

LEIGH MERCER, PALINDROMIST

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A man, a plan, a canal - Panama
(Notes & Queries, Nov 13 1948)

These seven words have earned Leigh Mercer a place among the logological immortals. Ask the man on the street for an example of a palindrome, and (if he knows what you are talking about) you will likely have this quoted back at you. (Or, perhaps, "Madam, I'm Adam.") But it is ironic that Mercer did not want to be remembered in this way; he chided me once in a letter (October 1971) "...I am writing again to make sure that you don't think of me purely as a 'drome man. I have had a number of hobbies, am only interested in ideas which only a few others care for..."

So be it. This memoir, although celebrating Mercer's palindromic achievements, will not neglect the other facets of a varied life.

He was born in October 1893, the son of a Church of England parson. His older brother, Tom, was a journalist and, after his retirement, a highly-regarded local historian in the London suburb of Thames Ditton. Mercer, contrasting himself with these worthies, wrote "I have been taught to regard myself as the fool of the family, a professional ne'er-do-well." The rebellion of the parson's son, the refusal to fulfill family expectations?

He held a large number of jobs - 60 by one count, 80 by another, 85 by a third - from 1910 until retirement in 1959. As he put it, "[I thought] nothing of throwing up a well-paid job for a poorly-paid one, or just for a holiday, on the spur of the moment." Some jobs lasted as long as seven years, others only a day; some employers fired him, others begged him to stay on. His earlier jobs were in engineering shops of 30 motor car companies - yet he never learned to drive. (In his later years, he got around London on a bicycle, refusing to use public transport on Sundays because that was a day when no one was supposed to work.) His first job, and his longest, was with Rolls-Royce in Derby, where he remembered starting work at 6 AM and being paid only 9 bob (shillings) a week plus tips from the fitters. He liked it best working for Ford, but they were a bit on the strict side - he was fired for talking on the job.

Eventually, he became bored with engineering and branched out into all sorts of short-lived endeavors. One Christmas he was a temporary postman in the suburb of Crawley (where he was bemused by a house named "Kreepi"); he also clerked in the Post Office Savings Bank for five years ("a soft job"). He was taken on as

a handyman at a fun fair sideshow, the "Devil's Glide" at Bertram Mill's Circus in Olympia. There it was fun to watch the various performers rehearse, and profitable to hunt for candies that had fallen beneath the spectator seats. He was a male nurse for an invalid in the wealthy suburb of Esher, and spent his nights there quietly reading Conrad. When the yo-yo craze was at its height, he rented a small shop in New Oxford Street to sell them. After he hired an attractive girl named Margaret as his assistant, business boomed; in the crush someone once stole 10 shillings from the till. He served a short stint as proofreader, boasting (like Captain Corcoran in "H.M.S. Pinafore") that "nothing - well, hardly anything - got past me." Deciding to try his luck in Paris, he pedaled there on a second-hand bicycle and stayed for three years. After two years of office work by day and English tutoring to a French girl, Gabrielle, by night ("she was willing to be taught other things too, innocent but pleasant"), he landed a job as houseman at the bachelor flat of millionaire Anthony Drexel's son. His job was to attend to the needs of the other six servants: butler, valet, cook, undercook, footman and parlourmaid. (Think of "Upstairs, Downstairs".) The food there was marvelous, he had his own bedroom (much pleasanter than the bedbug-infested room of his first Paris hotel), and every afternoon was his own.

No doubt his strangest occupation was that of pavement artist, exhibiting chalk pictures in the hope of inducing passers-by to donate a few coppers. In a letter to me, he characterized this as the "most interesting event of my life". This 1943 Oxford Street escapade was later written up by him for the December 14 1946 New Statesman. He found it a difficult task, enlisting the aid of a fellow-artist, and never - well, almost never - tried writing for pay again. Nevertheless, the result reads well, as the following excerpts demonstrate:

I make a point of being on my pitch, with my pictures in position, by half past seven in the morning. This avoids, by a wide margin, any danger of being forestalled on a busy, cash-producing spot. At that hour, moreover, passers-by do not take it amiss, and respond, if one wishes them "Good morning." This I find heartening, as it gives a tiny illusion of not being quite friendless. The remainder of the day one seems to wear a cloak of invisibility, except to clients - not a very pleasant sensation.

