" (*née* "Operation Eternal Justice," altered so as not to offend Muslims) never to permit such messages again. The AP release on the matter was itself so coyly correct that it described the message, which was obviously a reference to the September 11 hijackers, as reading: "'Hijack This' followed by an anti-gay slur." What was the slur? Goodness me, the sailors had actually written the word "Fags" on the bomb! Obviously not suitable for a family newspaper, and clearly insulting to Afghans.

About six months later the *Los Angeles Times* ran a lengthy story on the widespread practice of homosexuality in Afghanistan, involving 50 percent or more of the male population. Most common is the practice of older men consorting with younger lads, preferably between the ages of 12 and 16. These latter are called *halekon*, and the more beautiful among them line their eyelids with kohl, color their nails with henna, and walk about in high-heeled sandals. Obviously they are far more fetching than women smothered in burkas. The *halekon* were much favored by the Taliban, including religious teachers, who often kept them in their *madrasas*, that is, their religious schools, where they could be conveniently accessed. Maybe the Navy bombers knew something after all.

FOR THEIR next bomb the Navy should consult with the Germans who have been asked to come up with a new name for homosexual "marriage," which recently became legal there. At present it is "*Eingetragene Lebenspartnerschaft*," which is an eminently Teutonic but somewhat soulless "registered life partnership." The casual term is *Homo-Ehe* or "homo-marriage," which is thought rather undignified. But the Navy could probably confound its PC-watchers by writing on its bombs the following Critically created, multi-lingual nonce-formulation certain to baffle the PC-hawks: "Hijack



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This, You *halekonian uneingetragene Lebenspartners.*"

That standard processional at graduations everywhere, Sir Edward Elgar's *Pomp and Circumstance*, is also the regular closing hymn at the annual London Schools Prom night at the Royal Albert Hall, when all sing together to Elgar's music the words of *Land of Hope and Glory*. It was also sung by more than a million people outside Buckingham Palace on the Queen's Golden Jubilee. But the British organization appropriately known as NUT (National Union of Teachers) complained that the words were too jingoistic and triumphalist. So new words were written for last year's ceremony. Sing along, now, first with the original words, then try the revised version.

Land of Hope and Glory,
Mother of the Free
How shall we extol thee, who
are born of thee?
Wider still and wider shall thy
bounds be set;
God, who made thee mighty,
Make thee mightier yet!

Revised:

Music and our voices, Unite us all as one
Let our sound be mighty, Sung by everyone.
Deeper still and deeper shall our bounds be set.
Bring our world together, Make us closer yet.

It reminds one of Screwtape's final words to Wormwood who has failed to snare his victim and thus is now food for his mentor: "Your increasingly and ravenously affectionate uncle."

Meanwhile, Canadian feminists have found their own national anthem in need of revision. *O Canada* begins: "O Canada! Our home and native land!/True patriot love in all thy sons command." "Thy sons," say the critics is sexist and must go. No substitute was offered. Criticus offers one or two: "O Canada! Our home and native land!/True patriot love in boys and girls command." Or "True patriot love in guys and gals command." Or: "True patriot love in stags and does command." Or — well you get the idea.

Criticus also has some advice for the purveyors of a home security system that recently assaulted him with a flyer advertising their wares. Such Critical advice is

to eschew this kind of absurd PC verbal overkill: "A burglar won't find your home an 'easy mark' if he or she is forced to work in the light, if he or she has to take a lot of time breaking in, and if he or she can't break in without making a lot of noise." Show me a she-burglar, and I'll show you a transvestite.

STUDENTS IN Spokane, Washington, have been obliged to drop their traditional halftime show, "The Death of Custer," because it is offensive to Indians, who are depicted in a "cartoonish" manner, according to complainants. Those performers dressed as Indians also render a war dance around the dead Custer. Or rather, they did. Henceforth there will be no Indians in the show, the band will dress as Custer troops or in cowboy attire, and the crowd will be lectured about American policy towards Indians at the Battle of Little Big Horn and told that Custer was a "self-proclaimed Indian killer." Presumably they will not be told that Indians were Custer-killers.

Back in West Virginia the PC Indians briefly prevailed upon the state's 4-H clubs to drop their traditional summer camp feature whereby members divide into four groups of Indian tribes — Cherokee, Delaware, Mingo, and Seneca — which compete in sporting events, wear Indian costumes, and gather in council circles round campfires in the evening, perform skits, sing songs, and even indulge in such outrages as calling boys "short braids" and girls "long braids," adults "Big Feet," and the camp director "Big Chief." Indian critics suggest that all this be dropped and that the 4-H-ers be taught about Indian "stewardship of the land," and Indian "spirituality and philosophy." If 4-H summer camp is going to be so boring, they may as well add lectures on Indian alcohol addiction as cautionary tales in a state famous for moonshine. Small chance, however, for now the federal government is looking into the matter, since the 4-H subsequently declined to play the game. If voluntary compliance continues to fail, the case may be handed to the Justice Department, which could in classic government style end the federal grant the 4-H program receives. Perhaps we can get Homeland Security on the case as well.

