

# TLS

THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

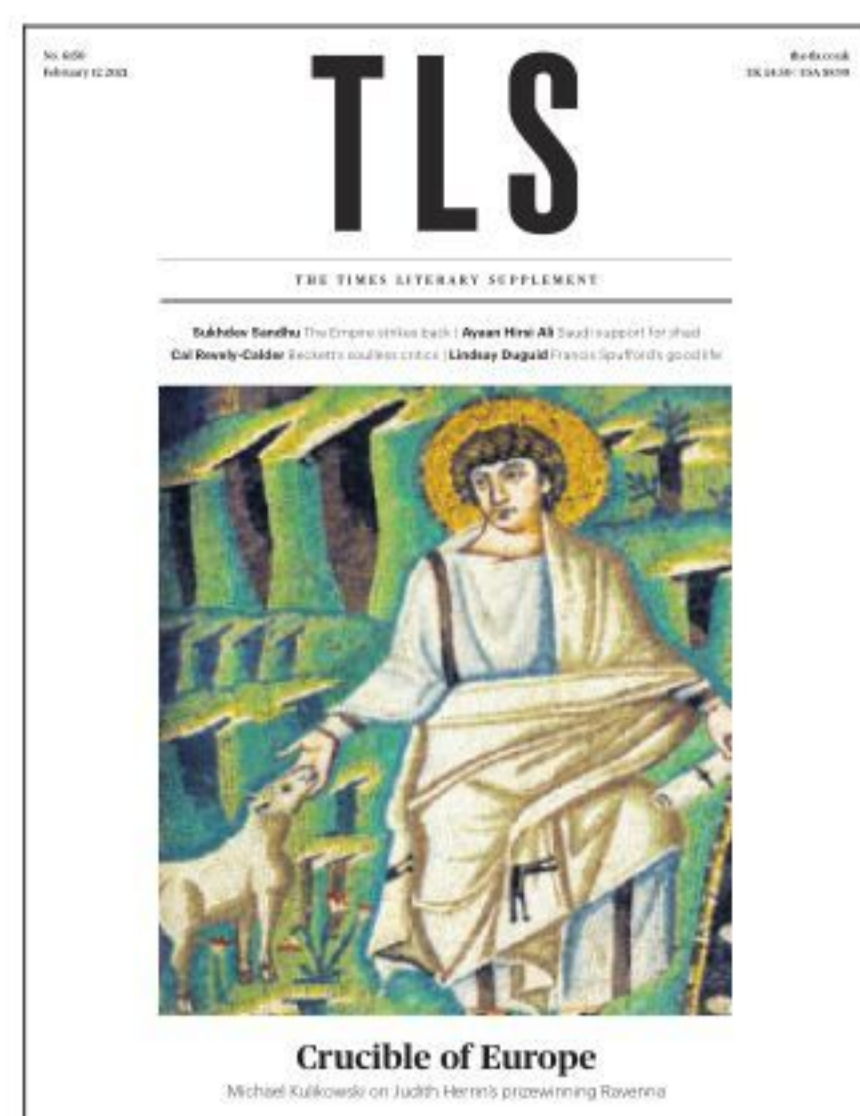
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## Crucible of Europe

Michael Kulikowski on Judith Herrin's prizewinning 'Ravenna'





Detail of a mosaic of Moses in the Basilica di San Vitale in Ravenna © Gordon Sinclair/Alamy

## In this issue

Readers of the *TLS* looking for distraction during the lockdown may care to stray from the bodice-ripping excitements of *Bridgerton* to the snail's pace of Netflix's *The Dig*, a screen adaptation of John Preston's novel about the excavation of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. In the film, an amateur archaeologist proves to the professionals that civilization survived the Romans' departure from Britain. The discovery of sophisticated Anglo-Saxon metalwork and the unearthing of treasures traded across the continent in the early seventh century show, in the words of one character, that "the Dark Ages are no longer dark". On the eve of the Second World War we are reminded that the good that men and women do may live on after them; the past gives hope for the future.

Set in the same historical period as Sutton Hoo, Judith Herrin's *Ravenna* (which won the Pol Roger Duff Cooper prize last week) broadens the argument. By her account, the city was "the melting pot of Europe", long after the last emperor in the West was sent packing by the barbarians. It was the hinge between the old Roman empire, the refounded Rome of Byzantium and the second new Rome of Charlemagne, who plundered its monuments for his capital at Aachen. On a visit to Ravenna in 1877 "where Dante sleeps, where Byron loved to dwell", the young Oscar Wilde found "no sound of life or joy" in what had become a backwater. But today's traveller will delight in the golden mosaics of the Basilica of San Vitale, testimony to a civilization that flourished from the fifth to the eighth century. Herrin's book, reviewed for us by Michael Kulikowski, is a welcome addition to a golden era of scholarship devoted to late antiquity and the early Middle Ages in Europe, which took off with the publication Peter Brown's biography of Augustine of Hippo in 1967.

The Italian humanists first invented the myth of the Middle Ages, when civilization was supposedly vanquished by barbarism. That error aside, James Hankins, the author of *Virtue Politics*, praises the nobility of their elitist but meritocratic project "to exclude immoral people from political life". Machiavelli thought more brutish talents were required. *Virtue Politics* may be "the greatest study ever written of Renaissance political thought", says our reviewer, Jeffrey Collins. I have enjoyed it too. Professor Collins concludes that "any humane reader will find it difficult to evade some embarrassment when measuring the humanists' political aspirations against the transactional, interest-driven, 'neutral' spirit of modern liberalism". What sort of education do our budding leaders get?

**MARTIN IVENS**  
Editor

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# Curates, cretins, critics

Saving Beckett from Beckett Studies

## CAL REVELY-CALDER

### THE MAKING OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S FIN DE PARTIE/ENDGAME

The Beckett Digital Manuscript Project,  
Volume 7

DIRK VAN HULLE AND SHANE WELLER,  
EDITORS

376pp. Bloomsbury. Paperback, £29.99.

### THE NEW SAMUEL BECKETT STUDIES JEAN-MICHEL RABATÉ, EDITOR

280pp. Cambridge University Press. £74.99 (US  
\$99.99).

### BECKETT'S POLITICAL IMAGINATION EMILIE MORIN

276pp. Cambridge University Press. Paperback,  
£22.99 (US \$29.99).

### SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE VISUAL ARTS CONOR CARVILLE

272pp. Cambridge University Press. £75 (US  
\$99.99).



**M**Y DISENCHANTMENT with Beckett Studies was settled at a conference in Antwerp, when, one night outside a bar, a senior male professor at a distinguished university began to throw chairs at a female peer. Indoors, one of his colleagues suggested some motives for this, smoking casually as the graduate students ran out to break it up. Drink had been taken; there was an affair, long ago. She, as it happens, had just been overlooked for a senior post at the same university. Later, those grads would be advised not to work with her on a forthcoming critical book. It's unclear, connecting all these sentences, where to place the implied "because". Power is versatile like that.

Academic books are about power in at least two obvious ways. They reflect the writer's need to acquire it, and they embody, or attempt to, the state of having it. They present, in other words, as both submissions for and proofs of success, both of which are performative. When you read one, you're entering the prism of someone's power fantasy. Like most of us, academics don't have much power, but few people have to publish the fact, and never so often as this lot do. In Britain, for instance, the Research Excellence Framework haunts their careers, by giving their "outputs" official scores. Stop publishing, and it's death by REF. There are limited resources on offer, and the efficient inherit the earth. Scholarly prose - by which I mean the secondary works that students are told to read - is therefore a battery of compromise. It doesn't encourage the first person, nor a self-reflexive mood, nor a variety of styles.

Beckett Studies is a notoriously massive field, so large that nobody has attempted a critical bibliography in the English language for half a century. Students who work on Beckett's texts - his plays, his prose, his under-read poems - are obliged to care about the bits of that morass that pertain to their own research; this obligation is ironic, because most of the academic "output" doesn't read as though "caring" was involved. This is no personal slight on the Beckettians I've met. They're often interesting; they're knowledgeable; they go to bars in Antwerp (and most of them behave). The graduate students in particular, some of whom were given advice on choosing friends, have weirder and richer ideas than ever appear in print. Their writing, however,

bears no resemblance to the way they talk or think. It's astonishing, viewed from outside, that this distance, which would be a failure in almost any interaction premised on human warmth, is somehow a virtue in literary-critical work. (It's equally astonishing how many people inside academia treat this as both an obvious state of affairs and a strange thing to bring up.) And the structures grow rusty as well: a field in which rituals like the REF hold sway won't lead to a diversity of either power-holders or written idioms. Difference only gets in the way.

The situation in the Beckett world may be worse because it's larger, or it may be more visible because his writing deals in many-mindedness and inconclusiveness, two things at which anxious scholars don't (and cannot profitably) excel. Watching one of Beckett's late plays, for instance, we are looking at figures who move in patterns about the stage, or speak enigmatic, fragmentary lines - actions that seem repetitive and odd - and because the best frame of reference we have is the behaviour of normal people, creatures like ourselves, those actions seem at the same time close and far away. They demand explanation at the same time as they resist it. One option, visible in any departmental library, is to assert that the work "represents" a concept, a theory or an idea. Probably it's nihilism, or something to do with Deleuze. Alternatively, you could take the difficulty as the point, and have a good look at yourself. All ethics is grounded in self-scrutiny, in thinking again on how we form judgements and put them into words. ("Self-perception", as Beckett once told *Vogue* magazine, "is the most frightening of all human observations.") Remembering her work on the late play *Footfalls*, in which a woman walks back and forth, the actress Billie Whitelaw said that she didn't need it explained: "I'm not interested in what the plays are about, to be absolutely honest. That's an academic's job. I get a bit nervous when people get too reverent about Beckett's work". And it's salutary to remember that none of us is first touched by these plays on the grounds of what they're "about". Instead, you encounter something, a visual and auditory spectacle that's moving, or powerful, or discomfiting - pick your adjective - in a way that is hard to define. With Beckett, you are always verging on errors, and you may not be

**Teresita Garcia-Suro as Nell and Alan Mandell as Nagg; Endgame, the Young Vic, 1980**

able to return to your first impressions once you have moulded them into words.

To the extent that Beckett's work is "about" anything, it is about knowing what not to say. It deserves a critical style that is self-critical, and reinvents itself from scratch. Certainties are of zero interest; what person lives in certainty about the way they feel? But the dominant projects in Beckett Studies haven't developed along those lines; the emotion and soul of literary criticism have been professionalized away. Around two or three decades ago, the field took a gradual "turn" in which interpretation, freewheeling or prim, was superseded as the big-ticket item by archival scholarship. The centre of gravity for this new approach became the Beckett International Foundation at the University of Reading, and the Beckett Archive there; its progeny is the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, based at the University of Antwerp and scheduled to be finished in 2036. The BDMP groups Beckett's texts into twenty-six "research modules", and in "All the Variants", a chapter of Jean-Michel Rabaté's anthology *The New Samuel Beckett Studies*, Mark Nixon sets out the goal: to publish "all of Beckett's manuscripts in facsimile and in transcription", both online and in twenty-six books. The result, Nixon explains, will be an "entire map of Beckett's creative endeavours", one that "enables us, forces us, even, to think differently about the entire canon".

That claim is hardly true. Maybe it is easier to believe such things if you have a vested interest in their success, if (for instance) you co-direct the project to which you attribute such incredible power. Nor are claims like "forcing" made by the BMDP in print, which grasps that individual readers are liable, and free, to think for themselves. For example, in *The Making of Fin de partie/Endgame*, the seventh volume of the series, Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller chastise Giuseppina Restivo, who refers to a bunch of Beckett's fragments as "different starts" that would lead, by 1957, to the play that is being discussed. Say no to teleology!, Van Hulle and Weller cry. "The longer [her] list becomes, the more it can be interpreted as a silent reproach to Beckett: why did it take him so long to write *Fin de partie* if he already had most of the play's ingredients in 1950?" They call this "backshadowing", after Michael André Bernstein, and say they are "sideshadow-

*Cal Revely-Calder writes and edits at the Telegraph. He is working on a book on art and embarrassment*



ing” instead, by which you maintain “an awareness and wariness of the impulse towards backshadowing as a way of creating meaning”. Because they are smart like that, their “awareness” saves them from drawing flimsy connections between the drafts and the final text. Unfortunately, their refusal to believe in fate deprives them of hope as well. In their introduction, writing of the tweaks Beckett made to the play - when he directed productions of it, for example - they lament his “failing attempt to achieve a definite ending; that is, a final, *definitive* version”. But this is beside the point. Beckett could have revised the published play, but did not. There is, therefore, a “definitive” text: it is called *Endgame*, and it sits on my shelf.

Genetic criticism explains nothing, and never has. At its best, it presents a series of facts, like Lego bricks, with which you assemble what you will. The aim should be to fashion something interesting, but the bricks are rarely interesting themselves, except as trivia. A reliance on heavy redrafting doesn’t mean that the drafts themselves accrue weight. This is one of the stranger beliefs that scholars maintain, though it also fuels scholarship. Good for them, but quantity does not entail quality - it can just make for a fuller bin. It may change your appreciation of *Endgame*, a play about a curious pair living in a near-empty room, to learn, for example, that there survives a fragmentary dialogue called “Louis & Blanc”, held at the Houghton Library at Harvard, which features a duo jabbering about their maladies and mishearing each other’s puns. It is interesting to me, though perhaps not to you, while Van Hulle and Weller are unsure. “Blanc and Louis”, they write, “fit in with [Beckett’s] series of post-war decrepit characters”; the dialogue “adds another dimension to Beckett’s post-war notion of the pseudocouple”; the couple are “personifying a decomposing humanity”. The first and second of these phrases are windy, and the last is just hot air.

Prior to the BDMP, the only genetic Becketts in print were three “variorum bilingual editions” (published from 1993 to 2001) and the four-volume *Theatrical Notebooks* (1993 to 1995). The latter are common objects of study in the anglophone world, far below the ivory tower; I remember the *Notebooks* for *Waiting for Godot* from my A-level English class. They present the notes that Beckett kept when invited to direct his plays; the notes are then applied to the published works, and “revised” versions are offered up. A lot is made of these gussied-up texts, and there is often grumbling that the Beckett Estate won’t have them published as stand-alones. Stanley Gontarski, who edited two of the *Notebooks*, has branded the stance “historically irresponsible”, complaining that “readers, scholars and theatrical practitioners should have, in fact deserve, easy access” to them. (“Deserve” is the language of rights: you have to marvel at pique like that.) And yet, even if Beckett approved the publication of the notebooks, complete with “amended” texts, he didn’t know that the *Theatrical Notebooks* would be quite so fetishized. His changes were neither singular nor consistent. When sending an edited script to the director Marek Kędzierski in 1981, he mentioned his “cuts and simplifications” and noted: “To another director they may not seem desirable”. If you see someone change their mind, and you think that this change must be fixed in print, you should meet more human beings.

With Beckett, as with several of his twentieth-century peers, we already have the texts, but we risk becoming distracted by shiny paratextual stuff. The latter is secondary material: it should inform, but not obsess. As Christopher Ricks said in 2002 at the British Library: “These days *The Waste Land* as published in 1922 may find itself characterized as Eliot’s somewhat unsuccessful attempt to write the manuscript. We might do better to give priority to the study of revision as a means, not an end, the end usually being a deeper understanding of the final work”. Two years after that, in an issue of the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Van Hulle’s article “Genetic Beckett Studies” watered a budding field. But in it,



Van Hulle was wary: “Manuscript analysis cannot reveal what Beckett wanted to write, only what he has written”. (Ricks wouldn’t disagree; he might only add that the meaning of “written” changes on publication, after which there can be no true going back.) That should be pinned above the desk of anyone who works on manuscripts; its spirit of nuance and caution is a rebuke to (say) the conceit of Pierre-Marc de Biasi at how, thanks to genetic critics like him, “the work of art becomes interpretable through the very movement that gave birth to it”. Only peculiar groups of peculiar people - those in seminar rooms, not theatres - are able to believe this, because it isn’t how we experience art. “Louis & Blanc” has zero bearing on how a play such as *Endgame* affects the audience who watch it in the communal dark, or read it alone at home. This kind of information is an elaborate parlour game. Go back to the finished artwork and try to use your head.

