

PRIVATE CASE – PUBLIC SCANDAL by Peter Fryer, *Secker & Warburg*, 21s.

This is a fascinating survey of the largest collection of erotica in the world, and one man's attempt to find out exactly what this collection consists of. This collection is the Private Case of the British Museum, presided over by conscientious officials – in the main – for whom this vast array of dubious literature is a doubtful blessing.

Mr Fryer researches like a scholar and writes like a writer, a combination not at all common in this field. His review of the books contained in the Private Case is sensible, and he resists the temptation to make swans out of some of these very bedraggled geese. The idea that erotica, and particularly pornography, is exciting is one that dies hard; the idea that there are masterpieces hidden away under lock and key, barred to the searcher after truth and beauty, is one that dies even harder. Readers who brave the rigours of a magisterial type of examination, who may have to suffer intense embarrassment at the hands of officials anxious to find out precisely why they want to see these naughty books, who are permitted only to sit at one desk under the eagle eye of assistants, may well wonder, when they have obtained their quota of Private Case books, whether it was worth it.

In 1962, the British Museum offered its first comprehensive guide to the services offered by this monument to acquisitiveness and scholarship; there was no indication that the library possessed works that were not to be found in the general catalogues which consist of a series of, large unwieldy volumes and, for later books, a card index; that such works are now known, to the general reader, to exist is almost entirely due to the persistence of writers such as Mr Fryer, who have gone to an enormous amount of trouble to find out what exactly is hidden away.

Whatever one thinks about the quest for forbidden fruit, the unfairness with which officials have, in the past, granted or coyly refused access to books in the Private Case does make the

hackles rise. 'I should very much like to look through the records of that noble "cultus" quietly, if I could manage to do so by the intervention of my Museum friends.' So wrote William Hardman, connoisseur of wine and good food, a century ago a propos of the cult of Priapus. H. S. Ashbee, who renounced business to set up as the prime Victorian erotologist, unquestionably had the run of Private Case books (otherwise he might have bequeathed his invaluable Cervantes collection elsewhere). The 'goats', as Carlyle termed them, were not denied the sensual pleasure of smut if they had friends in high places, though they concealed the springs of their interest under the euphemism of 'anthropology' (so we are told by the son of keeper Bullen).

Why are erotic books kept locked away?

There are two main reasons (a) moral (b) practical. People, it was reasoned, would be perverted, stimulated, driven to unknown vices, by being acquainted with such books. So said the Victorians. And so we ought to sneer. The odd thing is that they were partly right – just as there are crimes of emulation, so there are perversions of emulation. In a very recent court case concerning an American novel stigmatised as obscene, Dr Ernest Caxton, secretary of the British Medical Association committee that prepared evidence for the Wolfenden Committee on homosexuality, declared that he knew of cases where people's sexual behaviour had been changed because of the books they read. Presumably many of these people had access only to books that could be bought over the counter and did not have the estimable advantage of a British Museum readers' ticket.

In a Britain swinging gaily to perdition it might be well asked, 'So what?' And its corollary, 'Is it of anyone's concern that sexual behaviour has been changed by reading books?' When it comes to certain classes of erotica, the answer must be yes. The Private Case of the

British Museum has a unique collection of Victoriana, in which pursuits such as the violation of child virgins, flagellation to death, sodomy, and bestiality, are written about with a commitment that might well influence the more susceptible reader. Many of the books in the Private Case are harmless or quietly amusing. Few would be shocked by *Aristotle's Master Piece*, a bumbling account of the facts of life, and an eighteenth century treatise on masturbation (*A Treatise on the Crime of Onan*) is equally innocuous. Other books are not so innocent.

Then there are the practical reasons why books should be kept locked away. Reading room officials have an unenviable task; it is their aim to have the books in their care returned *virgo intacta*, especially rare erotica, but, as Mr Fryer relates, 'some people are kinky about such books. They cannot help themselves. Their fingers itch for a pencil, or a sharp knife, or the thrill of possession.' If all the Private Case books were made available to all readers – and it is no difficult task to acquire a reader's ticket, especially a temporary one – one suspects that historians, sociologists, and sexologists would plead for a reintroduction of some kind of censorship. Even with the present strict control on Private Case books there is evidence that the mutilator, have been at work. Freedom to read what one would is all very well; freedom to read, marks annotate, scribble, tear pages out, or steal?

Unquestionably British Museum officialdom has been coy, obscurantist, petty and don-like in the worst possible way. Peter Fryer's trials and tribulations in the exploration of the *terra incognita* emphasize this; his first encounter with the mysteries of the order came when he applied for Iwan Bloch's *Sexual Life in England Past and Present*, and his application slip was returned marked, 'please see superintendent'. 'That gentleman was as courteous as most of the mus-

eum officials are, leaving aside one notable exception of each sex. He had to satisfy himself, he said, that my purpose in applying for Bloch's book was serious and that I was unlikely to steal, mark, or mutilate it.' Mr Fryer, being a presentable young man, passed the scrutiny. He had the mien of a man not likely to steal mark,, or mutilate.

One's sympathies are divided between the genuine researchers aggravated by polite formulae, and the reading room staff, who are helpful and intelligent in a way few librarians are today, and who themselves are as puzzled by Private Case etiquette as anyone. It is not fair that dons from remote and respectable colleges should be given preferential treatment over a writer who may only manage to squeeze in a couple of hours on a Saturday morning; it is not fair that timid and retiring researchers should be subjected to a brutal scrutiny by officials who, for all one knows, may be looking for a twitch; especially, and this is surely the main point of Mr Fryer's book, once one has been screened, one should at least know the extent of the territory available for scrutiny. The catalogue of the Private Case should be accessible.

My own experiences of the Private Case situation have been pleasant. In blissful ignorance of procedure, I applied to R. A. Wilson, the Principal Keeper of Printed Books, for permission to browse amongst the books of the Private Case. 'I cannot allow you to have immediate access to the cases themselves', wrote Mr Wilson, but 'shall have no hesitation in allowing you to read the books kept in the so-called Private Cases in this Library.' Had I been allowed the free run of the Private Cases I should have established a precedent, and Mr Fryer's excellent book would have been super-numerary.

RONALD PEARSALL

THE BOUNDS OF SENSE: AN ESSAY ON KANT'S CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON, by P. F. Strawson. pp. 296. *Methuen*, 1966, 35s.

Mr Strawson's book on Kant is likely (together with Jonathan Bennett's *Kant's Analytic*, published about the same time) to initiate a renewed discussion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in the English speaking philosophical world. Strawson's great achievement is to get behind Kant's barbarous and often inconsistent terminology and contrived architectonic to his problems and his solutions seen afresh as living philosophical

issues. We are forcibly reminded again that Kant was one of the most powerful pertinacious, penetrating and original minds in the history of Western philosophy, and that no time spent in grappling with his thought can ever be wasted. Mr Strawson's own time, so far from being wasted, has produced what must be accounted at least the philosophical book of the year.

Mr Strawson's title is appropriate in two ways