PC Abroad

Across the Pond an organization formerly known as the Spastics Society, now calling itself Scope (like the mouthwash), has issued a document listing unacceptable words relating to the disabled, including "the disabled," which should be "disabled people" (huh?).

Words that should no longer be used in print, and presumably also not in speech, are "normal," "disease," "damage," "the blind," "the deaf," "cure," "afflicted," "suffers from," "weak," and "able-bodied." For the latter, you may substitute "non-disabled." And quite beyond words there is a body of opinion in dear old Blighty arguing against cochlear implants for the deaf on the grounds that such a procedure is "de-meaning to the deaf community." Criticus knows of two recipients of such implants but rather doubts that either is prepared to give them back out of consideration for the "deaf community." We await a declaration from *CPR*'s own Bill Saracino.

A female Tory Member of Parliament serving as shadow agriculture minister was removed from her position and sent to the back benches for telling a joke offensive to an ethnic minority. Lest the joke be lost to history, here it is. An Englishman, a Cuban, a Japanese, and a Pakistani were all on a train. The Cuban opened the window and threw out a fine Havana cigar. Asked why, he said, "They are ten-a-penny in my country." The Japanese man then threw out a Nikon camera, remarking, "They are ten-a-penny in my country." The Englishman then picked up the Pakistani and threw him out of the train window. Asked why, he said, "They are ten-a-penny in my country." Not actually uproarious, but it was told at a Rugby cup dinner and, if you've ever watched an English Rugby match, you will see that the joke doubtless struck just the right note.

IT REMINDS Criticus that even Rugby can seem sedate in comparison with Australian Rules football. A player in such a match recently was fined for having bitten off an opponent's testicle in a hotly contested scrum, or whatever it's called in football. And speaking of that, Criticus came across a hilarious account of an interview the BBC journalist John Simpson had with the abominable Idi Amin, which may be censored in a family publication like this one. Speaking as elliptically as possible, let us say that it involves the same anatomical item as in the Australian case, only with Amin it slipped out of his swimming trunks in front of the astonished interviewer who reported that it was the size of a honeydew melon. Presumably Amin suffered from (to use a forbidden phrase) some affliction (to use a forbidden word) that he chose not to have corrected in order not to offend the community of others with the same condition, the name for which I do not know, but I could coin one.

Some others seem already to have coined, if not a

new term, then a new etymology for an old one. A British government minister was reproved for using the term "nitty-gritty" at a police conference. The director of the London metropolitan police told the offending minister that if he as a police officer had used the term, he would have been subject to a discipline charge. Why? It seems that the police have been informed that the term is racist in that it was "used to describe slaves in the lowest reaches of slave ships." Criticus thinks someone in the race industry is pulling the collective police leg. The term does appear to have originated in American Negro slang, but the earliest recorded date that three dictionaries I consulted have for it is in the 1960s, and they say the etymology is unknown. No word about slave ships. Dictionary dates, especially for slang, often lag behind actual use, but not centuries behind. Moreover, how would non-English speaking slaves chained to their oars during the Middle Passage have been able to understand what ye old British slaver above decks was saying, preserve it among themselves from 1617 on, and go public with it, so to speak, only in the 1960s? One could by a stretch just possibly imagine that pitiless slave ship captain John Newton talking about the nitty-gritty down below before repenting and composing "Amazing Grace" and "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken" but what were the Dutch and Portuguese slavers saying?

No More Mascots, Please

Considering that Criticus believes himself to be the *fons et origo* of reporting on and excoriating the anti-mascot crusade, he should be allowed to continue it here. But what was virtually a lone voice a few years ago has been drowned out this past year by a media chorus, such that Criticus believes he can keep his mascot report briefer than usual. I assume that all readers have heard about the Fightin' Whities of Greeley, Colorado. If not, go back to May/June's *CPR* (p. 24) and read the witty verse by Joy Skilmer, which should tell you all you need to know.

In another reversal of fortune the bill offered in the California Assembly to ban the use of all ethnic and group names for teams was defeated once media coverage got on to it. The lunatic proposal by the

weighty Jackie Goldberg was said by many to be liable to interpretation by the courts that would forbid not just Indian mascots but names like Normans, Vikings, Spartans, and even Hollywood High's unique Sheikhs, named after Rudolf Valentino. Perhaps running scared in expectation that the bill would pass, Cal State Sonoma dropped its forty-year old mascot, the Cossacks, and as of this fall is to be known as the Seawolves. Cossacks, you see, are "linked to barbarism and anti-Semitism," presumably because they participated in pogroms as loyal sons of the Czar. However, it's not so different with seawolves. My dictionary defines a seawolf variously as "a fabulous amphibious beast of prey," "a voracious sea-fish," and "a pirate, a sea-robber."