The difficulty, with Beckett, is in knowing what that use should be. When asked, for a theatre programme in 1967, whether *Endgame* posed its audience a riddle, the man himself replied: “Neither riddles nor solutions. For such serious matters, you can always go to universities, churches, *cafés de commerce* etc”. This neat little snipe is mentioned in *The Making of “Fin de partie”*, and it’s a tribute to the institutional power of scholarship that such quotations may be co-opted into critical books, without students feeling able to say: *If that’s what Beckett thought, why do you make us read books as dull as these?* In *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett* (2007), Rónán McDonald describes the field as harrowed by choice:

Another reason why Beckett has prompted so much critical fascination is because his work can be persuaded to fit into any number of models or systems. Beckett’s stripped stages and rootless contexts have resulted in his enlistment into many critical or theoretical movements over the last fifty years. It was almost as if the deracinated settings turned Beckett’s work into a mirror in which a multitude of critical methods and schools could find their own reflections.

There is something wry about “persuaded”, “enlistment”, “almost as if”; McDonald sounds like a lawyer describing a chain-gang. “The attitude of veneration”, he continues, “may well have hobbled the judicious scepticism that healthy literary criticism sometimes needs.” That “judicious scepticism” is a responsibility, not just a resource, if those trying to make sense of Beckett’s work want to see more than

**Samuel Beckett during rehearsals for *Waiting for Godot*, with Stefan Wigger (left) and Horst Bollmann; Schiller Theater, Berlin, 1975**

their “own reflections”. As one of Stanley Cavell’s most elegant lines, in *The Claim of Reason*, runs: “Narcissus can question himself, but he cannot give himself an answer he can care about”.

Self-doubt is hard to market, and yet a market is what we have. In *The New Samuel Beckett Studies*, which surveys the map of scholarship today, plenty is said about genetic and archival work. The essays on “hermeneutic codes” are grouped together at the end, as if interpreting texts no longer needed to be the aim. The mood in part one, “the expanded canon”, is as high as a kite, and everyone believes. Van Hulle extols the machinery behind the BDMP, saying it’ll “check, nuance and fine-tune” our critical “narratives”. Marjorie Perloff turns up to cite herself nearly 20 per cent of the time. Jean-Michel Rabaté says that we are enjoying a “textual revolution”, and “the corpus of Beckett’s works that we read today has little in common with the Beckett canon of just a decade ago”. The enthusiasm is corporate, and the sentences are dire. (Perloff: “Here two letters, both of them often cited but difficult to parse, are germane”.) This is an anthology in which literary texts are used as resources, and research is a colourless form of perpetual industry.

Compare, instead, two books that hope to tell you about Beckett’s world without travestying his work: Conor Carville’s *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* and Emilie Morin’s *Beckett’s Political Imagination*. The former deals with Beckett’s immersion in visual art, especially during his trip to Germany in 1936-7, and the latter asks how his literary texts might be linked to the political contexts in which they were born. Morin’s project (an excerpt from which appears in *The New Samuel Beckett Studies*) is the more obviously fraught of the two. People are forever saying that imaginative literature is really about politics, but it rarely turns out to be an interesting belief. Luckily, she is reticent in the end: “Beckett’s densely allusive texts cannot be assimilated to a coherent historical thesis”. Nor could the things he said. He told Alan Reid, for instance, that he’d joined the Resistance during the Second World War because he saw Jews wearing the yellow star. In France, Morin points out, this didn’t happen until “shortly before Beckett’s cell was dismantled”. He said something different to James Knowlson, his biographer: he’d seen the Jews being rounded up in Paris’s Parc des Princes. Too late again, says Morin, and the venue can’t be right. She gestures at the stumbles of post-war France, dealing with Vichy and collaboration and a nation that hadn’t always resisted; she suggests that Beckett’s memory might have lost its way amid an outbreak of collective guilt. But she won’t say how conscious the writer was, and has no desire to blame. One of the best lines from the conference I attended in Antwerp was by John Pilling: “I think Beckett lied a lot to us scholars. He was a difficult man”. (Knowlson himself, in the audience, agreed.) This need not be a judgement. People are always lying and trying to forget; it helps them to survive.

In politics, it transpires, Beckett was as slippery as his work. He disliked explaining his role in the Resistance, and only donated to one political party: the South African ANC. “It is somewhat bewildering”, Morin says, “that Beckett could consider, with the same ease, dedicating a year to political filmmaking in Moscow and spending six months wandering around German cities and museums bound by Nazi decrees. Peculiar forms of displacement and substitution are at work in his change of heart.” That lovely sentence is matched by a series of careful hinges between text and context, which she uses when she knows that she shouldn’t say too much. The play *Rough for Theatre II*, for example, depicting two men who expound on the sins of a third, was finished in 1976, and thus was “intimately related to ongoing debates” about what the French spooks had done in Algeria. “The shadow of torture looms over the proceedings”, she writes. “Looms” is perfect: so much, but no more. Morin is as cautious with the word “absent” in Beckett’s late-1940s prose, at a time when anyone deported from French soil and yet to return was categorized that way. As



Eric Griffiths once put it: “Knowing the circumstances of the writer at the time of writing need not amount to knowing the circumstances of the writing”. Morin doesn’t say that anything “means” anything else, much less “refers” or “represents”. All she’s seeking is “subtle continuities”.

Carville, too, depicts a writer who didn’t aim to be in one mind. Beckett’s interests in art were catholic, ranging from ancient Egyptian statuary through to contemporary painting, via Quattrocento frescoes and plenty more besides. His opinions on art “draw on disparate, sometimes contradictory, sources at different times”. Carville is good, if a little stiff, on his uninterest in pinning down: “Beckett has a very strong conviction of the autonomy of the art object as something remote from considerations of both value and judgement. The artwork blocks judgement completely, resists it, scrambles the synthesising powers of the imagination”. We are given the obvious reference points, from the *Three Dialogues* (1949), a chat with Georges Duthuit about contemporary art, to artists who were Beckett’s close friends, such as Bram van Velde and Avigdor Arikha. But Carville wants to treat Beckett as a viewer of art whose way of seeing is worth our time. Art criticism doesn’t often have language to lean on, and there are points where this book becomes vague; for instance, “it is the act of looking at a painting that forms both the intimate core and ultimate horizon of [Beckett’s] art”, though art has neither horizons nor cores. On the other hand, we learn of Beckett’s eye for paintings of figures’ backs, and his inconstant choosy heart, at one point loving Van Gogh and Cézanne, and later letting them go. This is a writer, we are told, who “looks consistently for antithesis and undecidability”. And, like Morin, Carville doesn’t draw leaden connections to Beckett’s literary work. There is no overarching thesis here, only the story of an imaginative man, rendered through descriptions and opinions that are precisely and modestly held.

At their best, then, both Carville’s and Morin’s books are worth reading because they know the limits of critical work: that it is a matter of personal interest, and that texts are not seams to mine. An encounter with a literary work is a transfer of care: the care invested in it, the care it can inspire. What is disciplined about each of those books (they are surveys, and do not over-explain) outweighs what is familiar and disappointing (their prose can be baggy, their voices aloof). If Beckett’s work needs scholars at all, it needs those who live by the first words he published, in the essay “Dante ... Bruno. Vico .. Joyce” (1929): “The danger is in the neatness of identifications”. Many books on Beckett seem occasioned by professional need; they are so remote from the strangeness and charm of the subject they apparently chose. If you doubt this, and you are not paid to read Beckett’s work, try to remember when you last wanted to pick up a secondary source. This is a world in dialogue with itself.

And it isn’t because the researchers want it that way; certainly not the younger ones, who have more interesting minds, who might want a different state of affairs, and do not benefit from the one that exists. Instead, it is because their industry is parasitic on their intellectual life. If graduate students and junior academics were sure of their salaries and career paths, and didn’t feel bound to conform to intellectual trends that are set by a coterie, a field like Beckett Studies might slow to a crawl. There would be more critical work, meaning thinking - meaning imagination, experiments, fun - and less “output” to show for it. But today, as Fredric Jameson puts it, knowledge is there to be capitalized on. “The second part of the life of the successful entrepreneur”, he writes in *An American Utopia*, “is that of the businessman, the exploiter of the invention.” He points at Edison, Ford and Disney, capitalists supreme, then adds: “One might want to extrapolate that into other lines of work as well, such as academic specialisation”. Deadpan, sad and true. This is how it works. Take a dead man’s work, create a niche - then get out there and sell yourself. ■

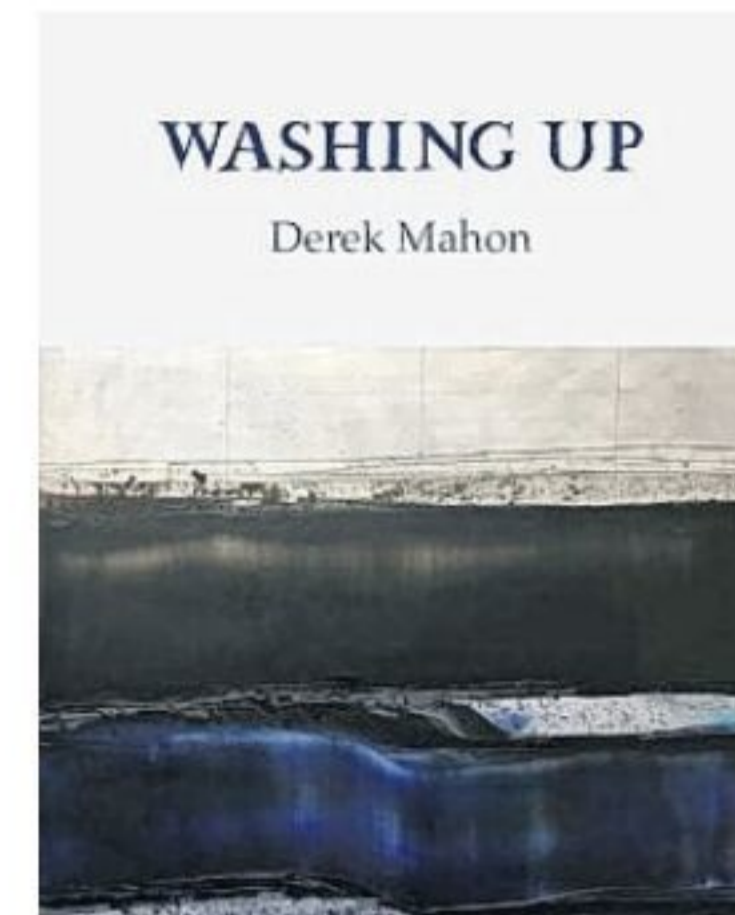
# So long the sensuous visions

Derek Mahon’s last collection

**JUSTIN QUINN**

**WASHING UP  
DEREK MAHON**

93pp. Gallery Press. €18.50  
(paperback €12.50).



**D**EREK MAHON DIED ON October 1, 2020. *Washing Up*, which was published a few weeks later, is his final book of poems.

When I began reading Mahon’s work in the early 1990s, he was already said to be “washed up”. Little of his work had been published since *The Hunt by Night* (1982). Soon, however, came *The Hudson Letter* (1995) and *The Yellow Book* (1997), long poems in heroic couplets that extended the range of the verse-letters which had appeared in

Justin Quinn’s most recent collection of poems is *Shallow Seas*, 2020. He works at the University of West Bohemia

previous collections. There is a lot of this work and opinion is divided as to its quality. Hugh Haughton has written well about it, but John Redmond, in an article on those earlier epistolary poems, remarked that “when he is writing his verse-letters Mahon is writing against the best part of his poetic nature”. These are works in which he does not successfully deal with “the struggle between low-key observation and visionary grandeur”.

Redmond’s article, “Wilful Inconsistency: Derek Mahon’s Verse-Letters” (1994), anticipated the flaws that would dog Mahon’s work in his later years. In *Life on Earth* (2008) and *An Autumn Wind* (2010), the poet vamps interminably, recycling turns of phrase and image that had once made thousands of readers catch their breath. Much here is modish ideology: high finance is bad, we have to get back to nature, and as for the internet ... It’s all true, of course, but that truth, while it spurred him to write, stymied his best instincts as a poet.

These flaws mar *Washing Up*, too. Again Mahon writes about his withdrawal from the modern world to a small town on the south coast of Ireland (although it is unclear how Kinsale is any less plugged-in than Williamsburg or Kreuzberg). For the most part, he employs the rhymed stanzas that served him well throughout his career, and in which he wrote with idiomatic flair. What holds him back, however, is imaginative fatigue - a kind of leadenness of thought. Often, he strains for the playfulness we find in W. H. Auden, James Merrill and A. E. Stallings, setting the scene with admirable verve only to fall back into one of his default positions:

See that block of apartments? Dust.  
Manhattan Equity and Trust?  
Dust; and to dust all these return.  
It’s from the dust that we were born.

...  
Here in my quiet inglenook  
I doze or read a serious book  
ignoring, in reflective slowness [sic],  
the world of economic growth.

Merrill, in poems such as “Self-Portrait in Tyvek™ Windbreaker”, has fun: the poem shuffles and riffs so happily with happenstance that the reader has little idea where it will go. *Washing Up* has none of that freedom. The passages above are the conclusions of two poems by Derek Mahon; it is hard for me to write that statement. He expends so much energy in this book instructing the reader or himself to “ignore” or “resist” certain things (“the latest news”, “the online scene”) that he has none left to describe what they should positively pay attention to, and flops back wearily into platitude.

Thankfully this isn’t the whole story of the past two decades. For “at his very best”, as Redmond also wrote, Mahon was “a sensual visionary, almost the equal of Yeats”. The 2000s also gave us poems such as “A Swim in Co. Wicklow”, “A Thunder Shower”, “The Clifden Road”, “Insomnia”, and the radiant achievement of *Harbour Lights* (2005). In one of that book’s poems, “New Wave”, about the French art film movement in the 1950s, Mahon describes how its exponents

wake to a dawn silence, curtained light,  
mist and roar of the sea, vast dazzling cloud.

