

Odds fellows

Academic ideas about racing certainties

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Guy Griffith and Michael
Oakeshott

A GUIDE TO THE CLASSICS

Or how to pick the Derby winner

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When Lord Dacre of Glanton (otherwise Hugh Trevor-Roper) was Master of Peterhouse at Cambridge thirty years ago, that sceptic punctiliously attended chapel, where a volume lay in front of his stall with gilt "Prayer Book" on its morocco binding. Within lay the beloved text of the *Aeneid*, which the Master could peruse to while away sermons. The title of *A Guide to the Classics* is a comparable little joke, and it does not, as its name might suggest, treat of Virgil and his peers.

It was published in 1936 by two young dons at that same university, both Fellows of Caius. Guy Griffith was indeed a Classicist, an ancient historian, who had published *The Mercenaries of the Hellenistic World* the previous year. Michael Oakeshott was then a historian, but in the process of turning towards historiography, and then philosophy. By the time of his death he had become, the *Daily Telegraph* claimed, "the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill – or even Burke".

The purpose of their book is found in its less playful subtitle, "How to pick the Derby winner". Noel Annan made the somewhat surprising claim that "The key of Oakeshott is to be found in that little book on the Derby . . . Oakeshott was the Pascal of political theory: *il faut parier*". In his foreword to this reissue, the political journalist Peter Osborne likewise claims that "germs of Oakeshott's later philosophy can be detected in *A Guide to the Classics*", since racing illustrates his definition of voluntary self-governing association.

However that may be, this sometimes

rather whimsical book by two enthusiastic racing men is inevitably outdated, but still entertaining and readable. Like many punters, the authors thought they had a method. Breeding and form are the chief factors when assessing a horse's chances, although there are others, such as "the reaction of particular horses to hard or soft going or to a special type of course". If anything they don't make enough of that and the fact that Epsom, where the Derby is run, is very "special", with its winding horseshoe, sharp turn at Tattenham Corner, and downhill straight with left-hand camber. The Derby is part of our island story, but no one today would choose Epsom as the course for our greatest three-year-old race, rather than much fairer tracks like Ascot or York.

Simple elimination removes the horses which "cannot win". The most obvious clue

to those who can is that they were sired by previous Classic winners, although Griffith and Oakeshott recognize that there were exceptions even in their own era – which is now a long time ago. They say that "it is better for a colt to be 'good' rather than brilliant" as a two-year-old, but young colts, if not fillies, have undoubtedly become more precocious in the eighty years since they wrote.

How does their method work in current practice? This year's Derby winner was indeed sired by another, but came as a complete shock all the same. The 7-2 favourite was Cracksman, trained by John Gosden and sired by the brilliant Frankel, undefeated in fourteen races and the best horse seen in England this century. He was a Classic winner, but in the Two Thousand Guineas, run over a mile at Newmarket a month before the Derby, and he never raced over the Derby distance of a mile-and-a-half. Cracksman finished third, to confirm what the authors say about the danger of using the Guineas as a guide.

Second was Cliffs of Moher at 5-1, sired by Galileo, winner of both Epsom and Irish Derbies in 2001 and since then the outstanding stallion of his age. But Cliffs of Moher was three-quarters of a length behind the winner, his stable companion Wings of

Eagles, the two of them among no fewer than six horses in a field of eighteen trained in Co Tipperary by A. P. O'Brien. And Wings of Eagles was yet another Derby winner sired by a previous winner, Pour Moi in 2011.

But he started at 40-1 at Epsom last June, was barely backed, and was what's known as a skinner, or pure profit for the bookmakers. Despite his breeding, Griffith and Oakeshott would probably have written off his chances: *A Guide to the Classics* takes account of form as well as breeding, and Wings of Eagles's record before Epsom was five races and just one win, in an auction maiden in Killarney. And that really is not what we call Derby-winning form. The real lesson is that you never can tell.

In one other passage which shows its date, the authors say that the fifth Classic, the St Leger, over a mile and three-quarters at Doncaster in September, was the most important race after the Derby for breeding purposes. But the days have long gone when staying horses were at a premium. Nowadays Leger winners are at a discount in the bloodstock market. All the same, this year's Leger did confirm the Griffith-Oakeshott thesis: not only was Capri, the winner, by Galileo, but the second and third, Crystal Ocean and Stradivarius, were both by Sea the Stars, one more Derby winner. Maybe it's time for a new *Guide to the Classics*, looking hard at the way in which, with sought-after stallions now covering 200 mares a year, five times as many as a generation ago, a few blood lines are becoming ever more concentrated, with long-term consequences we can only guess at.