In his account of recent notable plagiarisms, somehow Criticus overlooked a case that was much discussed in Europe and has affinities with the spurious Belleisles account of gun ownership. That is, it is not a plagiarism but a fiction passing as fact. The work is called *Fragments* and was purportedly written by one Benjamin Wilkomirski. It purports to be an account of time spent by a young Latvian-Jewish boy in the concentration camps. It won various prizes, including the U.S. National Jewish Book Award and the French *Prix Mémoire de la Shoah*. The work has been exposed as a fraud and its author revealed to be one Bruno Doessekker, a Swiss, who is neither Jewish nor a camp survivor. Understandably, actual survivors are especially bitter about such exploitation. Unfortunately some topics prove irresistible to certain kinds of huckster-hoaxsters. Remember the spurious *Hitler Diaries*.

Other similar topics have long remained *verboten*, but eventually some of them surface. The German Nobel prize-winning author Günter Grass, known for his unsparing criticism of Naziism and his general anti-right wing sentiments has recently published a new novel that dares to look at German suffering during WWII. To be titled "Crabwalking" when the English translation appears (*Im Krebsgang* in German), it uses the story of the sinking of a German refugee ship, the *Wilhelm Gustloff*, in the Baltic in the waning days of the war, with the loss of 9000 lives, mostly women and children, in what remains the



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deadliest disaster in the history of sea travel. And who knew about that? It was three times the number of deaths in the Trade Center attack and six times the number of deaths on the *Titanic*. Of course, the ruthless Russians were responsible, they who have escaped all postwar retribution except for having to live under the government they chose, which was almost punishment enough. Grass's novel is opening up the whole issue of German suffering, especially the displacement of 15 million Germans from ancestral lands in the east, of which number 2.5 million died. Grass notes that Germans have been reluctant to talk about such things for fear that they will seem to be detracting from the sufferings their own country brought on others and especially from the Holocaust. But innocent as well as guilty people can suffer on all sides in war, a lesson too easily forgotten. Dresden, anybody?

LESS FORGIVING, the state government of Brandenburg has discovered and removed a forest of trees about 200 square feet in size planted in the Nazi period and never altered by Communist East Germany. In the autumn the trees show up as a swastika, albeit visible only from the air. The Swastika Trees, so to call them, are all larches planted in the midst of an evergreen forest. Only the larch trees turn color and thus form a giant yellow swastika against the green background. Yes, Keats's autumn is a "season of mists and mellow fruitfulness," but faces in Brandenburg are red.

Mellow fruitfulness may not be the tone of the proposed Jodi Foster film about the extraordinary life of Leni Riefenstahl, if indeed it actually ever goes forward. There have been protests from the usual suspects against making the film at all, but there has also been a withdrawal of cooperation from Riefenstahl when she came to believe that the film would be less than flattering. Instead, to mark her 100th birthday in August, Riefenstahl was set to release a new film, *Underwater Impressions*. (This statement was written before the fact, so Criticus does not know whether the film has appeared.) The film compiles footage from the more than 2000 scuba dives Riefenstahl made in the Indian Ocean from 1974 to 2000 when

she ranged in age from seventy-two to ninety-eight! Not even the late Queen Mother was scuba-diving at age 98. Let's have a gin-and-tonic toast to both these indomitable women.



The Indian government argues that the caste system is based on social rather than biological differences and thus is not a form of racial discrimination.

Closing Quotes

In India the caste system is alive and ill. A young man and woman were hanged one after the other from the roof of a house because they were lovers who came from different castes, his high, hers lower. Hundreds watched, including the parents of the hanged. Although the parents and several other persons involved were arrested, the Indian government continues to argue that the caste system is based on social rather than biological differences and thus is not a form of racial discrimination and intolerance. Criticus, ever ready with the dictionary, notes that the word *caste* is of Spanish and Portuguese origin where it means "race, lineage, breed" and that the definition of Indian caste is "a hereditary class." Furthermore,

the original fourfold caste system was based on *varna*, the Sanskrit word for, what else? "color." Biology seems to be lurking in there somewhere At the beginning of the year Criticus received from an upmarket grocery chain a flyer listing important dates throughout the year for giving flowers. Most were pretty obvious — Valentine's Day, Mother's Day, and the like — but, studying the list, Criticus is still puzzling over what flowers one is supposed to give on Good Friday The redoubtable Germaine Greer, who had in 1971 debated (and been hit on by) a young Clinton at Oxford, was invited by the mature President Clinton to join the festivities when he visited Warwick University in England some while back. She did, complained about the heavy security, the lack of food, and the way Bubba held her hand steadily and fixed his eyes unflinchingly upon her as they spoke, "which," she said, "everybody seems to find so hornifying." Not Greer, who opined, "He hasn't got any more charisma than any other reasonably fit fifty-something man with a red face and a nose like fuchsia fruit." As for Hillary, Greer remarked: "Hillary is a strange little person. I didn't get any eye contact with her. She's like a lizard sliding off a rock." These tough old feminists are good for something after all. CFR

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