This is the zone that vouchsafes Mahon’s sensual, visionary moments, and many poems of *Harbour Lights* disport themselves with such imaginative joy. He pulled off the trick again in *Against the Clock* (2018). (From *Washing Up*, perhaps “Another Cold Spring” can be added to the list.) In these two collections, separated by thirteen years, Mahon produced some of the finest anglophone poems of his time. ■

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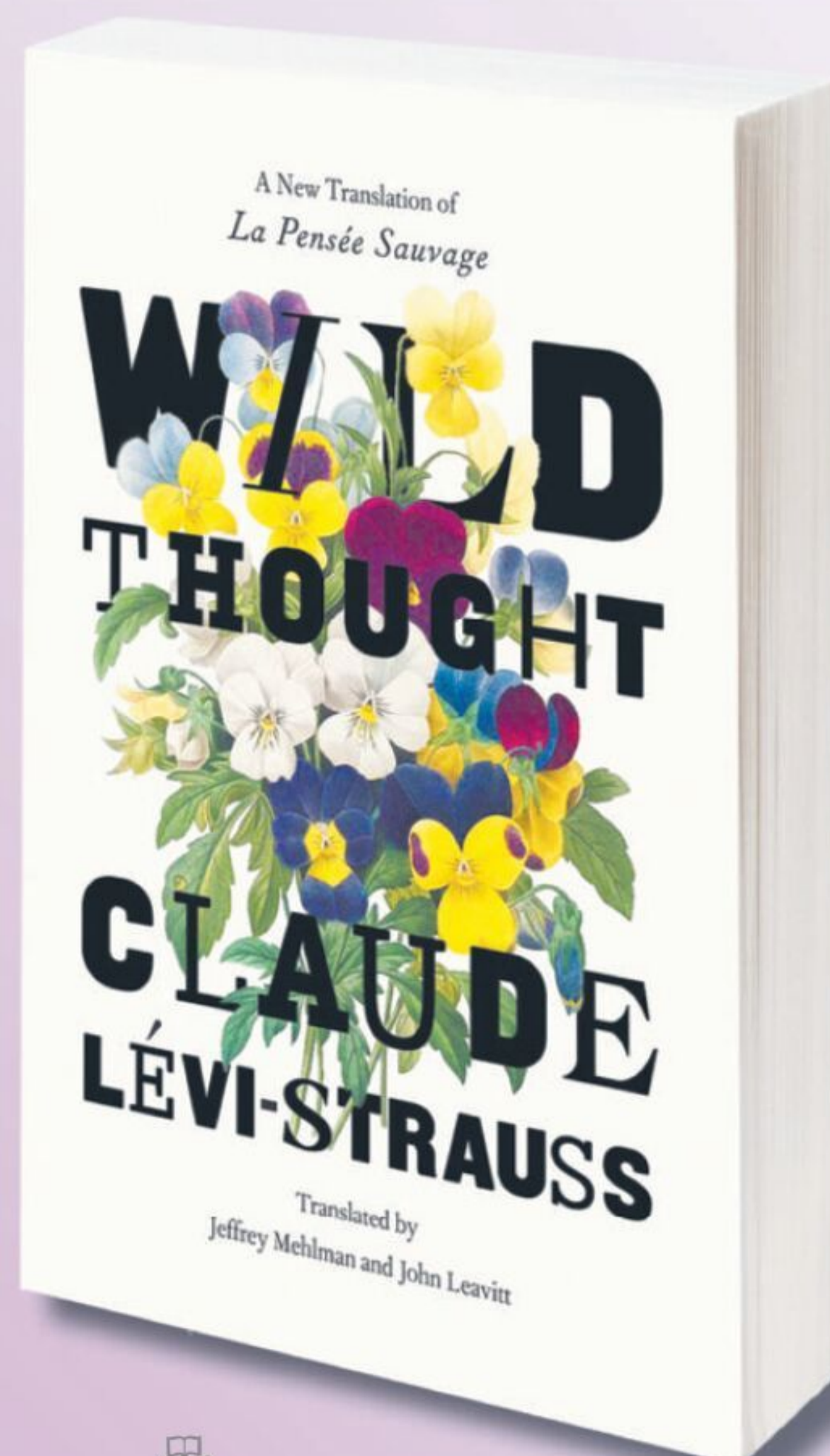
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**Ernest Bevin and Israel**

I had not previously come across Michael Holzman's phrase "Israeli war of independence", by which I assume he refers to the Zionist "Plan D" invasion of Palestine in 1948 (Letters, February 5). The UK was on the verge of leaving by the time the invasion occurred. The state of Israel did not exist before the invasion, unless you accept the rather fragile idea that the Jewish Agency was already the state of Israel. In that case, the Arab Higher Committee could - on as strong a basis - also claim to be a state, representing the interests of the Arabs in Palestine. Both organizations had been recognized by the League of Nations, but few people would have called them states in 1948.

The invasion was bloody and cruel. The Zionist army (Haganah) was assisted by two terror gangs, Irgun and Lehi, one of which, inter alia, shelled Palestinian civilian areas, while both participated in the massacre at Deir Yassin. Such acts, along with many others, contributed to the Zionist aim of getting as many Arabs out of the bounds of the proposed Israel state as possible: around three-quarters of a million Arabs had to flee their traditional homes and land, and were subject to cruel handling in doing so.

The Zionist goal of taking over a large part of Palestine, conceived when the population was more than 90 per cent Arab, was described by the early Zionist leader Theodor Herzl, in a letter to Cecil Rhodes, as "something colonial". He had approached the British because he thought the colonial idea would be easily and quickly understood in England. The Anglo-American Committee of Inquiry of 1946 described the Jewish Agency as "one of the most successful colonizing instruments in history".

As for Ernest Bevin, what he certainly resisted was acceding to the

# Vaccination strategy

Dr Burch's certainty is impressive (January 29), but he must know something the rest of us aren't being told when he says, "The challenge should not chiefly be to identify vaccine recipients in order of vulnerability and importance; it should be to jab as many people as quickly as possible. If you stop the robust from transmitting the disease then you protect the vulnerable". Do you, though, "stop the robust from transmitting the disease" just by jabbing them? Until this week, what we laymen and women have been given to understand is that the currently available vaccines offer remarkable protection against developing a severe and potentially fatal illness after infection by the coronavirus: not against infection *tout court*. As I write, a small but encouraging study by Oxford/AstraZeneca suggests that its vaccine can also reduce transmission (of the currently dominant variants in the UK, anyway) by more than 60 per cent. There is some optimism that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine may have a similar effect. But this still doesn't rule out the possibility that one of Dr Burch's "robust" could be jabbed, go out, get infected, and pass on the infection to any passing pensioner, without themselves ever suffering so much as a headache. For the pensioner, the outcome might be very different. In other words, you only protect the vulnerable by jabbing as many of them as quickly as possible, in the hope that while you're doing so the robust will be able to call on their stronger natural immune response to fight off the worst effects of the virus. Hence, I take it, current government policy and the order of priority decided by the JCVI.

Dr Burch writes, "It took three months for it to sink in that spreading out the first doses was a laudable improvement on not doing so". Presumably he means spreading out the first doses among the greatest possible number in those earliest groups "in order of vulnerability and importance" - the over-seventies, the clinically vulnerable, carers and NHS staff, etc. Laudable indeed. But with supplies at their current levels, this is impossible without simultaneously spreading out the time between the two doses of both the Pfizer and AZ vaccines that, every medical and scientific authority agrees, are needed before maximum, longer-term protection is assured. Certainly, the balance of risk seems

to favour vaccinating more people in more of these groups, more quickly, with one dose, rather than making sure everyone, say, over seventy-five has received both doses before moving on to doctors and nurses and those under seventy-five with underlying health problems. But unless Dr Burch, again, knows something we don't, that doesn't mean the strategy carries no risk at all. Both vaccines offer a good-to-high level of immunity (depending on whose figures you look at) three weeks after the first dose. For the AZ vaccine, it seems a longer delay before the second might even be an advantage. For the Pfizer, while it seems unlikely to become ineffective after the three-week interval between doses recommended by Pfizer-BioNTech itself (and supported by both the FDA and the CDC in the United States; six weeks maximum, for the EMA and WHO), there isn't any hard evidence as to what happens when that interval is extended to twelve, as per current policy here.

This is what I'd gathered, anyway, from my attempts to grapple with daily news developments, and it was backed up by the doctor who administered my own first dose of the Pfizer vax. He left me in no doubt (not that I'd really needed persuading) that one dose, now, was a lot better than none (I'm "only" sixty-five, but not as robust as I once was), however long it is before I get a second. But following the science, it's not. One virologist in the US is even on record with his view that "if you wanted to create a vaccine-resistant strain, what you would do is build a cohort of partially immunized individuals in the teeth of a highly prevalent viral infection". Don't get me wrong - I'm 100 per cent behind Dr Burch's call for greater urgency in getting "needles into arms", and I'm astonished and grateful to have had one in mine. Given the appalling numbers we all read every day, who would want to wait and see? But those numbers weren't fated to happen: a lot of dropped catches and bungled decisions went to their making, that had nothing to do with the shortcomings Dr Burch experiences in the NHS. Lying awake in the small hours, I'm queasily aware of being part of a large-scale experiment - or, as some chancers in the cabinet no doubt prefer to see it, in a high-stakes gamble.

■ Alan Jenkins  
London W14

Jewish Agency's pressure to be allowed to take the whole of Palestine to the west of the Jordan. Given the circumstances and the respective populations, one might

argue that that was a reasonable position rather than an antisemitic one.

■ John Tippler  
Spalding, Lincs

Parini, and the older man no less a figure than Jorge Luis Borges. An odd couple indeed.

■ John Hanson Mitchell  
Littleton, MA

**SOE in France**

Patrick Marnham's claim (Letters, January 22) that the collapse of the Prosper circuit "led to the death of hundreds" is incorrect. In fact, some 170 people were arrested as a direct result of the collapse, of whom half died, and I give the name and fate of every one of them in my book, as he knows.

■ Francis J. Suttill  
Bishopswood Leigh, Ross-on-Wye

**Borges and Parini**

In the spring of 1971, I was undertaking a bicycle trip through the Scottish Highlands and stopped over for a while in Inverness. While I was there, I met an odd couple in a pub - a young American student and a Spanish-speaking older man. Through a bizarre combination of events, after Jay Parini's *Borges and Me* came out (January 29), I realized that the young American was

**Education and Covid-19**

The government's response to the Covid-induced crisis in education is piecemeal and inadequate. The funding body UK Research and Innovation is advising postgraduate students to "adapt and adjust research projects to mitigate the delays caused by Covid-19". In other words, write something worse. There is vague talk of catch-up classes for schools, and exam re-sits. But who is going to teach, and isn't everyone exhausted?

I think the least bad option is for the academic year to be repeated for all pupils and students in the UK, from primary school to university. Exams/deadlines should be cancelled or extended. A "Groundhog Year" solution will mean that everyone will get the education/research they missed. It also avoids having graduates and school leavers flooding the jobs market when there is already sky-rocketing

unemployment. Students will have to be compensated financially by the government for the extra year of fees and living expenses.

The repeated school year will mean that pre-schoolers will need to be kept in nursery education for an extra year, or at home for an extra year, necessitating a shift to the continental system of starting school later. Extra free nursery provision could be set up in empty buildings, and currently unemployed creatives, etc trained up to teach them.

The short-term cost to the government is far less than the long-term consequences of a whole generation of schoolchildren and university students losing more than a year of education and then ending up on benefits.

■ James Hall  
London SW12

**Comic le Carré**

In Sam Leith's review of Mick Herron's novels (January 29), he states that no one would call John le Carré a comic writer. Well, not only. Le Carré's novels are surely shot through with dark, caustic comedy at every level, from titles (*Our Kind of Traitor*), through absurd characters (Jerry Westerby, Percy Alleline), to single sardonic sentences and whole ghastly plots. At the same time, of course, his novels remain deadly, horribly serious.

■ Alex Faulkner  
Lewes, East Sussex

**Research criteria**

In my review of *Boys and Sex* by Peggy Orenstein (In Brief, January 29), I mistakenly described her research as "quantitative" rather than "qualitative". Sex and measurement should, of course, be kept apart, and I apologize to both Ms Orenstein and your readers.

■ Josh Raymond  
London SW2

**Wild bulls**

There is no such animal as an auroch (Brian Morton, In Brief, January 29). The extinct wild bull of Europe was an aurochs, and the plural, if you can have a plural of something that isn't there any more, is aurochsen, as in English oxen.

■ Jeremy Harte  
Bourne Hall, Ewell

**Correction**

The picture chosen to illustrate David Coward's review of *The King of Nazi Paris* about the war criminal Henri Lafont (January 29) was of Henry Lafont, French veteran of the Battle of Britain.

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TLS



# The new Rome's window on the West

Ravenna, a mosaic of peoples and cultures

**MICHAEL KULIKOWSKI**

**RAVENNA**

Capital of Empire, crucible of Europe

**JUDITH HERRIN**

576pp. Allen Lane. £30.

**V**ENICE HAS ITS SINKING BUILDINGS and tourist mobs, Rimini the Ponte di Tiberio and an excellent garage rock scene. And Ravenna – Ravenna has mosaics, so very many mosaics. Once seen, never forgotten, their luminous golden backgrounds wring new meaning from more familiar blues and purples. Not even overfamiliarity from a thousand book jackets can reduce the impact of the emperor Justinian and his wife Theodora in the sixth-century church of San Vitale, the Three Wise Men in the roughly contemporary Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, or the serene frontality of St Lawrence's martyrdom in the slightly earlier Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. With a figural naturalism not anchored in perspectival space, they are both artistically timeless and the epitome of what we think of as Byzantine art. Ravenna's artworks had the good fortune to escape the iconoclasm that swept away many such works of art in the eastern Mediterranean. It was their further good fortune that Ravenna itself, increasingly landlocked by the silting of the Po delta, lacked the kind of medieval and modern importance that would have erased its late antique glories. Judith Herrin's *Ravenna*, which was last week awarded the Pol Roger Duff Cooper Prize for non-fiction, aims to set these mosaics, the buildings they ennoble and the urban landscape they inhabit back within a meaningful historical context. It's a worthy project that surprisingly has not really been attempted before.

The narrative against which she sets Ravenna's townscape is almost paradoxically conventional, full of shifty Germanic foreigners barbarizing the Roman army, threatening an imperial system too weak to retain its distant provinces, and thereafter forming "the germs of an early medieval culture that emerges in western Europe personified by Charlemagne, with its combined Latin, Christian and Germanic tributaries, transalpine energies welded to those of Rome". These are the terms of analysis that many of us learnt as students, not a world away from Thomas Hodgkin's *Italy and Her Invaders*, the eight-volume Victorian masterpiece that covers the same time frame as does Herrin. Yet that strange anachronism doesn't really matter. As others have demonstrated, it is possible to make a handsome living recycling this same narrative with varying doses of melodrama and bombast, but it takes a scholar of Herrin's brilliance to bring events to life within a meaningful evocation of a time and a place. That skill, and a wonderfully pellucid prose style, ensures that even readers frustrated by the archaic narrative will find a great deal to admire and indeed learn from.

There is one very good reason why so many historians have kept away from Ravenna. For the past fifty years, the five imposing volumes of Friedrich Deichmann's *Ravenna, Hauptstadt des spätantiken Abendlandes* has loomed over every student of the city. This is the kind of uniquely German monument that is more easily admired than read, and its very monumentality overshadows rather than illuminates the subject. For the most part, Ravenna functions as a kind of absent structure in early medieval history, omnipresent yet somehow still terra incognita. Herrin opens a path into this historical space. There is, for example, a superb chapter on the church of San Vitale, most famous for its mosaics of the imperial couple. In these images, Bishop Maximian stands at



Justinian's left hand, although it was his predecessor, Victor, who commissioned and sponsored the building and its iconography. After a careful description of this, and a lucid explanation of the chronology, Herrin shows us Maximian, an imperial appointee, arriving from Patras at Ravenna in 546 and being refused entry by the city's inhabitants. A native of Pola, now Pula in Croatia, he was mistrusted as a foreigner, even though under sail in good weather it was less than a day's journey from Ravenna's port of Classis (Herrin re-enacted that trip, just to be sure). Maximian had no choice but to wait, residing in the palace outside the walls that had previously belonged to the city's Arian bishops. Only after some time, hosting banquets, giving gifts and otherwise convincing the Ravennites of his good will, was he invited into the city, taking up residence in the orthodox bishops' palace and replacing Victor's image with his own in the San Vitale mosaics.

It is vignettes like this, and there are many, that make the book rewarding and there are two main sets of evidence that allow Herrin to engage readers on this sort of human scale. First and most important is the survival of Andreas Agnellus's *Liber Pontificalis Ecclesiae Ravennatis*. This is a history of Ravenna written in the ninth century, consisting of a series of biographies of the city's bishops, going right back to the legendary Apollinaris, founder of Ravenna's episcopate and supposed companion of Saint Peter. It is particularly useful because Agnellus recorded the texts of now lost inscriptions and commented as an eyewitness on buildings and monuments that no longer stand. While – as was typical of his era – his explanations and etymologies can be fanciful, he was more scrupulous in collecting his evidence than most were at the time, and much of the human spark in *Ravenna* comes from him.