My "premises" are five in number, in different London districts, and I try to be in the same place on the same day of the week. It pays to co-operate with the police, and they definitely don't like you there every day. Maybe clients don't either. Everything I show is my own work, and anything soiled or otherwise weather-beaten has to be discarded. A drawing, using pastel, white chalk and charcoal, takes me anything from one to three hours to complete, and I show a dozen or more at a time. So one day a week is allocated to production. A pavement artist with a faded lot of stuff that has been on show for years is not looked upon with a favourable eye either by the public or the law. And, speaking for myself, artistic integrity exists as a motive too.

Since I don't draw on the pavement surface itself, I have the greatest difficulty in satisfying questioners that what I show is my own. Grades of scepticism range from "Are these really all your own doing?" to "You didn't do those," with or without an interrogatory inflexion. Nor must I omit the young man who asks with a knowing air, "Where do you buy them?" Of late I have taken to chalking on the pavement some such statement as "All these drawings are positively my own work" which has of course decreased enquiries - about one per cent...

The hours pass at a surprising speed, especially if the occasional "tokens of esteem" are not unusually dilatory. Street life never loses its interest for me, and the novice soon learns to adapt himself to his circumstances. Twelve or fourteen pictures in a line take several strides to pass, so an "offertory circle" of chalk is advisable at each end, to accommodate walkers in both directions. Police constables are frequently detailed to stand unobtrusively near traffic lights to watch for traffic irregularities. Should one be stationed near my pitch I know I am in for an unproductive period, though only a psychologist could tell me why...

Finally, I have proved the truth of the proverb, "Money breeds money." A circle of chalk with a coin or two in it is more likely to receive further contributions than an empty one...

The article was reprinted in the World Digest, and the BBC paid him "six guineas and a glass of sherry" for a five-minute appearance. (This prompted a letter from a long-lost school friend who delicately inquired about the state of his finances.)

What was Leigh Mercer really like? We have two word-portraits of him in his seventies. The July 6 1969 London times commented

He wears the kind of round spectacles that sank with the ark and is round-shouldered and when you first meet him you think of a long-suffering law clerk or maybe one of those fist-shaking small town newspaper editors that Hollywood created for its Westerns. His suit is dark and dusty and appears to have stopped fitting him with tailored perfection a decade ago. He's pensioner-thin and his white hair has shedded just above his forehead...[He] came into the living-room, hurriedly shook hands, then rushed between the armchairs to shut the windows. "Too much fresh air," he mumbled at the sky and made you think of the white rabbit in Alice in Wonderland running to beat the time. There's something of the white rabbit charm in Mr. Mercer, he seems so improbable he's intriguing.

In the late 1960s, Mercer suddenly began getting rid of his mathematical and logological memorabilia. He sent me a collection of pentomino constructions and his copy of The Nuttall Dictionary of Anagrams; he sent Howard Bergerson four palindromic notebooks (described later in this memoir). J.A. Lindon commented on this on October 22 1970

I suppose the fact is, he has always been a very lonely man. I don't think he ever married, and although he has a wide circle of semi-friends, I doubt whether he has ever had any close ones. And he has always lived in lodgings, I believe. I expect he has come to feel that his long interest in, well, gimmickry, which has filled his days

and made his life bearable, is not enough; he feels he needs something more essentially worthwhile and human, [but] it's a bit late now to start reorganising his way of living.

It's probably fair to say that Leigh Mercer regarded life as an opportunity to pursue his great enthusiasms - number-play and word-play. He was primarily a collector of word curiosa rather than a creator, although the subject of palindromes (as we shall see) provided an exception to this generalization. Although he characterized himself as "brain-lazy" and didn't like using his brain overmuch, his hobbies eventually became his whole life.

