

Peter N. Miller

“In feather’d briefness sails are fill’d
And wishes fall out as they’re will’d”



Born 13 December 1964, New York City. Current Position: Assistant Professor of History, University of Maryland at College Park. Education: Ph.D., 1990 University of Cambridge. M.A., 1987 Harvard University (History). B.A., 1986 Harvard College (History and Philosophy). Books: *Peiresc's Europe: Learning and Virtue in the Seventeenth Century*. Harvard University Press, in preparation. *Defining the Common Good: Empire, Religion and Philosophy in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. Cambridge University Press, 1994. *Political Writings: Joseph Priestley*. Edited with an introduction, notes, etc. Cambridge University Press, 1993. *The Song of the Soul: Understanding "Poppea"*. London: Royal Musical Association, 1992 (with Iain Fenlon). – Address: 45 East 89th Street, Apt. 9e, New York, NY 10128-1228, USA.

Coming to the Kolleg this year as one of the youngest Fellows and the only one without a job intensified the pleasure of being here. Browsing through the newspapers in the morning, greedily devouring the piles of books that re-appeared daily in the library, or carrying a very late night glass of the house St. Emilion back to my office, I couldn't help feeling how fortunate I was.

From the very first day, when I sat down to page one, the worries and fears that had pursued me all through the previous year seemed to fall away (or at least recede from view). By the last day, the book had been finished and awaited only the final touch. In between lay many very long and very happy days of being freed to think, read, and write. It is the greatest tribute to this institution that it does so much in order to make it easier for scholars to be scholars.

Choosing between the different ways to spend the year was the single most difficult problem that I faced, and one that never disappeared: to write? or read? or seek competence in German? or learn Berlin? I decided

to write. And so, most of the year was blissfully spent sitting in my office surrounded by papers and books and feeling as happy as a child with a limitless supply of desired toys and no bedtime.

I had come to Berlin to work on Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637), an antiquary and polymath who lived in Aix-en-Provence and was the hub of the European learned world during his lifetime. The plan was to finish a book of essays on the redefinition of citizenship in early modern European culture as quickly as possible and then turn to a detailed examination of Peiresc's oriental studies as an instance of the antiquaries' invention of cultural history in the seventeenth century. Aside from a lecture at the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, I had left myself nine months without other professional commitments.

As I began to write, I realized that the two projects were not so distinct. For Peiresc's contemporary celebrity was a reflection of a new ideal of individual excellence in which the political participation that had defined the old ideal of the best man was no longer deemed necessary. The "man of learning" represented, instead, the value of the free mind and the friend. In an earlier book I had explored the redefinition of sovereignty in early modern Europe and in this one I wanted to examine what I assumed had to be a complementary redefinition of the ideal member of political community. It turned out that what I had to say about Peiresc and his image proved exactly this. And so, the book got reconceived, yet again, but happily now for the last time. An introductory *Problemstellung* leads to a biographical chapter that maps out the "Peirescean virtues" for which he was celebrated and which is, in turn, followed by individual chapters devoted to showing how central these virtues were in wider discussions of how to make a civil society. In its broadest terms, this is an inquiry into the model of the best man, or "citizen", at a moment in European history when the ideal of the classical citizen lost its appeal. Looking backward, it could also be described as the pre-history of the eighteenth-century German ideal of *Bildung*.

Although beginning from Peiresc, the book's argument unfolds against the backdrop of European history. This is in large part the result of it being written here. From my desk, I look over my left shoulder and see the lights burning brightly in the library across the Wallotstrasse. Without the patient assistance of Gesine Bottomley, Anja Brockmann, Marianne Buck and Gudrun Rein, my work would look very different. Years of books that had accumulated in a series of "not found" lists were swiftly and systematically rooted out of their dark hiding places and brought to my office. When, after a trip to Auschwitz, I began seeking out obscure Polish and former-GDR publications on the Shoah and its commemoration, they, too, found their melancholy way to the Grunewald.

The intrepid efforts of Eva Hund, a wonderful teacher, overcame my linguistic clumsiness and helped unlock the world of German newspapers and academic speech. As a great lover of newspapers – my preferred airline is Swissair because of the extensive selection of European newspapers carried on board (Sabena is a distant second) – I many times succumbed to the pleasure of a weekend immersed in the previous week's feuilleton sections. Christine von Arnim, Elissa Linke and Linda O'Riordan had to endure long and complex requests for slides and Hans-Georg Lindenberg and Doris Reichel repeated pleas for help. Barbara Sanders, surely the *genius loci*, guided me, as she has so many others, more surely through Berlin than the most detailed guidebook.

Berlin surprised me – from the start. I arrived at Tempelhof airport last October 11 to find a cargo worker sitting atop some of my boxes of books reading from a volume of Peiresc *Correspondence* that had spilled out of another “broken” one. After a brief conversation with him about Peiresc, I was spirited through customs by Herr Claus and brought “home”, thinking all the while that Berlin had to be a pretty amazing place if even baggage-handlers could talk about obscure heroes of the history of scholarship. If not all my Berlinish encounters have been as dazzling, by year's end I had developed a new relationship to a city that I had always approached with trepidation. When I finally made it back to Berlin after a research trip to France that had been timed to get me out before the start of the World Cup, but which ended up exactly coinciding with a series of air, rail, and bus strikes, my first comment to the taxi driver – surprising even me – was how wonderful it was to be back in Berlin. The green-ness of the city, especially here, has been wonderful, and the BVG a source of endless admiration. Where else could one set one's watch to the arrival of a bus? Coming from a city where dirty and decrepit is a recognized aesthetic, I also had no problem feeling at home in the less immaculate parts of town when seeking out congenial cafés and bars in Prenzlauer Berg and the Scheunenviertel or a favorite restaurant almost swallowed up in the temporary wasteland of the northern Tiergarten. I loved the pastries sold on the Unter den Linden during intervals at the Staatsoper – the apple turnovers were best – and then buying the next day's newspapers on the S-Bahn platform while making my way home. An idyll of urban civility that I will long cherish. As I will the long dinners on our loggia, on the few days this spring when it did not rain, overlooking the Koenigssee, Teufelsberg and that distant, delicate Funkturm. Wolf Biermann's guided trips back to the GDR, over long lunches and longer dinners, took me into a world that was until then only dimly visible. There is something so riveting about contact with living history that it makes one realize just how much is lost by being forced to rely on mute sources for understanding the

past. My encounter with *Mohn* and *Kümmel*, two childhood tastes that I had never acquired, was a visceral reminder of a cultural connection to Eastern Europe that was destroyed, by people living and working in Berlin. Many times have I walked these streets, lost in thought, only to bump up against a reminder of that horror and wake, as if from a dream, in that past.

I leave the Wissenschaftskolleg, and Berlin, with so many memories of happy times, engrossing conversations, and the easy pleasure of amicable conviviality – like that last evening spent *en famille* in front of the television watching the World Cup final. My boxes and bags are packed and bulging, but heaviest of all, and surely hardest to discharge, is a debt of gratitude to my fellow Fellows and all those who work here for having made this such a marvelous year.