The city also has a papyrus archive that few western cities can match, in part because the fragile material rarely survives well outside the sands of Egypt; in part because its urban institutions survived longer and better than they did in most of the West; and in part because in late antiquity the culture of written law and administration survived in Italy, southern France and parts of Spain, while other regions became increasingly governed by customary law. Written law generated masses of documentation. Local councils' activities and decisions were registered in *gesta municipalia*, or "minute books", and municipal functionaries of various sorts provided people with fair copies of the legal instruments

**The martyrdom of St Lawrence; fifth-century mosaic, Mausoleum of Galla Placidia, Ravenna**

*Michael Kulikowski is the author of Imperial Triumph, 2016, and Imperial Tragedy, 2019. He teaches at Pennsylvania State University*

they needed to sell property, manumit slaves, leave an enforceable will (few traces of any of this remain in regions with customary law). Ravenna's papyrus archive, which like all such archives is predominantly made up of relatively mundane legal transactions, is unusual not just for the quantity that has survived, but for a fine documentary script and sustained legal quality absent in contemporary texts elsewhere. Many of these documents are wills, and they teach us a lot about the daily lives of the inhabitants – for instance George the silk merchant who gives all his possessions to the church of Ravenna, or the young Stefanus whose inheritance is described at length, as are the parts of his family property that had previously been given to the freed slaves Guderit and Ranihilda.

As those Gothic names suggest, Ravenna was if not a melting pot then a mosaic of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. One fascinating thing about the papyri, which Herrin could have drawn out more extensively, is the degree to which influences of the

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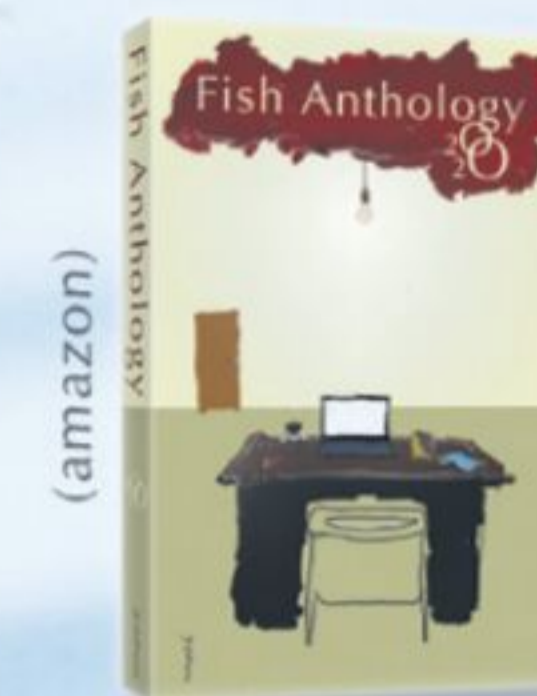
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Greek language creep into the native Latin legal culture of the city, both as names for everyday items and in the occasional grammatical oddity. On the whole, though, as Herrin makes clear, there was a relatively limited penetration of the Greek language into the government of Byzantine Italy. That is surprising, as Greek was, in the later sixth century, entirely superseding Latin as the language of law and administration in Constantinople and the eastern empire - and, while Bishop Maximian was from a Latin-speaking area, several later bishops, and many of the secular governors, were native Greek speakers. The seventh-century governor Isaac, for instance, was a Greek of Armenian extraction who died at Ravenna shortly after putting down a revolt in the city of Rome. His widow Susanna buried him in a very fine fourth-century sarcophagus with a new lid inscribed with Greek verse. The stonemason who made the inscription was no local bilingual - the lettering is of the finest eastern quality, a reminder that Ravenna was, as Herrin puts it, a hinge between the East and the West. She illustrates this both with a brief survey of eastern Mediterranean architectural forms (octagonal churches, for instance) that arrived in the West via

Ravenna and also with an exceptionally illuminating discussion of Greek medical texts copied and commented on by doctors there. Few general readers, and not many specialists in the period, will have previously been acquainted with another Agnellus, "the doctor", whose lecture notes on texts of Galen and the Hippocratic corpus were taken down in shorthand by one Simplicius. Until the great Arabic versions of Aristotle came to be translated into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Ravenna had been the single most important conduit for ancient Greek knowledge to the western Middle Ages. Yet even while Agnellus was giving his lectures in the late sixth century and Isaac's widow was having him commemorated in Greek iambics, the papyri reveal how much was changing in Ravenna.

The late Roman legal and administrative culture certainly did survive at Ravenna much longer than it did elsewhere, not least in Rome which was by the seventh century sparsely populated, dotted with gardens, middens and burials, and increasingly administered by its bishop. But even at Ravenna, the outlines of a post-Roman, medieval culture are visible by the time the Arab conquests wrested North Africa from

Constantinople and with it control of the Mediterranean. It is the names that give the game away. Old municipal family names have disappeared, everyone has a single name and (perhaps) a patronymic or occupational designator, and the vast majority of the literate appear to be clerics. That change came later to Ravenna than the rest of the Latin West, but come it did. The old archives survived for Charlemagne to ransack, thus ensuring that the glories of late antique book illustration were transmitted to the Renaissance through Francia, but the city he found when he deposed the last Lombard king was a shadow of its former self.

The mosaics, however, remained and remain still, a permanent memorial to the last flowering of antiquity in the Latin West. Another virtue of Herrin's book is the specially commissioned photography by Kieran Dodds. These bring out angles and details missed in the usual stock photos and their significance is well integrated in Herrin's narrative. It is a pity that the plate captions do not tell you where in the text the image is discussed, but that is a minor quibble in an otherwise lively, and long overdue, treatment of this subject. ■

# Sovereign virtues

Machiavelli's betrayal of Renaissance humanism

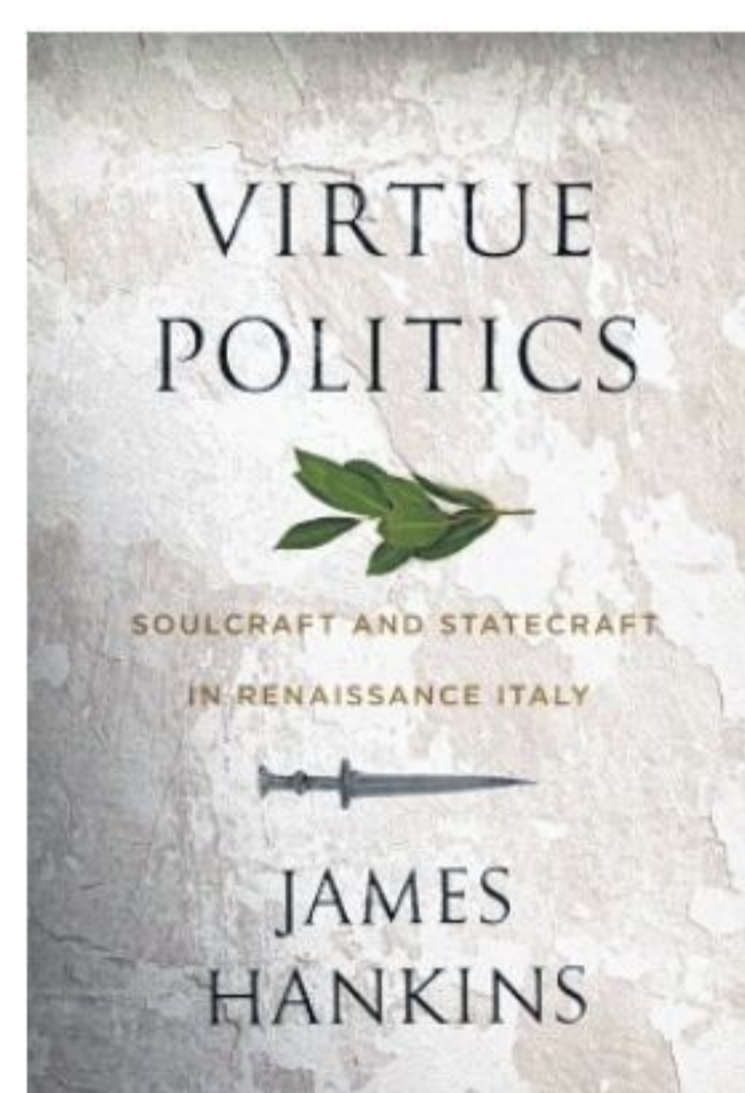
**JEFFREY COLLINS**

**VIRTUE POLITICS**

Soulcraft and statecraft in Renaissance Italy

**JAMES HANKINS**

784pp. Harvard University Press. £36.95  
(US \$45).



logically or geographically. Within these parameters, however, he escapes the conventional fixation on Florence and its chancellors. Leonardo Bruni and Machiavelli are here, but so too are the Roman jurist Mario Salamonio, the Greek translator George of Trebizond, the travelling "merchant scholar" Cyriac of Ancona. Nor does Hankins limit himself to the familiar canon, but mines a deep vein of histories, biographies, letters, orations and treatises, both printed and scribally published. His mastery of the archive is astonishing.

Hankins argues that the Italian humanists were not mere word technicians, or opportunistic rhetoricians, but represented "a movement of thought and action, similar in its physiognomy if not in its content to the movement of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment". That sort of claim has been unfashionable ever since the great Paul Oskar Kristeller (Hankins's mentor) defined humanism as a set of methods and philological practices, rather than a positive philosophy celebrating heroic individualism in a secular universe. Hankins has no interest in resuscitating these latter Burckhardtian reveries, and he has an insider's understanding of the scholarly agenda of the humanists. Nevertheless, he ascribes to them a common cultural-political project: "to rebuild Europe's depleted reserves of good character, true piety, and practical wisdom" in the face of the late medieval crisis of Christendom. The *studia humanitatis* was their means to this end.

"The humanism of the Italian Renaissance," writes Hankins, "was born from a profound sense of loss and longing. It arose from a new kind of historical awareness shared by literary men - men newly conscious of past glories and present humiliations." Borrowing from ethnography, Hankins describes Renaissance humanism as a new *paideuma* (which Ezra Pound glossed as "the tangle or complex of the inrooted ideas of any period"): an effort at complete cultural renovation. Its targets were an exhausted scholasticism, Christian *contemptus mundi*, and the desiccated technicalities of university jurists. A politics animated by virtue was required instead. The "social technology" necessary to this "soulcraft" was the study and emulation of antiquity. Politics would be reformed by starting upstream, with the culture.

The project's springhead was Petrarch, but it flowed into dozens of channels. Changed political circumstances or the recovery of specific lost texts could redirect humanist debate. Why did Rome rise?

Was Julius Caesar a tyrant? Could chivalrous knight-hood be reformed in the image of the ancients? Could cosmopolitanism be virtuous? In debates more apparently historical than political, Hankins finds embedded prescriptions for reforming the public character of the Italian city states. This breaks from a historiography traditionally captivated by constitutional republicanism and "civic humanism" in Florence. The humanists would have little regarded our present-day obsessions with constitutional design and individual rights. They considered "constitutional essentialism" fatal to political prudence. In fascinating chapters, Hankins recovers how humanists such as Bruni and Cyriac of Ancona revolutionized the terminology of "republicanism" and "democracy". But virtue could inhabit all regime types, which were shaped by history, fate and character. The humanists would have seen our abstract, contractual understanding of impersonal "sovereignty" as dismally vulgar.

Humanist methods prospered among court elites and coincided with a period of Italian wealth and military success. The project collapsed with the calamitous invasions of Italy by France and the Holy Roman Empire after 1494. Few realized that these would inaugurate centuries of Italian political subjection. But the disaster was grave enough to trigger a revolt against virtue politics. Hankins concludes his book with a discerning rereading of Machiavelli in this context. Current scholarship tends to assimilate Machiavelli into the culture of humanism, often in an effort to cut him down to size (as a diplomat or a hired rhetorician). Hankins instead acknowledges Machiavelli's rare brilliance, but presents him as the betrayer, rather than the exemplar, of the humanist movement. The Florentine's "demoralizing" redefinition of *virtù* as a manly capacity to master fortune was directly aimed at the humanist tradition that Hankins has reconstructed.

Reading *Virtue Politics* from our present political situation suggests, paradoxically, both the incommensurability of the Renaissance project and its relevance. The Italian humanists shared a common social outlook (elitist but meritocratic) and the ethical foundations provided by Christianity. We live in an era of mass politics, venomous social distrust and ferocious moral disagreement. The suggestion that our culture, or our universities, should instil character, virtue and civic pride would currently achieve little more than ritualistic condemnations of elitist Eurocentrism. And yet any humane reader will find it difficult to evade some embarrassment when measuring the humanists' political aspirations against the transactional, interest-driven, "neutral" spirit of modern liberalism. Perhaps a politics of private rights and public utility is the best that we can do. But *Virtue Politics*, at the least, forces the question. ■

**V**IRTUE POLITICS IS PERHAPS the greatest study ever written of Renaissance political thought. The breadth of James Hankins's book surpasses that of the reigning incumbents, Hans Baron's *Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* and the first volume of Quentin Skinner's classic *Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. It is also a book of bold argument and relevance.

Hankins concentrates on the classic Italian Renaissance - Petrarch to Machiavelli - and dispenses with fashionable efforts to diversify his subject chrono-

Jeffrey Collins is an Associate Professor of History at Queen's University in Canada



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- 30 March **HANNAH SKODA (Oxford)**  
'How I long for the good old days': Nostalgia and Social Change in the Long Fourteenth Century

Lectures start at 5.30 p.m.  
All lectures will be held online via Zoom.  
Please visit the GHIL's website <<http://www.ghil.ac.uk>> to register.



# Vanishing act

How snobbery and fashion put paid to magic

**AUDREY BOROWSKI**

**THE DECLINE OF MAGIC**  
Britain in the Enlightenment  
**MICHAEL HUNTER**

288pp. Yale University Press. £35 (\$40).



Illustration of the "Tedworth Drummer"; from *Saducismus Triumphatus* by Joseph Glanvill, 1681

**I**N 1735 THE WITCHCRAFT ACT redefined all claims to magical powers as criminally fraudulent, rather than evidence of demonic possession, and by 1749 the radical clergyman Conyers Middleton had declared belief in witches in Britain "utterly extinct". In his fascinating study, *The Decline of Magic: Britain in the Enlightenment*, Michael Hunter delves deeper into the reasons behind the retreat, and ultimately the discrediting, of magical beliefs in England. Fifty years after the publication of Keith Thomas's landmark study *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Hunter seeks not to overturn Thomas's thesis but to qualify it. Hunter focuses less on the endurance of popular beliefs in the face of Protestant hostility to Catholic "superstition" than on the actual process of decline of those beliefs. In doing so, he immerses us in a world which took for granted the absolute existence of a spiritual realm of ghosts, apparitions and witches, and in which challenging this orthodoxy could be construed as tantamount to denying the existence of God himself - something very few were willing to risk, aside perhaps from the sceptic John Wagstaffe in his tract *The Question of Witchcraft Debated* (1669).

Contrary to a widely held view, the occult did not suddenly give way to science as we now understand it, but often coexisted with it. Hunter presents us with a nuanced and marvellously ambiguous picture,

showing how a gradual change in educated attitudes towards magical beliefs occurred between about 1650 and 1750 through a kind of "cultural osmosis", that is, intellectual exchange primarily through an "elusive oral dimension". In fact, far from displacing magic, science and the newly acquired scientific ethos of empirical investigation were often enlisted in the defence of the occult. While some scientists such as Robert Hooke and Henry Oldenburg were certainly hardcore sceptics, most displayed a much more ambivalent attitude towards the supernatural realm. As a corporate body, the Royal Society in London carefully sidelined the topic altogether.

