

Plutarch lives: Entertainment, education, liberation

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

In the last letter Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from prison, he asked, “Father, could you get me from the library Plutarch’s *Lives of Great Men*?” We do not know if the book ever reached the captive. I hope it did; few books could have provided more comfort.

Plutarch’s reach is very broad. Some years ago I was asked to write an article on “what was in the water in Wahoo.” A century ago that Nebraska town had only a few hundred citizens, but in one ten-year period it produced five little boys who grew up to be 20th-century great men: Howard Hanson, composer and head of the Eastman School of Music; George Anderson, painter of horses; George Beadle, Nobel Prize-winning economist and president of the University of Chicago; Darryl Zanuck of Hollywood; and Sam Crawford. Crawford was nasty Ty Cobb’s classy teammate, all-time record holder for most triples batted, and late-in-life electee to the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Would-be interviewers found “Wahoo” Sam hard to locate on the day of his election. Crawford owned neither radio nor television set. When reporters finally knocked on the door of his California mobile home, he was reading Plutarch.

Recently I was scanning the Christian Century shelves to see what new books awaited review. Senior editor Richard Kauffman challenged me to take on the index to Plutarch’s 15-volume *Moralia* (Harvard University Press, 632 pp., \$21.50). Compiled by Edward N. O’Neil, the index is a fat little book, and its pages tantalize. Thus, “Myrmecides, a craftsman: reputed to have made chariots that were covered with the wings of a fly and to have inscribed verses of Homer on a sesame seed XIII.2.853 (1083D-E).”

Plutarch’s *Lives* is a book one may read in adolescence and then file away to reread during retirement days. Meanwhile, we have the *Moralia*, which is more often anthologized than read as a whole. Here are some random samples that may help

explain why Bonhoeffer, Wahoo Sam and their lessers enjoyed the ancient author so:

The virtuous wife: “On being reviled by someone for his offensive breath, [Hiero] blamed his wife for never having told him about this, but she said, ‘I supposed that all men smelled so.’”

For those with parking problems: “When [Philip] was about to pitch his camp in an excellent place, he learned that there was no grass for the pack animals. ‘What a life is ours,’ he said, ‘if we must live to suit the convenience of the asses!’”

For “Wahoo Sam”: “Seeing some of his soldiers playing ball in their breastplates and helmets, [Antigonos] was much pleased and sent for their officers, wishing to engage them. But when he heard that [the officers] were engaged in drinking, he gave their positions to their soldiers.”

For payers of tuition: “Many fathers . . . go so far in their devotion to money, as well as in animosity toward their children, that in order to avoid paying a larger fee, they select as teachers for their children men who are not worth any wage at all—looking for ignorance, which is cheap enough. Wherefore Aristippus . . . cleverly rebuked a father who was devoid both of mind and sense. For when a man asked him what fee he should require for teaching his child, Aristippus replied, ‘A thousand drachmas’; but when the other exclaimed, ‘Great Heavens! What an excessive demand! I can buy a slave for a thousand,’ Aristippus retorted, ‘Then you will have two slaves, your son and the one you buy.’”

You can purchase the *Moralia* from Harvard, and Plutarch’s *Lives* in many editions. He entertains, educates and liberates.