

Peake de luxe

I have at last managed to see and turn the pages of a couple of volumes of the Queen Anne Press limited edition of Peake's *Collected Works*.

The title prompts me to ask: what constitutes his 'Collected Works'? I didn't find any information about this in the volumes I viewed, and there was no descriptive leaflet, so I had to work it out for myself. To start with, these volumes include pretty well all the prose and verse that I know of, including some discarded and previously unpublished fragments from *Titus Alone* – but none of his plays. Also included is a wide selection of Peake's art work, in particular twenty-eight illustrations for the Moccus Book, and fourteen items from the Adolf Hitler portfolio, which is more than have ever been seen before in a book. There are also some of the works he produced for the War Artists' Advisory Committee, particularly the pictures of air crew before and after their missions, but only a few of his many images of glassblowers at work. In the way of war drawings, there isn't (I don't think) the drawing of a blitzed aircraft hangar that was in Goatie's Smith's memoir; it would have happily accompanied the portraits done for the WAAC at an RAF aerodrome.

In addition, there is a couple of hundred doodles and marginal sketches from the archive acquired by the British Library, many of them previously unpublished. On the other hand, none of Peake's illustrations for works by others are included, not even those for poems by Walter de la Mare or the four colour ones of nursery rhymes that appeared in *Lilliput* in 1950. (Both series are reproduced in *Mervyn Peake: the man and his art*.) So much for the title, *Collected Works*. I found myself going from surprise to disappointment and back to surprise as I turned the pages. A better title might have been 'Selected Works'.

These inspection volumes were not the super de luxe edition with beetle wings or whatever on the covers, but samples of the cloth-bound issue. They are a very sober black (with a sheen that makes me feel as though I should draw on a pair of white cotton gloves before I handle them), with gold lettering down the spine and a different Peake drawing (roughly 2 by 3 inches) glued on the front of each volume. The ten volumes are numbered on the back cover in Chinese characters, so you have to be a sinologist to get them in the right order.

Inside, the books are printed in two colours – black and a shade of dark sepia that Peake himself often used for his drawings – plus full colour when required. (There's a nice colour spread of glassblowers at work, marred by the presence of the page numbers just below.) The smaller drawings culled from the manuscripts in the British Library adorn the margins of text pages (and nibble away at the words); larger ones (from other sources as well) are printed solus on the page. As most of these drawings have been thoroughly cleaned up, they jump crisply off the page. (Garance Coggins questions this approach to the manuscript sketches in her article in this issue of *PS*.) So although Peake's book illustrations are absent, there is a fair amount of his ephemeral graphic work that has not been seen before.

This brings me to my first complaint: there is no list of these images, no indication of their size or source, and no indication of whether they have been published before. I foresee desperate moments in the future when I shall be racking my brain, trying to recall where, in which volume, I saw this or that drawing. (The British Library has meticulously catalogued the Peake archive: it would have been easy to add the BL's reference numbers to a list of sources.) Nor is there any indication as to

whether the marginal drawings have been placed alongside the text that they accompany in the manuscript, or merely randomly. Those that I checked in *Gormenghast* seem to be placed where they belong in the manuscript – but there’s only 65 of them in the book, whereas the manuscript contains something like five times that many. So a selection has been made – by what criteria? Some stunning sketches are omitted, and some quick, insignificant ones are present. There are also doodles which have no apparent relation at all to the text. (Again, see Garance Coggins’ article for thoughts on choices like these.) In volumes of this price, the least one could expect is information about the editorial principles that presided over these decisions.

It’s also hard to know where to find things. Peake’s long narrative poem, ‘The Touch o’ the Ash,’ is not in the volume of poetry but in the volume called *Labyrinth*, which contains many of Peake’s short prose pieces, from ‘Mr Slaughterboard’ to ‘Boy in Darkness.’ Conversely, other prose pieces, like ‘The White Chief of the Umzimbooboo Kaffirs’ and ‘Johnny Butterfield,’ are in another volume called *In Umbra* – which also contains Peake’s rough stage designs for the opera of Gormenghast, or some of them, but none of the associated text. I believe that the grouping could have been improved.

