

Chapter 11: Hypernotes

📖 WWW 📖 11:1

Sitwell devoted the final chapter of *Left hand, Right Hand!* to the Sargent painting. Modern critical opinion is much more appreciative of Sargent's talent both as a portraitist (Kilmurray & Ormond, 1998) and in other genres, and the recent Tate Gallery Exhibition (Oct 1998 - Jan 1999) seemed to show precisely how in his portraits Sargent was looking through the surface vanities to the personality behind the facade.

Although the painting is also clearly meant to be a statement about their unity as a family, later in life Edith was said to be "white with fury and contempt that my father held me in what he thought was a tender paternal embrace", since tenderness was rare from either parent (Bradford, 1995 p.19).

📖 WWW 📖 11:2

I do not think Sitwell's left-handedness is mentioned in the biography by Ziegler (1999).

The autobiography was published in five volumes under the collective name *Left Hand, Right Hand!* (Sitwell, 1945). The first volume was originally called *The cruel month*, but now seems never to be known by that name but instead by the collective name. The other four volumes are, in order, *The scarlet tree*, *Great morning*, *Laughter in the next room*, and *Noble essences*. Even Sitwell's biographer, while suggesting that "this Blenheim among autobiographies has survived remarkably well", comments how "the social assumptions occasionally jar, the mannerisms grate" (Ziegler, 1999 p.313).

In quoting from Orwell's review of the third volume of Sitwell's biography I have not perhaps been entirely fair since even Orwell concludes his review by saying that, "although the range they cover is narrow, [these volumes] must be among the best autobiographies of our time" (Orwell, 1970 p.505).

📖 WWW 📖 11:3

Sitwell later used the cricketing incident as one of the few true parts of his *Who's Who* entry, the majority of which was totally frivolous. Many of the successive entries over the years can be found in the end papers of the first edition of *Laughter in the next room*.

Lord Dawson was to be called in once more by Sitwell, in less satisfactory circumstances, in July 1940 when Sitwell was looking for a medical certificate that his health would not allow

him to take on any arduous government work. Dawson acquiesced, although it would seem with serious doubts (Ziegler, 1999 p.246).

Examples of Sitwell's handwriting can be found in the end papers of the first edition of *Nobles Essences*, and in the catalogue published by the National Portrait Gallery (1994 p.180).

Darwin commented in his notebooks that "...handwriting said to be hereditary [sic]. shows well what minute details of structure hereditary" (Barrett et al., 1987 p.420 E.89).

☞WWW☞ 11:6

There is mention in a Parliamentary debate of 22nd July 1998 of a seven-year old left-handed child in Worcestershire who was forced to write with the right hand.

I should probably state at this point that I am and always have been right-handed myself. My mother is, however, left-handed and when I was a child she was, to our knowledge, the only left-hander in the family¹. She tells me that she has hardly ever noticed any problems at all of being left-handed, and indeed she seems to cope with almost all aspects of the right-handed world without trouble. One memory of childhood, though, is her left-handed dress-making scissors – it was intriguing how they were almost impossible for a right-handed child to use.

As a right-hander researching and writing about left-handedness I am uncomfortably aware of the comment made by Diane Paul (1990 p.49), that,

"One of the biggest problems through decades of handedness research has been that well-meaning, right-handed researchers do not fully comprehend the workings of a left-hander's mind."

☞WWW☞ 11:12

The authors of the article on the negative refractive index, as well as the editors of *Science*, are clearly doubtful about the usage of the term since they actually say, "these materials were termed 'left-handed' (LHM)", the scare quotes showing their own doubts. They were right to be worried. If they had taken any other contentious description, say calling them 'female materials' or 'gay materials' or 'black materials' then the pejorative nature and the inappropriateness of the description would have been apparent. It should be emphasised that left and right in a physical sense have nothing to do with the nature of the phenomenon itself. According to Mullins (Mullins, 2001) the name comes from the fact that instead of the usual right-hand law for an electromagnetic material one has to use a left-hand law, a perhaps half-justifiable reason.

The etymology of the left-handed hummingbird is not entirely clear, and it is also a possibility that left-handed means 'from the north' (Kelley, 1992) Kelley, 1992.

Although the use of 'left-handed' to mean homosexual is often quoted as being from the 1920s onwards, it was clearly in use before that, Rubert Brooke for instance writing a letter in 1910 to Lytton Strachey about the attractions of Lulworth Cove for a holiday, which

¹ One of my daughters is however left-handed.

included, "a fishing village, which had a beautiful left-handed boy in it two years ago" (Jones, 1999, p.123).