First, a brief sampling of his interests in mathematics and mechanical devices:

- * he designed a mechanical puzzle and (for a cost of 22 pounds) had four copies made
- * reading Cundy and Rollett's **Mechanical Models**, he was inspired to construct a twin-elliptic pendulum, a device which, fitted with a pen and set in motion, traces out elaborate surreal curves
- * using the digits 0 through 9 once each with addition and multiplication signs only, he convinced himself that every number from 1 through 16629 could be represented
- * he sent me a notebook diagramming the 2339 ways in which the 12 pentomino pieces can be arranged in a 6-by-10 rectangle (later some of these constructions formed the basis of a pentomino word puzzle in **Word Ways**)

But he should be primarily honored as a logologist before most people even knew the field existed. Again, a sampling must suffice:

- * When Dmitri Borgmann sent him the idea of "Zero Redundancy" (finding examples of words beginning with all 676 bigrams), he was so entranced that he mined the British Museum catalogue for 552 of them
- * He constructed an initial-letter mnemonic for the names of British sovereigns up to George VI
- * He noted three 13-letter English villages with no repeated letters: Buslingthorpe, Buckfastleigh, Rumboltswhyke
- * He was especially taken with word-deletion sentences such as hONE shALLOWed feATHER aCORNs wLSe restrAlNed (or) caln shAME wHEREin thINe baTHED bRACKET
- * He observed that none of the three letters in YOU are used in the homonymous EWE
- * He constructed various limericks with wordplay, such as
When the "Rose & Crown" signboard blew down
George, the landlord, remarked with a frown
"On the one to replace it
We'll have much more space be-
Tween 'Rose' and 'And' and 'And' and 'Crown'"
- * In a letter to Howard Bergerson October 4 1968, he claimed to be the creator of letter-shifts such as CHEER to JOLLY
- * he once noted the name Michael Carmichael Carr, and constructed the stutter-sentence "Bye-bye, Lulu," Fifi murmured, "George Orr pooh-poohs so-so Tartar cocoa beriberi Dodo had had"

And now to palindromes. Despite the disclaimer I received from

Mercer in 1971, he wrote to Howard Bergerson on September 9 1968 "In a lifetime of interest in palindromes, to the exclusion of all other types of word play, I have never seen any thing like [Edna Waterfall]." The London Times characterized him as "a king-pin of this game called palindromes, and whenever you pick up an American book on the subject you're likely to see his name indexed." When he joined the National Puzzlers' League in 1952, he took as his nom the palindromic Roger G. M'Gregor.

When did his interest in palindromes begin? After I wrote Mercer in 1971 begging him for some insight into his logological development, he replied

I will try to fall in with your wishes and provide a skeleton for you to work on...

BONE ONE My father was always interested in puns, spoonerisms, palindromes, and acrostics, but not as composer. (Lewis Carroll was a book we all knew almost by heart.)

BONE TWO The arrival of cross word puzzles, which none of us cared for

BONE THREE ...cross word word-lists, listing words without giving meanings, grouped according to length.

BONE FOUR I bought one such book second-hand, with no particular object in view.

BONE FIVE With time on my hands, it occurred to me that no one seemed to have systematically tackled 'drome-making.

BONE SIX I bought some exercise-books, and, using the above-named book, I listed all words which seemed to be useful, both in alphabetical and reverse-alphabetical order, up to seven-letter words.

BONE SEVEN Rawlplugs, where I was working, had occasion to throw out several thousand pieces of card, about 3" by 2", printed on one side only. I took the lot for a card-index of two- or three-word 'drome centers. (One was the not-very-hopeful-looking PLAN A CANAL P; it was a year or two before I found that PANAMA fitted.) The above took about two years to do, during which I made no attempt to make 'dromes.

Bone Six is apparently the four palindromic notebooks mentioned earlier, now in the possession of Howard Bergerson. These consist of 18 to 30 pages apiece, each with several columns of words, divided so that words (or fragments of words at the ends) can be read in reverse: Niaga ra, m yria d, c on si der. The present location of the Bone Seven card-index is not known.