Joseph Glanvill, the Royal Society apologist, led a painstaking investigation in the 1660s into proving the existence of the alleged poltergeist known as "the Drummer of Tedworth". Robert Boyle, the eminent natural philosopher, became particularly fascinated with accounts of prophetic "second sight", the strange ability of certain individuals to foresee future events, and he set out to verify these claims by meticulously collecting empirical examples of such occurrences. This interest in the supernatural was motivated by the desire to understand nature itself better, an understanding that Boyle and his contemporaries conceded was far from complete: "And if we know so little of natural Causes, how

much less can we pretend to things that are supernatural?" For Boyle, it was simply "a violation of the Law of Nature, to reject all these Relations as fabulous, merely upon a self presuming Conceit, unless a Man can fairly shew the things to be Impossible, or wherein those Persons were impos'd on".

Hunter paints a picture of two resolutely opposed attitudes, on the one hand the "heroic open-mindedness" and intellectual humility of the scientific seekers of the causes of as-yet unexplained phenomena, and on the other hand the "intellectual arrogance" of the pure "Newtonians", who summarily rejected supernatural phenomena for being incompatible with their particular scientific framework. Ironically, then, it could be argued that in this case dogmatism prevailed over the spirit of inquiry. "People just made up their minds", Hunter comments, "and then grasped at arguments to substantiate their preconceived ideas." In fact, if the sceptical viewpoint eventually triumphed and belief in the supernatural was defeated, it was not on the battlefield of rational argumentation, or in the face of proof, but on account of intellectual fashion, and especially the oral culture of sarcasm and wit which had burgeoned in London coffee houses. As Hunter puts it succinctly, "contrary to popular belief, the Enlightenment did not reject magic for good reasons but for bad ones". Once a tipping point had been reached, belief in magic was simply marginalized - rather than positively disproven - and reframed as imposture or self-delusion, then later relegated to the realm of fiction and fantasy.

Hunter's book is particularly praiseworthy for its reflection on the nature of intellectual change, and especially in showing the limits and even impotence of rational argumentation in accounting for that change - although as a consequence, admittedly, the reasons for change become more difficult to establish. While this book's provocative thesis and some of its broad brushstrokes are bound to be contested, Hunter's audacity in taking up this challenge, one that should be extended beyond Britain, is admirable. He provides us with a thoroughly engaging and stimulating study, which has a particular resonance today, at a time of growing epistemological uncertainty and information overload, when rational argumentation has seemingly again run up against its limits in the public sphere. ■

Audrey Borowski is a doctoral student at the University of Oxford

# Men behaving sadly

The Masonic cult of death

**RUTH SCURR**

**THE CRAFT**

How the Freemasons made the modern world

**JOHN DICKIE**

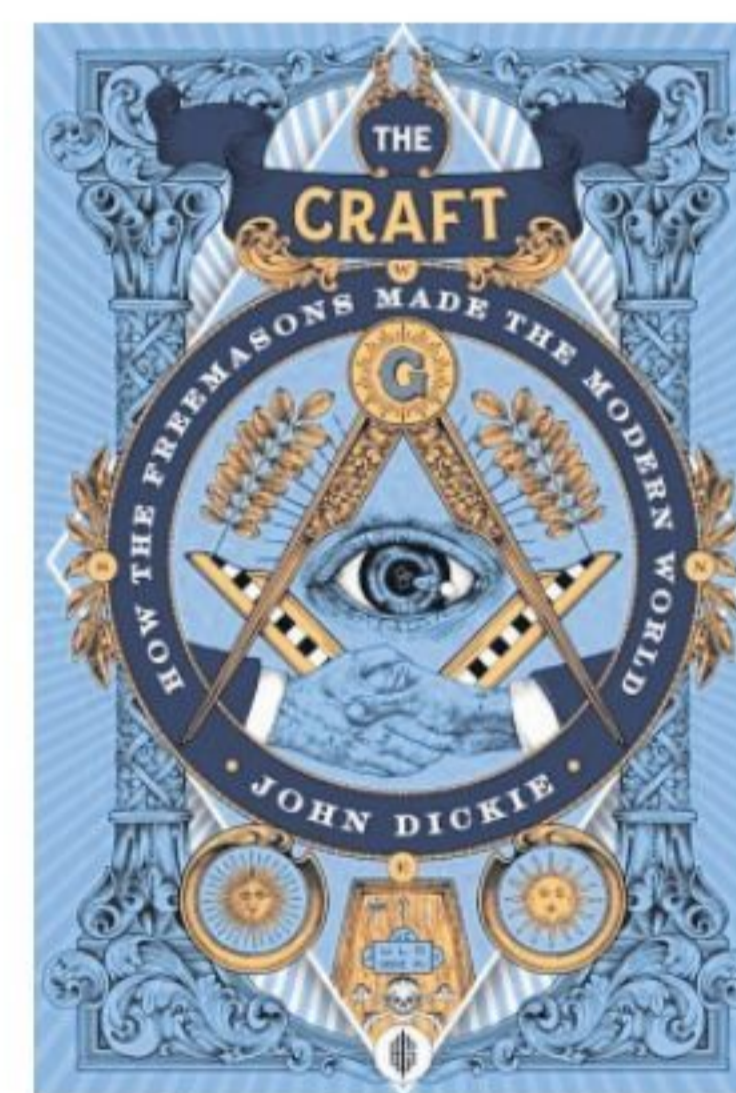
496pp. Hodder and Stoughton. £25.

**I**N HIS ENTERTAINING HISTORY of Freemasonry, John Dickie, the author of an internationally successful book about the Sicilian Mafia (*Cosa Nostra*, 2004), describes the global network of lodges and secret rituals as "one of Britain's most successful cultural exports, comparable to sports like tennis, soccer and golf". This relaxed and jaunty tone pervades *The Craft*, which is written from an outsider's perspective without giving credence to the more lurid conspiracy theories that have been attached to

Freemasonry over the centuries. Dickie mentions that his grandfather, a Scottish railwayman, became a Freemason in Aberdeen in 1919, like many thousands of soldiers returning from the Great War, but there is no suggestion that Dickie himself is a mason. He gives a cursory account of the supposedly secret initiation rituals - "we only have to know a little bit about them to enjoy Masonic history" - before moving on to the subject that interests him more: "the interaction between Freemasonry and society".

Dickie traces the rise of Freemasonry - there are 400,000 masons in Britain today, 1.1 million in the USA and around 6 million worldwide - from "a lucky dip" of sources, reaching back to "some of the big beards from Genesis and the Book of Kings". William Schaw (1550-1602), the first man in Scotland to be referred to as an architect, played a central part in establishing lodges during the reign of James VI, when there was "an upswing in the number of prestige building projects". Eighty per cent of the lodges we know about from Schaw's time still exist, but Dickie argues that modern Freemasonry began with the spread of Schaw's lodges south into England, where they became known collectively as the Acception: "it is only when the historical documents start mentioning 'Accepted Masons', or a secret organisation known as the Acception, that we can identify the immediate predecessors of today's Brethren".

"Freemason" originally referred to a mason who worked in "free stone" (fine-grained sandstone or limestone). Dickie explains that the name became associated with the "Accepted Masons" during the turmoil of the English Civil War and simultaneously with a set of "secrets which must never be written".



Ruth Scurr is a Fellow of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge. Her book *Napoleon: A life in gardens and shadows* will be published in May

He emphasizes that the purpose of Masonic secrecy is simply secrecy. "All the terrifying penalties for oath-breaking are just theatre - never to be implemented." His argument is that to understand the benefits of belonging to a Masonic lodge, it is necessary to look at the specific social context within which it operates.

Ranging widely through time and space, Dickie assembles a large cast of characters, some well known like Benjamin Franklin and Rudyard Kipling, others more obscure, who contributed to the spread of Freemasonry across the globe. Always careful to describe the varying manifestations of Freemasonry in different contexts - from the revolutionary to the reactionary - Dickie nevertheless offers a general characterization of the phenomenon: "Freemasonry is about death. The noose around the neck, the sword-point at the breast, the skulls, the bones, the tombs, the urns, the coffins". Through these "Emblems of Mortality", masons, he argues, stand shoulder to shoulder as Brothers and transform their fear of death: "In Masonry, death is a man thing". Women, formally excluded from the "fellowship of men and men alone", still make it into the story. The first Maçonnes appeared in France in 1740. There were women in the French Adoption Lodges during Napoleon's reign, and while it is unclear whether the Emperor was ever a mason, his wife Josephine had been initiated into a Strasbourg Adoption Lodge in 1792. Nevertheless, Dickie finds that women only ever have subordinate and circumscribed roles in Freemasonry, and proposes an alternative subtitle for his book: "four centuries of male eccentricity". ■



# Empire of the mind

What imperialism means to a modern Briton

**SUKHDEV SANDHU**

## EMPIRELAND

How imperialism has shaped modern Britain

**SATHNAM SANGHERA**

320pp. Viking. £18.99.

**E**MPIRELAND IS A BOOK about the British Empire by someone who makes a point of letting his readers know that, for most of his life, he has not thought very hard about it. Sathnam Sanghera speculates that this is because he was taught little about the topic at school - far less than about the Tudors or Tollund Man. Sikhs like him have been granted unusual rights - to wear turbans instead of helmets on motorbikes, or to carry ceremonial daggers in public - so perhaps, he reflects, he is compromised by belonging to a group that did "relatively well out of empire". But the main reason for his ignorance, he claims, is because he is British. And the British are unwilling or unable to face up to their own history.



**Empire Day celebrations at Brooklyn Public School, New South Wales, Australia, 1929**

Intriguing hypotheses all. Still, Sanghera's frank admission is a bold gambit, reminiscent of (often very well-educated) politicians who urge the public to be sceptical of experts, or of broadcasters who hire celebrities to present television series that might benefit from specialists. On the other hand, at a time when public discussion about the impact and legacy of British imperialism so often lapses into shrill and Manichean shouting matches, there is something to be said for authors who approach the topic in the spirit of engaged curiosity rather than didactic declamation. "You can't apply modern ethics to the past", Sanghera writes early on. "To read history as a series of events that instil pride and

*Sukhdev Sandhu directs the Colloquium for Unpopular Culture at New York University*

shame, or a balance of rights and wrongs, is inane."

Sanghera draws on the *Hobson-Jobson Dictionary* of Anglo-Indian words and phrases to highlight empire's imprint on the English language through well-known examples such as "juggernaut", "toboggan" and "zombie". The imperial histories of tea and sugar are similarly well known; marginally less so that of gin and tonic, which became popular with Brits abroad after quinine was advertised for its anti-malarial properties. Empire's material traces can be seen in the nation's statuary, its street names, even its flags (that of Wolverhampton, from where Sanghera hails, features a chain - a reference to its mighty past as a manufacturer of iron goods, some of which, such as manacles and locks, were used on slaves). This wealth can be overstated, he argues, citing work by the historians Patrick K. O'Brien and Leandro Prados de la Escosura. "Britain's links to countries outside the empire were more important in terms of value and scale by a substantial margin than connections with colonies."

Sanghera is a deft synthesist who sifts through mounds of historical treatises and alights on visceral, often shocking details. He recounts how, during the Eighth Xhosa War in 1851, members of the regiment of imperial irregulars who served in the Waterkloof and Kat River valleys carried broken sickles to slice the throats of natives they caught on night patrol. On one occasion, the skulls they presented to a doctor for phrenological research were deemed inadequate. The unit's leader Stephen Lake-man recalled: "The next night they turned my vat into a cauldron for the removal of superfluous flesh. And there these men sat, gravely smoking their pipes during the live-long night, and stirring round

# CHINA 1949

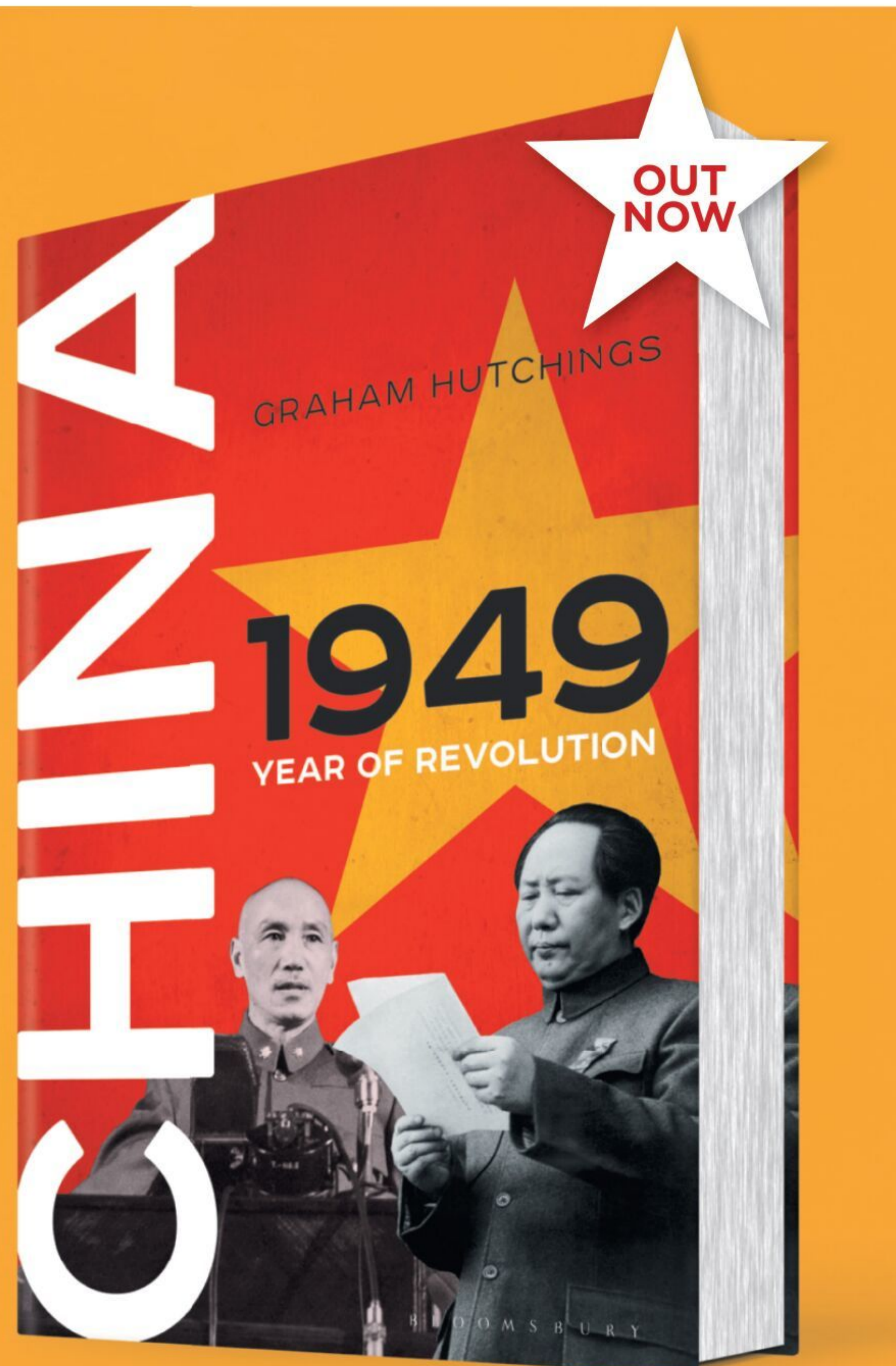
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RANA MITTER, AUTHOR  
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and round the heads in that seething boiler, as though they were cooking black-apple dumplings”.

A few decades earlier, in Jamaica, the slave owner and serial rapist Thomas Thistlewood had branded slaves’ shoulders with the initials “TT”, whipped runaways, and then had salt, pepper and lime juice rubbed into their wounds. Yet, without claiming an equivalence between the brutalities perpetrated by colonizers and those by the colonized, Sanghera, perhaps as a sop to anyone who might accuse him of being too partisan, references not only the slaughter by Indians of British women and children at the Siege of Cawnpor in 1857 but also the historian Lawrence James’s account of the violence Sikh troops meted out to Muslims.

