

Michael Wharton: The man who foresaw the way of the world

By Harry Mount - 8:31PM BST 19 Apr 2013



The world must have been an awfully predictable place for Michael Wharton, whose Peter Simple column appeared in these pages for almost half a century. Wharton, who died in 2006, would have been 100 yesterday. But, still, some of the forecasts that cropped up in his magical, fantastical, wildly funny columns are only coming true now.

In the disastrous pre-Thatcher days of the Seventies, Wharton was already talking about the idea of “imaginary money” – so illusory was the value of real money at a time of rampant inflation. Bitcoin – the intangible internet currency which has soared in value over the past few months – would have come as no surprise to him.

Again and again, he was ahead of the curve in predicting the way of the world – the name of the column he first wrote with The Daily Telegraph’s deputy editor, Colin Welch, in 1957. He took it over on his own from 1960, and continued to write the column – later called just Peter Simple – until shortly before his death.

It’s often said that real truths are only told through fiction. And Wharton’s fantasy world – in Stretchford, an imaginary conurbation in the West Midlands – told greater truths than acres of thundering op-eds by less original writers. Through his cast of imaginary characters, Wharton explained Britain in the second half of the 20th century better than any 1,000-page history or 12-part television documentary.

Among that cast were Dr Heinz Kiosk, the crazed psychiatrist given to ending all his grim verdicts on the state of the world with the doom-laden pay-off, “We are all guilty”. Long before the race relations industry reached its peak, Dr Kiosk came up with the idea of the prejudometer, an anti-racist device that could detect dangerous hidden signs of racism in unknowing bigots.

Most of Wharton’s targets were on the Left, including the magnificently smug Mrs Dutt-Pauker, the grand Hampstead socialist with her four houses, Leninsmore, Marxmount, Beria Garth and Glyn Stalin. For Mrs Dutt-Pauker, read Polly Toynbee and Glenda Jackson – how Wharton would have relished Jackson’s self-satisfied

attack on Margaret Thatcher in the Commons. But he wasn't boringly party political. He was less a Conservative than an anti-progress, anti-bureaucracy pessimist, and would attack cant or idiocy, whoever was responsible for it. His enemies were the types – always with us – who proclaim that all things modern are good, all old traditions bad: people like Dr Spaceley Trellis, the go-ahead Bishop of Bevington.

The enemies weren't exclusively on the Left. Among the enemies of civilisation was J Bonington Jagworth, the overbearing leader of the Motorists' Liberation Front, devoted to "the basic right of every motorist to drive as fast as he pleases, how he pleases and over what or whom he pleases". Step forward Jeremy Clarkson.

Wharton was in a rich tradition of comic, anti-progress conservatives, in the small "c" sense of that word, and in its literal sense – as people who want to conserve the best of the past. He was in the same vein as Evelyn Waugh and Waugh's own fictional alter ego, Gilbert Pinfold, who "disliked plastics, Picasso, sunbathing, and jazz – everything in fact that had happened in his own lifetime". Another pessimistic, comic conservative, Kingsley Amis, called Wharton "The Master" and kept his collected columns in his literary Valhalla, a bookshelf with choice books on drink and literary criticism.

Just like Amis and Waugh, Wharton was a sort of half-insider, half-outsider – his slight distance from the establishment gave him room to be satirical, while his semi-inclusion in it produced a deep affection for it. Peter Simple's fantasy home was Simpleham, a stately home in a prelapsarian state of grace, complete with butler, library, spreading acres and hat-tipping villagers.

The Telegraph cartoon of Peter Simple, by Michael Ffolkes, showed a walrus-moustached, grandee blimp in a deerstalker. In the flesh, Wharton couldn't have been more different. His father was a German-Jewish wool merchant, his mother a Yorkshirewoman; born Michael Nathan, Wharton later borrowed his mother's surname. Educated at Bradford Grammar School, he was rusticated from Lincoln College, Oxford, for throwing a Scotch egg at High Table, and pushing a dismantled sofa out of a window. After a good war – he became Lieutenant-Colonel Wharton – he initially settled into a rickety, boozy life of no great distinction. He worked for the BBC features department, wrote an unsuccessful novel and edited the Football Yearbook: among his articles was the definitive piece on "Some Aspects of the Offside Rule".

Only at the age of 43, with Welch's invitation to write for The Telegraph, did he collide with his glorious fate. For another 50 years, the fantasy poured forth, never growing stale, because it was forever refreshed by news events and Wharton's ever-fertile mind.

I was lucky enough to be among the editors of his column in its last five years – although it never needed editing. Each week, bang on time, a closely-typed fax would arrive, with amendments in his neat, miniature hand. Occasionally, when these were too small to be legible, I'd ring the Wharton household, in a pretty village in the Chilterns. The outspoken, fearless genius of his age was too shy to come to the phone; his charming wife, Susan Moller, clarified his corrections on his behalf.

Nothing dates like journalism but, looking back at Wharton's columns, they never do: they leap from the here-today, gone-tomorrow world of daily news to the eternal Elysian Fields of divine comic fantasy.

Source:

Daily Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/10005884/Michael-Wharton-The-man-who-foresaw-the-way-of-the-world.html>