Although the bones of this family skeleton provide no dates one can observe that his collection of 100 Notes & Queries palindromes was published from 1946 to 1953. In 1946, he commented that he had collected 47 palindromes, nearly half from earlier Notes & Queries. He presented 12, some of his own creation (though he didn't say which). The famous Panama palindrome did not appear until November 13, 1948; as we have seen, this was derived from his card-index.

Palindrome historians have been frustrated by Leigh Mercer's casual attitude toward attribution. One cannot say with certainty

which Notes & Queries palindromes were his and which were not. J.A. Lindon voiced his exasperation in a December 1970 letter:

Firstly, he is the reverse of straightforward, he will never answer a query in an intelligible way...he seems to love being oblique...it is simply no use asking him anything. When writing up some idea, I have once or twice asked him if this or that idea was his own, but he would never say.

Secondly, he has always been fond of passing on other people's ideas.. as if they were his own. I don't mean that he would steal them, but that he would never distinguish between his work and that of other people...He never attempted to take credit for them, he was just not sufficiently interested in credit to bother.

Lindon told the following anecdote of his penchant for obfuscation:

He has sometimes cut his own throat with his own obliquity - if one can! I remember once acting as expert referee in a palindrome contest run by an English paper...The contest was to write a PD, not merely quote one. I rejected the Editor's selected first-prize winner as it was one of Mercer's, I knew, and here sent in by a woman - naturally I assumed she had read it in print elsewhere. Actually, it was Mercer himself sending in his entry in a characteristically oblique manner. No reason why he shouldn't have used his own name and address, but he just didn't. So he lost the prize!

I conclude this memoir with the 100 Notes & Queries palindromes (kindly supplied me by O.V. Michaelsen). What more fitting monument to this enigmatic man?

- 1 Rise to vote, sir
- 2 Name now one man
- 3 Was it a rat I saw?
- 4 In a regal age ran I
- 5 "Rats gnash teeth," sang star
- 6 No slender evil was I ere I saw live red Nelson
- 7 Tense, I "snap" Sharon roses, or Norah's pansies net
- 8 "Stop!" nine myriad murmur, "put up rum, **rum**, dairymen, in pots"
- 9 See, slave, I demonstrate yet arts no medieval sees
- 10 Desserts I'd reviled, drawn onward, deliver distressed
- 11 Live time, never even emit evil
- 12 "Now saw ye no mosses or foam, or a redder aroma of roses" - so money was won
- 13 Now Ned I am a maiden won
- 14 Here so long? No loser, eh?
- 15 Trade ye no mere moneyed art
- 16 Dora tones area; erase not a rod
- 17 Evil is a name of a foeman, as I live
- 18 In airy Sahara's level, Sarah a Syrian I
- 19 Ban campus motto, "Bottoms up, MacNab"
- 20 Bob, a Sugar Pool's foreman, madam, namer of sloop "Ragusa Bob"
- 21 No dot nor Ottawa "legal age" law at Toronto, Don
- 22 I made Border bards' drowsy swords: drab, red-robed am I
- 23 Now ere we nine were held idle here, we nine were won