WWW 11:12

The lithograph of *The potato eaters* was actually produced before the much more well-known painting (of which there are actually three versions, as well as an oil sketch (De la Faille, 1970). Van Gogh wrote in a letter to Theo in which he enclosed some copies of the lithograph, "I should like to make, with a few alterations, a definite picture of the sketch I painted in the Cottage" (Anonymous., 1958 vol II, p.364).

Van Gogh was not the only young artist to make the same mistake. Picasso's first engraving as drawn on the plate showed a picador holding a pike in his right hand, but the pike was in the left hand in the final print. Picasso wittily finessed the problem by titling his engraving *El Zurdo (The Left-hander)* (Richardson, 1991 p.137).

Although for dramatic effect I have based the description in the text on *The potato eaters*, the original paper in which the effect was described showed a crayon drawing in what was ostensibly a memory experiment. The drawing showed eight children at a party, seven of whom held something in their left hand. Left-handers were significantly more likely to notice the handedness of the children when asked (Etaugh & Brausam, 1978), and spontaneously to use left-handedness in describing the picture (Etaugh & Fredman, 1980), where it was noticed by 50% of the 14 left-handers but only 1 of the 14 right-handers ($p < .05$).

WWW 11:13

I have been studying right and left for thirty years and still consciously have to make an effort to check the handedness of people I am talking to, rather than it being immediately obvious to me. But then, as mentioned earlier, I am a right-hander.

WWW 11:14

Of 245 right-handed students, 1 (0.4%) mentioned their handedness compared with 3 (7.5%) of 40 left-handed students ($p < .01$). Of the 1288 right-handed school-children, 6 (0.6%) mentioned handedness, compared with 3 (1.9%) of the 159 left-handed school-children ($p < .05$) (McGuire & McGuire, 1980).

WWW 11:15

Dieth, who had become interested in English dialects while Lecturer in German at Aberdeen from 1922-27, died prematurely, before the English Dialect Survey was completed. Orton became Professor of English Language and Medieval Literature in Leeds, and published basic analyses of the surveys. Orton died in 1975 before the dictionary itself was published, although he was active until the last in analysing the data and prepared much of it for publication. Upton and his colleagues (Upton & Widdowson, 1996) at the Institute of Dialect and Folk Life Studies in Leeds have continued to publish further detailed analyses.

Upton has since suggested that the decline in the number of terms has been even more rapid in the last third of the twentieth century. After noting the 80 or more terms once in use

for left-handedness, he says, “When I ask my English students these days, they are hard put to come up with three or four” (*The Observer (London)*, 31.10.99, p.14).

☞WWW☞ 11:16

I have been unable to find out anything about the origins of the term 'cotmer-handed'. It is not mentioned in the Oxford English Dictionary.

In 1974 there was a major re-organisation of local government in England and Wales, with a changing in many of the county boundaries. The maps presented in this book are drawn on the post-1974 boundaries, but the data in the dictionary are reported on pre-1974 boundaries. Occasionally this might produce minor inaccuracies of little consequence.

☞WWW☞ 11:17

Runciman (1997a) says that in the days before floodlighting, the baseball diamond always faced east, in order that the setting sun would not prevent the batter seeing the ball. Left-handed batters would then face south and hence were known as southpaws. A variant specifically refers to the old West Side Chicago ballpark (www.baylorhealth.com/proceedings/12_4/12_4_flatt.htm). The OED gives the first baseball usage as 1891 in the Chicago Herald of 24th July (“the new south-paw came to town yesterday”), and the term was only first used specifically to refer to a left-handed boxer in 1942. However the OED has a usage in 1848 meaning a punch with the left hand.

The term ‘north-handed’ probably derives from a person who is facing east towards the rising sun having their left hand to the north (Mayhew, 1895).

☞WWW☞ 11:18

A major methodological difference from the English Dialect Survey is that the Linguistic Survey of Scotland (Mather & Speitel, 1975) was carried out by a postal questionnaire, rather than by direct interview.

☞WWW☞ 11:20

The problem with scissors has been described previously by Coren (1992 p.267), and in almost every book by left-handers for left-handers. Clarke (1993 p.22) specifically mentions that, "It is not enough to re-mould the handles [of scissors] so that either hand can be inserted." Sadler (1997b) also comments on the need for the blades to be forced together slightly.

Although it might seem self-evident that left-handers would prefer left-handed scissors, that is not necessarily the case as the consumer magazine *Which?* found when it tested a range of left-handed equipment (Anonymous, 2000). Part of the explanation as they say is that left-handers are already used to using right-handed scissors (and in my own research I have been surprised by the fact that in a large group of over 900 applicants to medical school who were tested for manual dexterity there were no systematic differences between right and left-handers in the speed of usage of scissors, all of which were right-handed). In the *Which?* test there were however other tools which were preferred by left-handers, particularly striking

being the left-handed garden secateurs, where people said, "you can see where the blade is cutting".