The strongest chapter concerns Britain’s museums. The word “loot”, derived from the Hindi term “lut”, entered the English language as a result of the ceaseless plundering of Indian treasures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It is wrong, Sanghera says, to assume that criticism of such expropriations is a postcolonial phenomenon. William Gladstone told the House of Commons in 1871 that he “deeply lamented, for the sake of the country, and for the sake of all those concerned, that these articles ... were thought fit to be brought away by a British army”. Even back in 1899, the Hague Convention stated that “Private property cannot be confiscated” and “Pillage is formally prohibited”.

*Empireland* might have been a different book were it not for Covid-19. Sanghera mentions research trips abroad he was unable to make. He also points out that even though Black and Asian medical staff have played a crucial role in helping to make the NHS such a totemic part of British national identity, during the pandemic some were forking out for an NHS surcharge, “introduced for all recent immigrant workers, which meant they were paying to use the service they were sustaining”. He is caustic about

recent Conservative leaders’ pronouncements about imperialism. He cites David Cameron who, on a visit to Amritsar (the Indian city where many hundreds of peaceful protesters were massacred on the orders of General Dyer in 1919), declared: “I think there’s an enormous amount to be proud of in what the British empire did and was responsible for”. Or, more crassly, Boris Johnson echoing Donald Trump’s “birther” lies, when speaking about “the part-Kenyan” President Obama’s “ancestral dislike of the British empire”. Sanghera cites another Johnsonism - “We used to run the biggest empire the world has ever seen ... are we really unable to do trade deals?” - as an example of the “imperial exceptionalism” that energized pro-Brexit campaigners.

The British Empire was vast, bureaucratic and long-lasting - so much so that it can feel abstract, hard to fully grasp. But Sanghera has a talent for tangibility. To convey the size and power of the East India Company - which had a private army, set its own taxes, staged wars, printed its own cash - he neatly observes that “Walmart, one of the biggest companies in the world, does not own nuclear submarines; Facebook doesn’t possess infantry”. At the same time, he never talks down to his readers, discussing both the slipperiness of his subject (“historians agree that empire was both unplanned and a nebulous construct”) and highlighting key historiographical debates, such as, most recently, that between Bernard Porter and John MacKenzie on the extent to which empire penetrated the imaginations of average Britons in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.

*Empireland* is anchored by autobiography. Early on, Sanghera recalls the skinhead gangs who used to maraud through Wolverhampton in the 1970s and 80s, the anti-immigrant violence having become more vicious in the wake of Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968. The irony and lightness of tone that he brings to his regular *Times* columns

“  
Is imperial forgetting a peculiarly English phenomenon?”

are never far away, such as when he travels to the cemetery of Sake Dean Mahomed, the owner of the first curry house in Britain and the first Indian author in English: “The gravestone is behind a locked wire fence and I end up throwing my bouquet of petrol-station flowers over it, which promptly blow back into my face, attracting the mockery of a nearby daytime drinker”.

As the book moves to a close, Sanghera strains for a dramatic conclusion, which is neither required nor, given its subject, possible. After reading Edward Said, he states, with unusual bluntness, that he is “making an effort to decolonize myself”. Some of his claims - colonial ideology destroyed the “cultural self-confidence of the colonized” - are overstated. His critique of his private school and Oxbridge education - “[it was] narrow and encouraged me to belittle most non-Western thought, history and literary forms as irrational and illogical” - could have done with illustrations. Is imperial forgetting a peculiarly English phenomenon? Sanghera talks positively about how Germany has confronted its Holocaust past, but the same is certainly not true in relation to its former colonies.

Sanghera begins *Empireland* by talking about Empire Day which, from its founding in 1916 to 1958, celebrated Britain’s imperial identity. Youngsters, too, celebrated because they received a half-holiday. Their grandchildren today may reasonably insist that they can’t slough off an identity they never felt they possessed. Equally, many of the immigrants who came to Britain after the Second World War only caught the final phase of empire; for them processing the legacies of imperialism was secondary to earning a living. In their willingness to get their heads down and keep working, they were perhaps unconsciously enacting Ernest Renan’s belief that “Forgetfulness, and I would even say historical error, are essential in the creation of a nation”. ■

# Dirty British coaster

Steam power, free trade and colonial self-interest

**TRISTRAM HUNT**

**UNLOCKING THE WORLD**

Port cities and globalization in the age of steam  
1830-1930  
JOHN DARWIN  
496pp. Allen Lane. £25.

**F**OR RUDYARD KIPLING, Bombay was the, “Mother of Cities to me”. He “was born in her gate, / Between the palms and the sea, / Where the world-end steamers wait”. The students of his gifted art professor father, Lockwood Kipling, similarly celebrated the magnificence of steam with their Indo-Saracenic designs for the city’s Victoria Terminus rail station - “the truly central building of the British Empire”, in the words of the late Jan Morris.

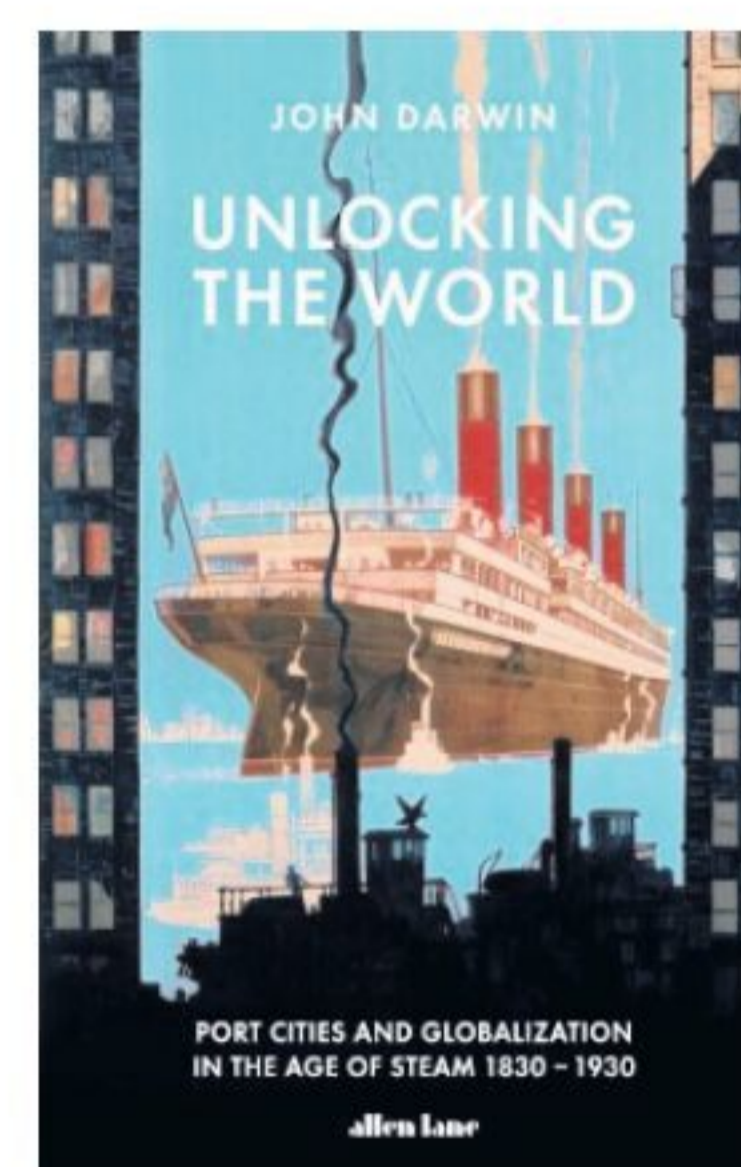
If you are interested in the architecture of Bombay Gothic, or the multi-ethnic soundscape of the Liverpool docks, or the condition of enslaved Africans, then this is not your book. Instead of an urban history of port cities, John Darwin has written a characteristically commanding, crystal-clear account of the technological processes and socio-economic implications of steam globalization in the story of European colonialism.

After a long preamble tracing the trade flows of the age of sail, Darwin chronicles the ruthless progression of steam power on global freight and passenger transport following the first transatlantic steam crossing in 1838. The compound engine and global availability of coal meant that by the 1860s it became profitable to send steamers as far as China. Colonel Matthew Perry’s armada to open up Japan in 1853

entailed three steamers and was entirely dependent on refuelling with coal in Singapore. The digging of the Suez Canal and the rise of the steam-liner - alongside the laying of submarine cables and advent of the telegraph - markedly quickened the pace of globalization in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Darwin’s thesis is that port cities were the most aggressive agents of steam globalization. “They were the beachheads from which its influence - commercial, technological and cultural - was expected to penetrate the interior regions behind them.” Chugging out of the coastal cities were the locomotives and paddle steamers (most notably during the First Opium War, 1839-42) which opened up the pastures, forests and plantations for the extractive economies set to enrich European capitals. Port cities were the vehicles for this “great divergence” between West and East as European factories then used the same steam routes to dump manufactured goods on captive markets across Africa and Asia.

A large part of *Unlocking the World* is taken up with charting the technological and economic context of the steam revolution and only halfway through do we arrive at the city’s edge. Darwin begins with New Orleans and “its vast inland empire of riverine commerce that stretched up the Mississippi, the Missouri, the Ohio and its tributaries”. The sugar, slavery, cotton, and richly multicultural make-up of the “Babylon of the South” is expertly covered before we move on to Montreal and then New York. Thence through the “maritime Raj” of Bombay and Calcutta before Hong Kong, Singapore and Shanghai. I would have liked to linger perhaps a little longer at each stop along the line, but more frustrating is the speed with which Darwin dispatches the European metropolises of Marseilles, Antwerp and Genoa during the Indian



Tristram Hunt is Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum. His books include *Ten Cities that Made an Empire, 2014*

Summer of Empire of the early 1900s. “To the novelist Georges Eekhoud, Antwerp was La Nouvelle Carthage”, writes Darwin, “a name meant to imply decay and corruption; its haute bourgeoisie grasping, ruthless and arrogant; its working class oppressed and exploited; the environment despoiled.” And I wished to know much more about the “Entrepot du Congo” and its global footprint.

Among postcolonial scholars the critique of John Darwin’s work and the project he has been most closely associated with, *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, is the terrible pitfall of objectivity, when surely the historian’s real role is to draw up the charge sheet. Darwin jettisons none of his rigorous scholarship in this work, but writes with graphic clarity about the nexus between steam power, free trade and colonial self-interest. “Globalizing capitalism revealed itself as essentially predatory, and alarmingly free from social restraint or moral anxiety in what were grossly under-governed colonial regimes.” Steam provided the coagulant between Free Trade and Empire, conferring on the European nations “an extraordinary disparity in economic and physical power, reversing the long equilibrium between civilizations and continents”. And Victorian Britain was the greatest beneficiary, as its seaborne primacy (with half the world’s mercantile fleet British-owned or flagged by 1910) enforced the highly beneficial terms of that “free trade” through its girdle of well-armed port city garrisons.

Rightly, Darwin also stresses the simultaneous ungovernability of globalization, as the acceleration of people, ideas, technology and information through steam gave rise to anti-colonial movements - of which political Islam was an important component. And he concludes his book by charting the “great convergence” of today, with Eastern economies now dumping their manufactured goods on the vast cargo docks of Southampton, Rotterdam and Los Angeles. Understandably, there are no Kiplings today ready to romanticize super-tankers arriving from Shenzhen. Perhaps the steely geopolitics of this history speaks to the spirit of our containerized age. ■



# WHAT IS AVAXHOME?



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# Bad goods

Lifting the curtain on a cosmos of cheapness

**N. J. STALLARD**

**CRAP**

A history of cheap stuff in America

**WENDY A. WOLOSON**

416pp. University of Chicago Press. \$29.99.



**W**ENDY A. WOLOSON'S history of America's toxic love of cheap consumer goods begins with an episode of the *Twilight Zone* from 1959, in which a kindly sidewalk hawker must attempt to distract Mr Death from taking a girl's soul. To do this, the hawker dazzles Mr Death with a fine array of neckties and the "sales pitch of a lifetime". He describes the polyester fabric as "the most exciting invention since atomic energy" and the sewing thread "as strong as steel yet as fragile and delicate as Shantung silk ... smuggled in by Oriental birds specially trained for ocean travel". Mr Death says he'll buy the lot. The episode, Woloson says, encapsulates the arousing style of American marketing: desperate yet charismatic salesmen and admen, seduction via diversion, and the upselling of trashy goods imported from overseas. Woloson's book is a history of buying "crap" - Magic Wand hand mixers, Beanie Babies, knock-off Staffordshire figurines, devices to measure the freshness of eggs (The Eggs Ray), hair in a can, Thighmasters, Baconizers - as well as a dossier of marketing ploys including one of the most fundamental of all: the "allure of infinite variety", or the art of heterogeny.

"Heterogeny", a neologism coined by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1868 to describe the appeal of randomly juxtaposed goods, adds theatre, thrill and

emotional intrigue to otherwise unexciting or unnecessary purchases (and explains why it can be so stimulating to root through a "bargain bin"). Hawthorne was referring to the showman's tricks of eighteenth-century Yankee pedlars, who, Woloson argues, made "cheap goods come alive, instilling in them a sense of wonder out of all proportion to their true worth - as people recognized". The pedlars' scheme-traps replaced quality with diversity and abundance (razors! silk handkerchiefs! sausage stuffers!) and became the foundation for sales techniques still used by Woolworth's five-and-dimes, TV infomercials, cutesy gift shops, mail-order enterprises, Costco and Target to convince shoppers to buy cheap things they don't really need at that moment, if at all.

Crap, as explained by Woloson, is the end product of consumer mania; "an often exuberant and wholly unapologetic expression of American excess and waste" based on "inartful and deceptive simulations". There is "nothing more American than crap", she writes, before showing how an appetite for Putt-Trainers and Cabbage Patch Dolls was further fuelled by the US's economic dominance after the Second World War and imports from Japan, Taiwan and China (in 1933, for example, an estimated 80 million Made-in-Japan lightbulbs were used to decorate American homes at Christmas) - although a pen-

*N. J. Stallard is a writer, editor and poet based in London. She is the winner of the Hollingworth prize 2020*

chant for knick-knacks produced by exploited labour is no longer a chiefly American condition. The book meticulously categorizes ephemeral goods by selling tactic, including an enthralling chapter on how sales of mid-twentieth-century mass-produced souvenir plates and collectable figurines were driven by sensationalist backstories and artificial scarcity, promoted through magazines and collectors' fan clubs. Calhoun's Collectors Society, who created the Official Bethlehem Christmas Plate in the late 1970s, enlisted a fixer in Tel Aviv to find a Holy Land cleric to provide the imprimatur for the design's publicity, settling on Archimandrite Gregorios of the Greek Church of Bethlehem, whose title sounded suitably fancy - despite the fact he worked as a greeter of tour buses. All of which gives depth and legitimacy to a stock tenet of consumer psychology: through emotional manipulation and a little stagecraft, advertisers can get you to buy almost anything.