Now for the texts themselves. Introducing Peake’s notes for an autobiography, ‘Chinese Puzzle,’ the editor writes, ‘What follows is an abbreviated version of the text as first published in *Peake’s Progress* (Allen Lane, 1975) with corrections to bring it into line with the original manuscript.’ I should feel more confident in the editing if the publication date of *Peake’s Progress* had been correct. In the volumes I have handled, ‘Chinese Puzzle’ seems to be the only text that has been brought ‘into line with the original manuscript.’ The next piece is ‘The White Chief of the Umzimbooboo Kaffirs’ in which the ‘spelling and punctuation are [Peake’s] own, as per the version published in *Peake’s Progress*,’ we are informed. Glancing at the first page I noticed a deviation from the given source. I did not check further. ‘The Touch o’ the Ash’ is also reprinted from *Peake’s Progress*, but *Peake’s Progress* (especially the first edition) is not a reliable source. As the MSS of these pieces are now in the British Library, these texts could have been corrected too. (My own list of corrections is available on the *Peake Studies*

website.) Nowhere did I check a text word by word against the source, but everywhere I looked I found misprints, some of them painfully obvious. On the second page of ‘The Touch o’ the Ash,’ there’s a ‘You’ printed as ‘Tou,’ for instance. ‘Peradventure’ has the Countess with a ‘chowder of cats at her feet’ instead of a *clowder*. ‘Clowder’ may be a rare collective noun (for a group of cats, like a *flock* of sheep or a *herd* of cattle), but surely, surely, turning the cats into soup around the Countess’s feet should have raised the editor’s suspicions that something was amiss.

In *Gormenghast* there’s a paragraph that has been misprinted in almost every edition but the first – see the ‘Mervyn Peake FAQ’ page on the *Peake Studies* website. The *Collected Works* (page 435) gets the word order right in this paragraph (hurrah!), but omits the plural ‘s’ from ‘roofs’ and manages to print a full stop in the middle of the last sentence: ‘to gain some island tower. new-risen from the blue.’ Oops. There’s also a puzzle on the back of the title page: ‘Introduction © Fabian Peake,’ it says. But there’s no Introduction by anyone in my copy. That’s ‘oops’ again, I suppose.

In the *Umbra* volume ‘Johnny Butterfield’ makes his first book appearance, transcribed from the manuscript. Glancing at the text, which I happen to know quite well for having transcribed it myself not long ago (see *PS* 12: iv, 4–18), I noticed that the cricketer’s name is given as ‘Crabbful,’ whereas Peake clearly wrote ‘Crabfire’ (with a double ‘b’ only in the first instance). I noticed a few other minor mis-readings. So the texts are not reliable, to say the least of it.

The editorial presence is likewise irregular. The *Umbra* volume contains a very useful short text, ‘Titus Far from Home’ which is introduced like this: ‘Dedicated to Maeve, and written on two scraps of paper in the first fortnight of 1953, this futuristic vision was Peake’s first sustained effort to establish Titus in a world beyond his ancestral domain.’ A few pages later, there’s another text, titled simply ‘Dickens.’ There is no editorial warning above it to the effect that it is *not* by Peake but copied by him from an essay by George Bernard Shaw. True, this fact is briefly mentioned in a note eight pages earlier, but the reader is rather likely to overlook it. What’s more, I question whether a couple of pages of Shaw’s writing should figure at all in Peake’s *Collected Works*.

Quite clearly, a collector of fine bindings (who doesn't really care about Peake at all) is going to want the super-duper issue. And the cloth-bound edition is going to look good on the shelves of the well-heeled admirer of Peake, who will delight in the drawings and doodles. But if you're wanting reliable texts, you would do better to buy second-hand copies of first editions of the Titus books or (for pockets less deep) copies of the King Penguin edition. Complete those with the volume containing 'Boy in Darkness' and other stories from Peter Owen and the volumes of poetry from Carcanet.

