

Introduction

“Grow old with me, the best is yet to be” — so pleaded the Victorian poet Robert Browning in his mile-long poem “Rabbi ben Ezra”. Little could he have imagined that, some one and a half centuries later, the former 101st Archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Donald Coggan, would be overheard at a dinner to proclaim, with a silver-haired voice, how excited he was at the thought of death.

While this is not a universally echoed opinion, ageing, as distinct from dying, has become fashionable because many more people partake of the experience than was true only 100 years ago. This is due largely to medical advances, but also to the recognition that the rate of ageing has become partly controllable, at least amongst relatively affluent populations. Life-expectancy has increased faster than health-expectancy, which is why Browning’s hope may take some time to reach fulfilment.

The object of this slim volume is to assist mutual introductions between those occupying opposite poles of life. It is intended for the pre-elderly from some 20 years old or under, for grandparents who might like to discuss suitable sections with the younger generations (but see Section 1), and also for intermediate age-groups. The generation gap, such as it is, is fuelled by grandparents having forgotten that they were rebels when young, and by youngsters being unable to imagine that they will ever grow old. Otherwise they would not allow older ladies to offer their seats on the bus or in the underground to wobbly old men.

Much of the world is still ageist, witness the costly fixture of retirement ages in many countries. In the United States of America,

this particular voodoo was broken when a Californian academic took his employers to court to fight enforced retirement — and won. The United Kingdom legislature has passed anti-ageist legislation, which has merely tinkered with the problem. It is likely, however, that, if life-expectancy keeps increasing for a while, the distribution of political power will make itself felt in favour of anti-ageism.

The burden of the text is that, while the ageing process as such is at present unstoppable, it may be possible to reduce its individual rate of progress by sheer willpower. The downside of this message is that it is unlikely to be of any value if we start modifying our lifestyle only when we retire or when we are 60 or 65, or however many years old. This is why the pre-elderly of 20 years of age or more are being addressed: by these ages the awareness of the need for an investment to be made in one's future should be apparent. While, therefore, early awareness is desirable, the early middle age can still bestow benefits. The first part of the text is intended for those who seek to know, whereas the second one from Chapter Sixteen onwards — a mere appendix — may interest those who also wish to delve more deeply into the problem. But it is hoped that both parts may prove to be of interest.

Good luck to all of us.

The following have helped me a great deal, and I am much indebted to them: Ms S. Haynes, Dr G. Hipkins, Professor W. Hodos, Dr K. Lowton, Dr J. Preston, Professor H. Ripps, Mr J. Robinson and Mr L. Sucharov. Mr. T. Weale drew Figures 1.1, 1.2, 1.3, 15.2 and 22.5.

I would also like to thank the original publishers for kindly allowing me to reproduce in this book some of their figures. In some cases, it was not possible to contact the editors, and I hope they will accept my sincere apologies. Should contact be established, due acknowledgment will, of course, be made in any future edition, or reprint, of this book.

R. W., 2009