Woloson gathers stories of those harmed by the distortion of value that is essential to this runaway system, including the tale of the railroad worker who placed an appeal in the *Railroad Telegrapher* in 1911 for 20,000 Central Union Smoking Tobacco labels which he could trade in for two artificial legs. Almost a year later, he was still 18,000 short of the goal, the generous public having sent him many labels but few of the right brand and so "of no value" (an example, says Woloson, of the impossible targets encouraged by consumer premiums). Then there is the man from Michigan who spent twenty-five years investing more than \$47,000 in Franklin Mint's collectable coins as a retirement fund, only to be told in 2012, at the age of sixty-four, that they are almost worthless. These tales are both cautionary and accusatory. As consumers, we have all bought into this seductive and corrupt system. Even those who think they are immune to buying crap have likely received an "advertising speciality", an incentive to buy more, in the form of a tote bag, free t-shirt or hotel pen. By accepting these "gifts", you have entered the cosmos of crap. In the eyes of the salesperson, that cheap plastic pen in the bottom of your desk drawer means the show is still on. ■

# Material changes

The 'vile' and 'wonderful' afterlives of wool

**ULINKA RUBLACK**

**SHODDY**

From Devil's dust to the renaissance of rags

**HANNA ROSE SHELL**

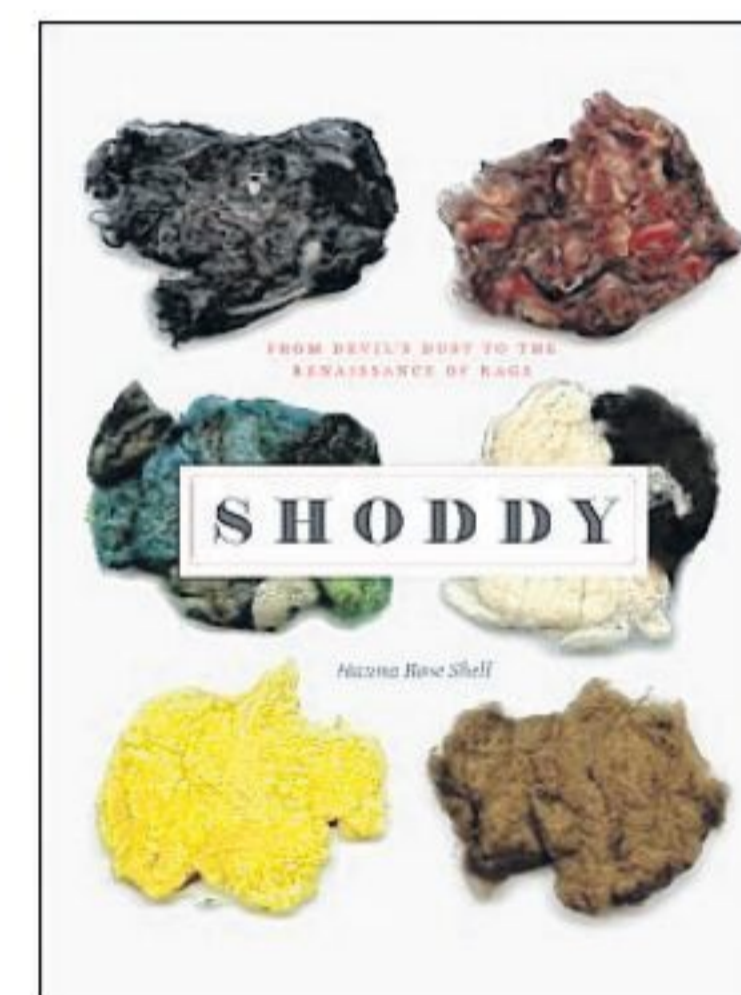
272pp. University of Chicago Press. \$25.

**H**ANNA ROSE SHELL has infused the history of shoddy - a cheap shredded material nowadays often used to fill mattresses - with a keen sense of drama. There are three "acts", rather than chapters, and a heavyweight cast of thinkers. Theoretical sophistication combines with narrative thrust in a remarkable story that moves from nineteenth-century England to today's global ecological concerns around fast fashion. Travelling through modern Britain, Shell spots "mini-Matterhorns" of pulped wool heaped along motorways, relics of the once thriving textile industry.

From the early nineteenth century, shoddy was made by mixing threads from reclaimed wool with new yarn to make suits and other garments, an effective way of recycling. Several West Yorkshire cities were known as "shoddy towns", where people were

employed by mills to sort, shred and card old woolen fabrics with the help of special machines. The fabric quickly became loaded with cultural meaning and turned into a divisive political issue. "By mighty tooth cylinders", the *Westminster Review* commented excitedly in 1859, "the much-vexed fabrics re-enter life in the most brilliant forms." Marx, by contrast, thought of shoddy as excrement, whose use was emblematic of capitalism's relentless drive for more out of less. Engels, when visiting northern England in 1844, deplored the industrial process and working conditions that generated shoddy. The grinding of rags created hazardous dust, paid poorly and created cheap fabrics that left the working classes unprotected from the damp climate of the British Isles. Both reformers agreed that the fabric lasted little in turn, speeding up capitalist production and consumption cycles. They approached shoddy through the German term *Lumpen*, meaning both rags and rascal. Marx's terminology of the *Lumpenproletariat*, then, is rooted in this new material culture of the industrial age. Shoddy, Shell suggests, helped to shape Marx's thinking, and while we may imagine him in a smart wool jacket, given his own struggles, it may well have been shoddy.

The English working classes seem to have liked the fabric, however. Upcycled yarns could in fact be sophisticated, and men paraded their first shoddy suits with pride. Uniforms were a different matter. Modern wars drove the industry on. From the early 1800s, shoddy-production spread to the United States, and it was there that "shoddy" came to be used as an adjective, initially functioning as a shorthand for war profiteering as hundreds of thousands of men did not receive the densely woven, resistant and warming uniforms of their dreams. Political rhetoric turned shoddy into an emblem of patriotic hopes betrayed. Shell's most poignant passages are



*Ulinka Rublack is the author of Dressing Up: Cultural Identity in Renaissance Europe, 2010, and, most recently, a co-editor of The Right to Dress: Sumptuary laws in a global perspective, c.1200-1800, published in 2020*

inspired by monochrome photographs of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1863, in which the bodies of soldiers are strewn across rough ground and "the nobility of the corpse becomes paramount, the body appearing virginal, as if untouched - its purity only reinforced by the shoddy other". For the critically minded, these photographs depicted a rotten body politic moulded onto the skin. Such images also furthered fears that shoddy spread disease. While linen and cotton were easily washable and associated with cleanliness, sickness seemed to seep into shoddy wool. As the cholera bacillus was identified in 1884, moist cloth, such as that worn by immigrants arriving at American seaports, became associated with danger. The stereotype of the unclean, diseased rag-dealer grew, and, once germ theory gained ground, rags became politicized as vile stuff, imported by immigrants, particularly eastern European Jews.

Today, Yorkshire's recycling industry works mainly with unsold clothes (mostly produced in sweatshops) sent by charities, which are baled up and sent to countries such as Poland, where sorting is cheaper. Since the rise of synthetic fabrics, there is less wool than there used to be, which means less opportunity for shoddy of the traditional sort, but whatever there is is reimported and turned into padding and carpets or shipped to second-hand clothing markets overseas. One of the most impressive facets of Shell's research is the deep material knowledge gathered through interviews with workers who remember sorting the stuff, distinguishing wool fibres and different types of synthetics by touch and smell. A woman who farms rhubarb recalls how disintegrating heaps of shoddy once fertilized the soil. "Yeah, marvelous stuff made from rubbish", says one manufacturer of a contemporary type of shoddy used to fill audio-speakers - "wonderful stuff and hateful stuff all becoming the same thing". ■



# They don't make them like that any more

Genres that have fallen out of fashion

**D. J. TAYLOR**

**A**S MIGHT HAVE BEEN EXPECTED, the obituaries of Tom Maschler, one-time kingpin of Jonathan Cape and a legendary figure in the world of London publishing, who died in October at the age of eighty-seven, dished up a fair amount of book-trade history. Less predictably, they also shed a welcome light on one or two of the dusty corridors into which book-trade history rarely strays. In particular, they turned out to be a decade-bestrident wayfarers' guide to the huge spectral library that floats out there on the margins of the modern literary world and consists of the kind of books which publishers no longer care to publish.

By chance, Maschler had, at the end of his career, written one of these items himself and, at the start of it, assembled another. In the first corner came *Publisher* (2005), his account of a long professional life spent sponsoring the novels of, among others, Messrs García Márquez, Naipaul, McEwan, Rushdie and Amis (senior and junior). In the second lurked *Declaration* (1957), one of those works by many hands so characteristic of a decade awash with movements, groups and statements of authorial intent, in which such up-and-coming talents as Doris Lessing, John Osborne and Colin Wilson combined to produce what Maschler called "a series of manifestoes by leading writers in the arts".

Would any mainstream publisher want to bring out a series of manifestoes by leading writers in the arts here in 2021? Would they even underwrite a work like *Publisher*, which, for all its comparatively limited interest to the common reader, belongs to a highly respectable tradition of book-world memorializing that goes all the way back to Grant Richards's *Author Hunting by an Old Literary Sportsman* (1934), Arthur Waugh's *One Man's Road* (1931) and Sir Stanley Unwin's *The Truth About Publishing* (1926)?

One good place to examine the various genres which have fallen off the Waterstones shelf is, naturally, a second-hand bookshop, with its memoirs of Edwardian childhood and self-effacing travel books. But another is the review pages of ancient weekly magazines. Here, for example, is Simon Raven, in an issue of the *Spectator* from September 1957, briskly appraising the autumn's crop of autobiographies. The six books crammed into the 800-word slot available are Sir Robert Bruce Lockhart's *Friends, Foes and Foreigners*, *Life's Adventure* by Philip Gibbs, *The Desert and the Green* by the Earl of Lytton, P. G. Wodehouse's *Over Seventy*, *Without My Wig* by G. D. Roberts and Lael Tucker Wertebaker's *Death of a Man*.

Leaving aside P. G. Wodehouse (who according to the reviewer "has mixed up fact with nonsense in a brusque and sometimes lapidary manner which might earn a little gratitude if one found it on a desert island, for an otherwise worthless book"), Raven's band of memorialists are, respectively, a retired diplomat, a minor novelist, a professional soldier, a distinguished barrister and an American



Detail of cover for *Over Seventy* by P. G. Wodehouse

woman recalling her husband's death from cancer. None of their modern equivalents, you fear - with the possible exception of Ms Wertebaker - would stand the slightest chance of attracting a publishing deal six decades later.

But neither, you imagine, would the book in which, a small matter of six years later, the review was reprinted. This is a work entitled *Boys Will Be Boys*, advertised as "A Simon Raven Miscellany" and published in hard covers by Anthony Blond (himself the author of a publishing memoir, *The Book Book*, 1985) in whose preface even the proud author strikes a defensive note. "No one is concerned to read old book reviews", Raven concedes, while introducing "the body of my work as a casual reviewer and essayist since 1957". On the other hand, he has tried to "give this book a second interest" by adding a commentary explaining "when, why and in what circumstances they came to be produced".

If books of *belles lettres* and reprinted literary journalism have gone the way of all flesh, then so have half-a-dozen old-style publishers' standbys. They include popular theology (these had titles like *Chuck It God*, or *What Would Jesus Say?*), old-fashioned nature poetry about bonny braes and brimming lakes, the Priestley-esque "light essay" or "middle article" that filled up so many mass-market newspapers in the interwar era, books which alleged that alien life-forms had used the deserts of South America for chariot-racing or that the Ark of the Covenant lay concealed in some Greek Orthodox monastery, symposia whose contributors revealed how they had lost their virginity, acquired their first job or suffered their most embarrassing experience, gentlemanly autobiographies (these had titles like *A Classical Education* or *Alma Mater*), and what used to be called "cheer up stuff" by media personalities who had left the hurly-burly of metropolitan life for Cornish mushroom farms or Brecon crags and were anxious to recommend the virtues of the simple life.

Inevitably, they also include numerous varieties of fiction. The original British picaresque of Fielding, Smollett and Dickens vanished in the 1840s along with coach travel as the railways ground on. In an age where print media is in incremental retreat, no one wants novels about journalists. The

"marriage question", which sent so many early-twentieth-century pens into frenzy, has more or less answered itself. Even what the publishing trade of Arthur Waugh and Sir Stanley Unwin knew as the "issue novel", and which lasted for nearly a hundred and fifty years, has somehow fallen off a cliff.

While there are any number of tantalizing outliers, the "issue novel" first made its presence felt amid the early Victorian era's agitation over divorce law reform. Its arch-exponent was Caroline Norton, whose treatment by her husband, the ghastly George Chapple Norton, produced at least two best-selling works, *Stuart of Dunleath* (1851) and *Lost and Saved* (1863) - the latter published six years after the passing of the 1857 Divorce Bill. Then there is the novel of religious doubt - see Mrs Humphry Ward's *Robert Elsmere* (1888), reviewed by Gladstone in the *Nineteenth Century* - closely followed by the temperance novel, the anti-gambling novel and the abused childhood novel (Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*, 1863).

Subsequently, the trail runs off in pursuit of the "superfluous female" of the Victorian census return (George Gissing's *The Odd Women*, 1893, F. M. Mayor's *The Third Miss Symons*, 1913, May Sinclair's *The Life and Death of Harriet Frean*, 1922, and, to a certain extent, George Orwell's *A Clergyman's Daughter*, 1935), before ending up with the "Should nice girls sleep with men?" novel of the postwar era (Kingsley Amis's *Take A Girl Like You*, 1960) and the unwanted-pregnancy novel of the 1960s (Margaret Drabble's *The Millstone*, 1965, Andrea Newman's *The Cage*, 1966).

There was even, come the eco-conscious 1970s, a brief vogue for the eco-novel in which gangs of outraged citizenry banded together to frustrate the developers and see off road-building schemes (Judy Cooke's *New Road*, 1975, Raymond Williams's *The Fight for Manod*, 1979). What did for the issue novel? On the one hand, books which surf self-consciously in and out of the tides of history soon become dated, as the dilemmas they advertise get solved. Divorce became easier. Nice girls slept with men. Illegitimacy ceased to be a stigma. On the other, there is a suspicion that novel readers, and novel publishers, began to demand different things from the books they were reading.

Victorian readers, by and large, expected that their fiction should have a "message", to the point where they often insisted on finding one where none existed. It was the message, after all, in age where fiction itself struggled to evade the charge of light-mindedness, that made novels important. Gladstone, again, sending a postcard to George Moore congratulating him on *Esther Waters* (1894), assumed that because a certain amount of the novel took place at the racetrack it was a treatise against gambling. Modern readers, you suspect, are less keen on propagandizing and on characters who represent things other than themselves. If there have, so far, been comparatively few "Brexit novels", then this is probably because most novelists (and most readers) despair of finding a treatment that can adequately convey the consequences of the 2016 Referendum.

Meanwhile, a whole host of books that delighted, or perhaps more accurately were tolerated by, a bygone generation of readers have marched off to the remainder bin. My own shelves are full of them - *Poets and Conspirators* (collected reviews by D. J. Enright), *Try Anything Once* (Raymond Mortimer, ditto) *Lady Adle Remembers: Being the memoirs of Lady Adle of Eigg* by Mary Dunn (spoof aristocratic reminiscences); *Jam Tomorrow* by Sir Basil Bartlett Bt (gentlemanly autobiography). Some arts-world institution or private philanthropist ought to endow a prize for the publisher keenest on keeping these archaisms from the publishing vault alive. It could be called the Superannuation prize and the winner would probably be a memoir of childhood in a Suffolk rectory, a book of poems about a favourite dog or a leisurely travel book called *St Cast to Quimper: Wanderings in Brittany*. Who knows, it would probably have the edge on this year's Booker prize. ■

“  
Victorian readers expected that their fiction should have a 'message', to the point where they often insisted on finding one where none existed

D. J. Taylor's latest books are *Lost Girls: Love, war and literature 1939-1951, 2019*, and *On 'Nineteen Eighty-Four': A biography, 2019*





# Loss of character

Two actors in search of an audience

**JOHN STOKES**

**STAGED**  
BBC iPlayer

**A**CTORS ARE OFTEN TEASED about their dependence on an audience. What should they do, then, when it suddenly disappears overnight? One answer, at least for now, might lie in turning to their colleagues for friendly reassurance, if not always for guaranteed applause.

