

Valentine story

Another Valentine's day has come and gone, prompting me to consider the history of choosing a Valentine and sending greetings or gifts to the chosen person.

The custom dates, in Britain, to the 15th century, but most references to it are vague and unsatisfactory. Despite this, John Brand in his "Observations on the popular antiquities of Great Britain", first compiled in 1795, offers a surprisingly wide range of notes. There are several candidates for the saint who is commemorated on 14 February, but the generally acknowledged person is the bishop of Terni who was martyred in the year 270. The custom itself may be a relic of the old Roman celebration of Lupercalia (strictly 15 February), in which the upbringing of Romulus and Remus by a wolf was remembered.



A 14th century proverb tells us: "On St Valentine all the birds of the air in couples do join." And John Donne in 1613 remarked: "Hail, Bishop Valentine, whose day this is / All the aire is thy Diocese." John Ray the naturalist cited a proverb that "On Valentine's day will a good goose lay".

All these indications of the association of 14 February with the amatory instinct have led to many local and more widespread customs practised by young people, although these seem in recent years to be restricted to the sending of greetings cards and bouquets of flowers, the commercial interests having decided that profits could be made by exploiting the idea.

One staid old custom has been to stitch five bay leaves to a pillow, one to each corner and one in the centre to enable the sleeper to dream of a sweetheart. A less attractive notion is to boil an egg, remove the yolk, add salt and eat the result, shell and all, at bedtime, without speaking or drinking.

Writing names, real or otherwise, on paper and drawing lots for a partner was once common. Alternatively, the first person one met in a public place on the morning of 14 February was one's valentine.

Some years ago, children wandered from house to house knocking and collecting pence for the same cause. An old English ballad recommends lasses to pray cross-legged to the saint to bring them good luck.

Early doodle

In *Science* for 11 January is an account of an intriguing discovery in the Blombos cave in South Africa. The deposits in this cave have been dated as being some 77,000 years old, and have yielded two fragments of red ochre which are engraved with geometric cross-hatching. What they are intended to represent is not obvious, but experts claim they are evidence of symbolic records made by humans.

The find supports the theory that modern human behaviour has its roots earlier than has previously been thought, and that *Homo sapiens* made his first appearance in Africa, perhaps 130,000 years ago, before spreading into Europe and Asia.

There have been doubts in the anthropological world over the length of the gap between the first recorded anatomical humans and the origin of modern human behaviour. Little evidence has hitherto been found for early hunting and fishing techniques, let alone the creation of elaborate tools and the symbolic expression we call art.

The cave paintings of the upper palaeolithic period in Europe are only some 40,000 years old. The ochre engravings unearthed in 1999 and 2000 in South Africa suggest that symbolic representation is much older than that. The fragments discovered are 53mm and 76mm respectively in length, and bear cross hatches traversed by horizontal lines, and constituting an intentionally inscribed abstract geometric pattern. There can be no doubt about their antiquity, confirmed by dating of charred stone tools in the accompanying soil layer.

Since the cave in question overlooks the Indian Ocean and its inhabitants must have had a rich fish diet available to them, it has been suggested that this advantage may have advanced the creative instincts of the inhabitants, and caused them to doodle their designs earlier than their fellows elsewhere.

Paying the price

No man is really cultured who does not prefer culture to power, to fame, to money, to prosperous practical activity.
—John Cowper Powys: 'The meaning of culture' (1930).

Tempus fugit

Time, when we try to come to terms with it, is a strangely elusive and protean quality. It is probably one of our major errors that we allow ourselves to be obsessed by it and see it in terms of profit or regulation of our acts.

In the Middle Ages people in authority distinguished between ecclesiastical time, related to ritual and ceremony, merchant time, essentially a quantitative measure of commercial transactions, and working time, applied to the labourer and dependent upon weather and length of days. Time related to religious observances might vary according to the relative positions of the heavenly bodies. By contrast, eternity, where time had no function, was simply its cessation. To illustrate these concepts it was customary to depict allegorical figures on canvas, tapestry or stone.

Philosophically, reality lies in the past and the present, and holds no place in the future. Time for the philosophers is the dimension of change as distinct from that of space, and any change in space must be associated with the flight of time.

Despite all the attention we devote to machines for setting time as the measure of action, and trying to ensure that everyone plays the game by the rules set by the machines, time remains an elusive quality. Inanimate matter shows little change over time, although we know that vast quantities of time have gone into producing it in the first place. Biological organisms are another matter, and suffer often alarming change over short periods, witness the impact on ageing, interactions between self and other living things, and on ill-defined rhythms which affect health and welfare.

What strikes me as a highly fortunate circumstance is that our political masters, or those who fancy in their pride that they are such, can do nothing to control time to their own ends. If they could freeze or reverse it our lives would cease to be worth living. Consider the relationship between time and space. A material object can exist in the precise space occupied by another material object, provided that the two do not occupy it at the same instant in time. Just suppose that some clever manager or spin-doctor could devise a scheme for shunting the time-scale so that two or more people, or a person and a lorry, were enabled to occupy the same location in space at the same time. The outcome does not bear thinking about.

And if many distinct fragments of matter were squeezed into the same temporal frame there might well be something resembling the original Big Bang for us to remember in our past, if we retained anything to remember with.