24 "Deliver," demanded Nemesis, "emended, named, reviled"
 25 Egad, a base life defiles a bad age
 26 Name I, Major-General Clare, negro Jamie Man
 27 No; relate, Mat, Aesop's Elba Fables Pose a tame tale, Ron
 28 "Reviled did I live," said I, "as evil I did deliver"
 29 I saw desserts, I'd no lemons, alas, no melon, distressed was I
 30 Now debonair dahlias, poor, drop or droop Sail, Hadrian, Obed won
 31 Live not on evil
 32 Sue, dice, do, to decide us
 33 Ah, Aristides opposed it, sir, aha!
 34 Paget saw an inn in a waste gap
 35 Diapered art as a trade repaid
 36 Sir, I demand - I am a maid named Iris
 37 No, set a maple here, help a mate, son
 38 "Slang is not suet, is it?" Euston signals
 39 Rise, morning is red, no wonder-sign in Rome, sir
 40 Doom, royal panic, I mimic in a play or mood
 41 Salisbury Moor, sir, is roomy; rub, Silas
 42 Are we not drawn onward, we few, drawn onward to new era?
 43 'Tis Ivan, on a visit
 44 See few owe fees
 45 "Not New York," Roy went on
 46 Poor Dan is in a droop
 47 Harass sensuousness, Sarah
 48 Yawn a more Roman way
 49 Won't lovers revolt now?
 50 No mists or frost, Simon
 51 Never a foot too far, even
 52 "Now dine," said I as Enid won
 53 A man, a plan, a canal - Panama
 54 I saw thee, madame, eh, 'twas I
 55 Draw, O Caesar, erase a coward
 56 Resume so pacific a pose, muser
 57 "Pooh," smiles Eva, "have Selim's hoop"
 58 Six at party, no pony-trap, taxis
 59 "Not for Cecil?" asks Alice Crofton
 60 No, I save on final plan if no evasion
 61 Pull a bat, I hit a ball up
 62 Red root put up to order
 63 Selim's tired, no wonder, it's miles
 64 Refasten gipsy's pig-net safer
 65 Tennis set won now Tess in net
 66 Draw pupil's lip upward
 67 Sums are not set as a test on Erasmus
 68 Nurse's onset abates, noses run
 69 Lapp, Mac? No sir, prison-camp pal
 70 Egad, Loretta has Adams as mad as a hatter Old age?
 71 Sue, Tom smote us
 72 Too bad, I hid a boot
 73 Anne, I stay a day at Sienna

- 74 Too far, Edna, we wander afoot
 75 Nurse, I spy gypsies, run!
 76 Drab as a fool, as aloof as a bard
 77 Goddesses so pay a possessed dog
 78 Reg, no lone car won, now race no longer
 79 Mother Eve's noose we soon sever, eh, Tom?
 80 Saladin enrobes a baroness, Señora - base-born Enid, alas
- 81 Niagara, O roar again
 82 Deer frisk, sir, freed
 83 Dora tendered net, a rod
 84 No word, no bond - row on
 85 Did Hannah say as Hannah did?
 86 So remain a mere man - I am Eros
 87 A gas, an age, bore Cicero, began a saga
 88 Yes, Mark, cable to hotel, "Back Ramsey"
 89 Yale democrats edit **Noon**-tide Star Come, delay
 90 Stephen, my hat - ah, what a hymn, eh, pets?
- 91 Ten dip a rapid net
 92 Pull up if I pull up
 93 Di, did I as I said I did?
 94 So may Obadiah aid a boy, Amos
 95 Remit Rome cargo to Grace Mortimer
 96 Tide-net safe soon, Alin A manila noose fastened it
 97 Gate-man sees name, garage-man sees name-tag
 98 Pusillanimity obsesses Boy Tim in All Is Up
 99 Yes, Syd, Owen saved Eva's new **Odyssey**
 100 Anne is not up-to-date, Godmother, eh? Tom, do get a dot put on
 Sienna

A reply to "Was it a rat I saw?" is "No, miss, it is Simon." A variant to an old friend is: "Madam, in Eden I'm - Adam." For any reader unfamiliar with this recreation, I append this hint, itself a palindrome: "Go, droop aloof," sides reversed, is "Fool a poor dog."

References: 1-12 Sep 7 1946 13-30 Nov 2 1946 31-42 Jan 10 1948
 43-51 Oct 16 1948 52-60 Nov 13 1948 61-70 Jul 8 1950 71-80 Aug 30 1952
 81-100 Feb 1953

Leigh Mercer was, for a time, my step-father. He was married to my mother from approx. 1936-1953. In his later years, my mother rented him a room at Purley Avenue, until he was in need of constant nursing attendance. He then lived in a nursing home called Kennedy House, in Church Walk, London NW2, where he died approximately 14 years ago.

--Denis Shanagher, June 18 1991