WWW 11:21

Carlyle's words on tool-making are actually those of Professor Teufelsdröckh in *Sartor resartus*.

The sum total of Chwast's comments on handedness are as follows (Chwast, 1985):

"Has your left-handedness influenced your work in any way? I've always been left-handed. Although my mother would deny it, she tried to get me to use my right hand more often, because it was considered a handicap -- and evidence of my being a little odd. However, being odd gave me a terrific excuse for being an artist. ... One last question. You treat your right hand like a second child, and your left hand like royalty. Does your right hand serve any useful purpose? Well, yes. I use my right hand to hold my head up at the correct distance from my drawing table. I couldn't work any other way."

WWW 11:22

The survey of schools was carried out in 1996 by Nigel Sadler as a part of the Vestry House Museum exhibition, *A sinister way of life? The story of left-handedness*, 13th August - 16th November 1996. The questionnaire was sent to 86 schools in the Waltham Forest area, of which 27 replied. It is more than probable that those which did not reply had even less provision for left-handers. A brief synopsis of the results follows:

<i>Equipment/training</i>	<i>Provide</i>	<i>Do not provide</i>	<i>No answer</i>
Scissors	22	5	-
Books on LH for Pupils	2	25	-
Books on LH for Teachers	4	23	-
Teachers been on specific training	1	26	-
Are the teachers aware of the following:			
Specialist LH bookshops	2	24	1
Specialist LH shops	14	12	1
Specialist LH equipment	25	0	2
The number of LH pupils in the school	9	16	2
Relationship between LH and learning disabilities	10	14	3
Do you sit LH together	1	20	6
Do you sit LH on the left side of right-handers	5	17	5

The House of Commons debate was entirely stimulated by a single left-handed MP, Peter Luff, who has helped to keep the issue on the agenda for several years. The debate was full of rather twee jokes about the rights of lefties and the like. For connoisseur's of New Labour policies there was however one fine moment when the Minister commented,

"I wondered briefly whether the Government's search for a third way might be relevant to this debate but – after 30 seconds – decided that, of all policy spheres, perhaps only left-handedness does not offer a third way. It really is a debate about left and right, and perhaps about achieving equal rights".

☞ WWW ☞ 11:24

Jack Fincher (1977), himself a left-hander, has gently mocked the ineffectuality of pressure groups for left-handers, describing how, "the National League for Left-handers -- all 123 men and women strong -- has been moved to suggest such militant stratagems of social protest to the rightful status quo as offering your left hand to shake, or putting stamps on the left side of letters of avoid cancellation (as if the Post Office didn't have its hands full already)". Likewise, "Something called The Association for the Protection of the Rights of Left-handers" now exists ... and campaigns for the allowable use of the left hand in taking oaths and saluting...".

Theodore Dalrymple is a pseudonym. I once knew well the "young and learned doctor ... [for] we turned o'er many books together". An intellectual iconoclast of brilliance, he might at times be likened, in his own words, to "Daniels come to judgment (as Antonio exclaims...in *The Merchant of Venice*)" (9816 /ft " p.44").

☞ WWW ☞ 11:25

The logic of Rawls' argument was apparent even in the nineteenth century when Ireland (1880 p.214) commented that, "A left-handed child forced to write with his right hand through fear of punishment, is very much in the same condition as a right handed one who should be forced to hold his pen in his left".

☞ WWW ☞ 11:26

As I emphasised in chapter 9, the advantage is not strictly associated with being left-handed but with having one copy of the *C* gene. That raises some interesting challenges for those who wish to play at eugenics. Once the gene is identified it would be straightforward to select individuals of the *DC* rather than the *CC* type, but from then on the outcome is not dependent on genes but on the random processes of fluctuating asymmetry. A quarter of the *DC* individuals will be left-handed, but no genetic test could identify them, and it seems unlikely at present that any anatomically based scan of the developing fetus could identify what is essentially a functional asymmetry. Likewise the theory of cerebral variation says that *DC* individuals will often be wired up differently from one another but it cannot say for any individual whether the combination will be advantageous or deleterious. That is dependent on chance and chance alone, and is unknowable and unpredictable in a deep sense. It is rather satisfying really that those who wish to control everything would find that they would still have to play a lottery with their eugenics².

² It is even more interesting than that, since the choice would be between the certainty of a *DD* individual, with their standard brain organisation, or the various unpredictable alternatives of a *DC* individual which will, on aggregate benefit the individual, but in some cases would be disadvantageous.

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