

Characters: English soles, psychic powers and doll houses

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [March 22, 2005](#) issue

Trapped on a plane on a runway in Atlanta the other evening, I had three hours to catch up on back issues of the *Times Literary Supplement*. Instinctively, I looked for M.E.M.O material. There on the runway I encountered some memorable aspects of some memorable characters, each of which would be worthy of comment. I offer here some highlights.

There is Cole Porter, for starters (January 31, discussed by Stephen Brown), a songwriter “capable of transcending his own mockery with a line which is just lovely language: ‘In shallow shoals, English soles do it’ before he turns crude with ‘Goldfish in the privacy of bowls do it.’” (“Let’s do it . . . Let’s fall in love.”)

Take Henry David Thoreau next (January 7, Paul Quinn): for a time he served as gardener for Ralph Waldo Emerson, “making a doll’s house for the Emersons’ children . . . and miniature gloves for Mrs. Emerson to put on the chickens’ claws, after she complained that they were scratching out her flowers.” I could make a whole children’s sermon out of that tender scene.

Take this scene from the high baroque period (January 7, Andrew Manze): King George I of England’s “first wife and her lover, Count Koenigsmarck, attempted to conceal their adulterous relationship by quoting lines from Steffani operas in their letters. When the affair came to light, Koenigsmarck was murdered and the Princess put away for life in a remote castle.”

In pre-king days, George tried to run an opera house. After a few days he declared that “he could with much more ease command an army of fifty thousand men than manage a company of opera singers.”

Did you know (November 5, Tim Winter) that “today only 15 percent of Muslims know Arabic, a percentage which seems set to shrink further”? This fact “recalls the status of the Latin of the Tridentine Mass, but more so; for despite all the jokes of

Cardinal Newman, Latin was never the Bible's original tongue" as Arabic is of the Qur'an.

Next take Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes (February 7, Jon Barnes), who after he lost a son in World War I "began to believe in almost everything. He believed in ghosts, telepathy, psychic powers, automatic writing, clairvoyance, fairies, communications with the dead, ectoplasm and the promise of golf in heaven." A candidate for New Age guruhood, he also kept his feet on the ground—as attested by the "startling fact that in 1909 Doyle was the referee of the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship."

William Gladstone (November 5, Richard Shannon), 19th-century British prime minister, in "the far most consequential dimension" of his evangelical sensibility had a "sense of the way his life seemed to be encompassed by assurances of providential care and love. Increasingly, he felt himself being shaped by a higher power into a purposeful design. . . . It came to him that God . . . directed 'great social forces,'" and he came to a "profound conviction that he was subject to a great election by God as his instrument for particular purposes." This was an idea he got not from reading but from "insight," as he asked "why any intelligent mind should doubt the capacity of our Maker to choose, frame and regulate the modes of His communication with us." That sounds like a dangerous man to be governor of an empire.

Given the choice, I'd prefer the example and company of Thoreau, who made no claims that the higher power shaped him, but busied himself modestly in Emerson's backyard, transcendently building doll houses for the children and sewing gloves for the family chickens.