The first series of *Staged*, in six fifteen-minute episodes, was broadcast in June last year; a second series, presumably made during the partial easing of restrictions, is also now available. At first the show hardly seemed original. Written and directed by Simon Evans, it is led by two well-known actors – David Tennant and Michael Sheen – the initial idea being, perhaps, that the pair would appear to adlib about their individual careers, past, present and future, much as Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon chat while eating and Bob Mortimer and Paul Whitehouse reminisce while fishing. The difference would be that whereas previously the conversationalists might travel from restaurant to restaurant or river to river, Tennant and Sheen would be stuck at home video-calling during the lockdown, frustratedly but amusingly tied to their computers. So it turned out, although a tension, an underlying nervousness, was palpable. Rarely mentioned, the pandemic was always present, occasionally surfacing in external

shots of melancholy London streets. There was a single brush with the physical reality of Covid-19, although the show's comic demands meant that this came to nothing. Not that the pair were alone by any means. They had company, both actual in the shape of partners and children, and virtual: the director Evans playing himself along with a couchload of celebrities from Michael Palin to Whoopi Goldberg, brought in to comment on the hopefully hilarious badinage. Evans was smart enough to ensure that *Staged* passed the well-known Bechdel test whereby to be acceptable a play must include at least two women who talk about matters other than men. It wasn't far into the first series before the "boys" were being up-screened by Georgia Tennant and Anna Lundberg, as well as by Evans's sister, Lucy Eaton. Even now there are occasions when the show feels like a revival of *Men Behaving Badly*, with twenty-first-century attitudes and beards.

In the second series, male competitiveness – that other supposed professional weakness – still dominates as the pair continue to demonstrate not so much grace under pressure as technique under strain. Confinement to a video call doesn't stop them from showing off their currently under-exposed skills at rhetorical delivery, indicative gesture and full-body movement. Proximity to and distance from the computer screen creates a performative axis for displays of passion, as close to physical violence as virtuality will allow, countered by phases of complete withdrawal. Sheen, in particular, exploits the power of profile to convey wounding inattention, while Tennant understands the effect of

**Michael Sheen and David Tennant**

“  
**Staged makes insiders, backstageers, of us all**

*John Stokes is Emeritus Professor of Modern British Literature at King's College London*

being, in his own favourite word, “inert”. Given the absence of barbers, hair takes on a newly expressive function: Tennant's is long and lank, flickable in a tantrum; Sheen's is angry and shaggy, bristling with personality. And, of course, they are at liberty to employ a full range of impersonations, regional accents, animal noises. They recall their Shakespearean successes: a pensive Richard II from Tennant, a martial Henry V from Sheen.

If impressive party tricks were all that were involved, *Staged* might still seem no more than an opportunistic addition to established (and remunerative) TV genres, an excuse for post-show chat and chat-show posturing. The clue that there might be something more going on is present in the very first episode of the first series. We learn that, when the pandemic struck, Simon, David and Michael had been working on a brand new production, and that their current scheme is to rehearse the play online so as to be ready to move into the West End the minute the ban is lifted. The play in question is *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Pirandello's modernist masterpiece, unrivalled for its exploration of game-playing illusion and shifting identity, and for a self-reflexive plot in which a troupe of actors is called on to represent a real-life family in crisis. This they achieve to the point of replacing the family entirely, stealing its experience. Something of the same entanglement takes place in *Staged* when, in the course of the second series, the first series is taken up by American TV – Tennant and Sheen find themselves dropped as being insufficiently “known” across the Atlantic, but nonetheless obliged to give notes to the very actors who will replace them.

Performing yourself is one thing (according to Pirandello we all do it, all the time); being performed by a rival is quite another. The guiding prefix for this kind of dramatic situation is, of course, “meta”, and the metatheatrical convolutions of *Staged* deepen considerably, although it remains cabined, cribbed and confined by technology, professional where Pirandello is philosophical and deliberately trivial where he is potentially tragic. Among the many meta moments are a ferocious debate about the unacknowledged contribution that actors make when they improvise around a script (leading to a row about the “ownership” of *Staged*) along with bickering about billing and the humiliation of being a second choice. The traditional egotism of actors is matched by the deviousness of directors (Evans showing up very badly here) and the inconstancy of agents. We witness the ever-present existential danger of dropping into character off-stage. Guest appearances by yet more celebrity actors reinforce the mutually enclosed atmosphere. When Tennant and Sheen try to back out of a commitment, they are rebuked by an imperious Dame Judi Dench: “we're actors, when we say yes we do the bloody job”. Phoebe Waller-Bridge, “the monologue woman”, is called in to do a rewrite and, being female, immediately “makes it funnier”.

To be reminded of the absurdities as well as the achievements of what we are currently missing offers an unexpected respite from isolation. *Staged* may not always look or sound very insightful but at its sharpest it provides evidence of the degree of self-awareness that the arts of performance can bring to our lives. Inevitably, there's a danger that the show will become over-familiar, much as the lockdown risks becoming over-familiar. So far that hasn't happened. *Staged* is about now. It's designed for those of us who mourn the buzz in the bar, the critic's sting and the columnist's indiscretion, who love ancient anecdotes and recent rumours, who enjoy recounting the hits and the misses of prominent personalities. It makes insiders, backstageers, of us all. Instead of complaining about theatrical aristocracy amusing itself under the guise of amusing others, we should simply appreciate the show as “first choice” talent standing in for all those other actors, unemployed but equally brilliant, who are stuck in their rooms shouting at a tiny screen. ■



# From ditzy sitcom to surreal menace

Marvel's new genre-bending TV

**ROZ KAVENEY**

**WANDA VISION**

Disney+



**W**HEN CONSIDERING POPULAR CULTURE, we often have to look backwards at context, at the story so far, the fragmentary clips assembled as "Previously on ..." Thus, when Disney's streaming service Disney+ announced *WandaVision* as their first TV show linked to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, there are certain things their assumed primary audience is expected to know already.

Among these are that Vision is an artificial person given autonomy and something like a soul by the Mindstone, an arcane artefact; that Wanda Maximoff has reality-bending powers; that somehow they managed to fall in love. Moreover, that Vision is dead, the Mindstone ripped out of his head by the

**Elizabeth Olsen and Paul Bettany in *WandaVision***

◀ *Roz Kaveney's critical works include Superheroes! Capes and crusaders in comics and films, 2007*

*Kate Bingham's most recent pamphlet, Archway Sonnets, was published in 2020*

genocidal Thanos at the end of *Infinity War*: that when Wanda was returned to existence in *Endgame*, she attacked Thanos with her powers and a terrifying degree of fury...

It is very disconcerting, then, to see them as a blithe young couple in black-and-white arriving in the suburb of Westview in a pitch-perfect pastiche of 1950s situation comedy: the veteran Dick Van Dyke acted as consultant. Neighbours are almost overbearingly friendly, the boss is a bully, comic misunderstandings abound. Wanda can do magic but, in keeping with the production values, we can see the wires when she does. But all is not as it seems. Vision's office job is meaningless to a Kafkaesque degree, and the end credits are being watched on

a monitor by someone in a 2020s office.

And things change: the second episode has animated titles and location shots and a racially integrated neighbourhood. A toy helicopter falls out of the air and is in colour: a beekeeper emerges from a sewer. Suddenly Wanda is pregnant and the screen is colourized. The third episode changes again to the 1970s mere minutes later and Wanda gives birth to twins. The neighbours' comments grow ever more cryptic and, when their neighbour Geraldine remembers the death of Wanda's brother (in *Avengers - Age of Ultron*) she is expelled from this sub-reality.

We wonder what exactly is going on and many of us have more information than the characters involved. The Marvel Cinematic Continuity is not the same as the comics but is cognate with it: we know that Wanda is a lot more dangerous than the ditzy Lucille Ball figure she seems here - that she can utterly rewrite reality. In a blink-and-miss-it moment, it becomes clear that Vision is still a shattered corpse and yet he is self-aware enough to suggest they leave.

The Marvel films have always been good at exploring other genres - *Ant Man* was a heist movie, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* was as much high-school romance as superhero film - but the Netflix Marvel TV shows, however good some individual episodes were, tended to be tin-eared neo-noir full of fights in corridors. Four episodes in, *WandaVision* is a lot more inventive: a history of sitcoms based in a deep understanding of them that is also a piece of surreal Lynchian menace. It is impressive that Marvel and Disney both took such a risk with their first streamed show and seem to be pulling it off.

The canonical Marvel films have always had surprisingly deep texture - a particularly fine point is that Wanda grew up in an impoverished Eastern European country and old sitcoms, viewed out of order, might be her idea of American reality. I fear the process of her learning otherwise is going to be fascinating, terrifying and compulsively watchable. ■

## Here

The line between the ocean and the sky is not a line and not, itself, the curve of Earth's one surface falling away but, rather, just as far as we can see - a limit, or frontier, the human eye for all its brain-power and optic nerve can't cross - now a closing blur of grey, now a distant clear blue boundary, a width of air dividing wet from dry, like glass whose thickness we only observe side-on, though we look through it all day imagining, sometimes, infinity, that abstract geometrical idea, out of reach, three short miles from here

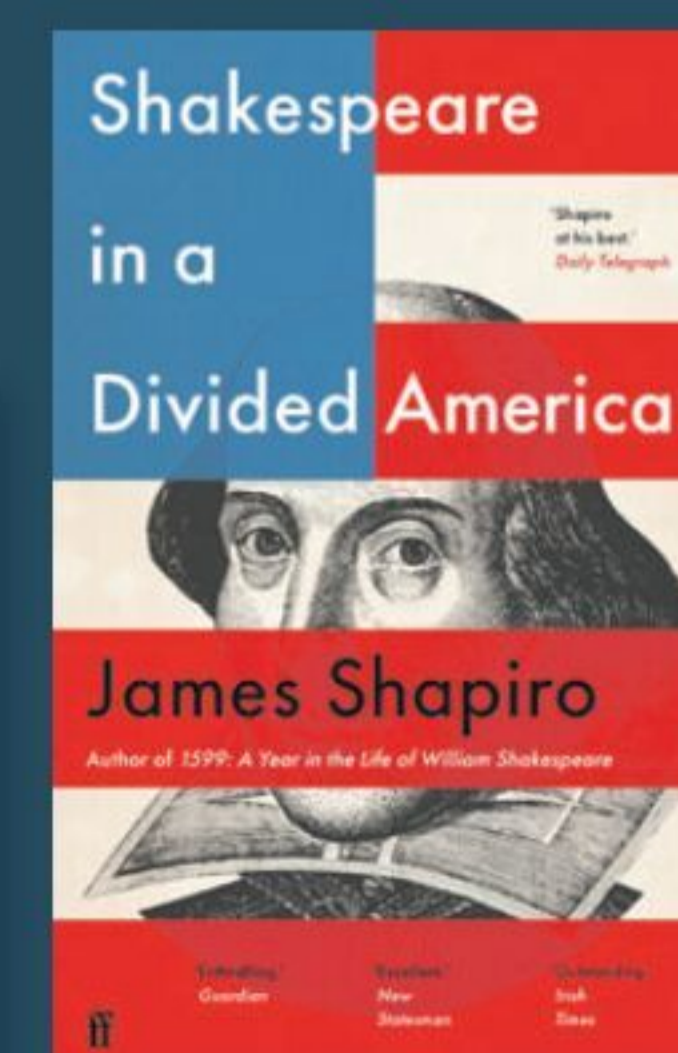
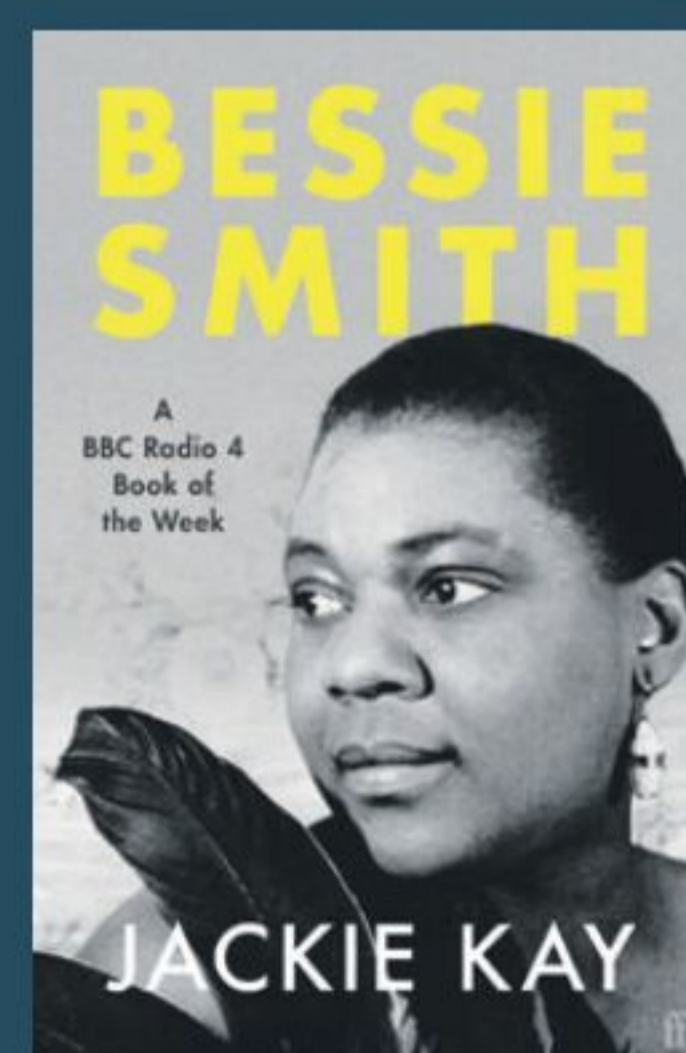
and what I think I mean is, standing here the body opens into an idea of the horizon as infinity - a line that circles, one long lonely day so long I am not able to observe it passing, even as the pebbles dry, a boundary that has no boundary only degrees and densities of grey or this wide blue I need to hold my nerve to look through, that unbalances the eye with its too little and too much to see, this empty feeling, far enough away to seem straightforward, though the oceans curve and weather comes and goes across the sky.

**KATE BINGHAM**

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# Drunk or metaphysical?

Jon Fosse's seven-part meditation on doubt, faith, art, identity - and alcohol

**KEVIN BRAZIL**

**I IS ANOTHER**

Septology III-V

**JON FOSSE**

Translated by Damion Searls

304pp. Fitzcarraldo. Paperback, £12.99.

**I**N *SOME RAIN MUST FALL* (TLS, March 11, 2016), the fifth volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard's *My Struggle* series, the twenty-year-old Knausgaard attends a workshop and submits a poem for assessment to the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse. "The first line, he said, is a cliché, you can cross that out." So is the second, third and fourth. Only one image in Knausgaard's poem, "wide-screen sky", passes muster. "I've never seen that before. You can keep that."

For many English-speaking readers, this may have been a first encounter with Fosse, even though, now aged sixty-one, he is one of Norway's most celebrated writers, granted the use of Grotten, a royal residence, by the King of Norway in recognition of his achievement. This scene also suggests why Fosse is comparatively less well-known than his compatriot. If Knausgaard has as little problem with writing clichés as with writing about himself, Fosse compulsively avoids both. As he has admitted, "I cannot help writing fiction" - something that places him outside the recent taste for novels steeped in barely disguised autobiography.

Fosse's belief that literary innovation requires negation, of cliché as well as of the self, places him in a tradition of writers such as Thomas Bernhard, László Krasznahorkai, Daša Drndić, Clarice Lispector and above all Samuel Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* motivated Fosse's play *Someone Is Going To Come* (1996). Fosse shares a common weapon with these writers in their struggle: a style that tends towards torrents of unpunctuated sentences, relentless blasts against conventional syntax and the reader's patience. Fosse calls this "slow prose", yet this doesn't necessarily make for slow reading; you can fight a current, trying to cling to what you know, or you can let go and take the risk of drowning.

Fosse's *Septology* series consists of seven parts; the



Jon Fosse, Frankfurt Book Fair, 2019

first two were published in English as *The Other Name* (2019); parts three, four and five have now been packaged up as *I Is Another*; and the concluding two will appear later this year as *The New Name*. All are translated by Damion Searls, who deserves much praise for bringing Fosse to an English-speaking audience over the past two decades.

The series is narrated by an elderly painter, Asle, who lives in the fictional town of Dylgja in the Norwegian countryside. Each part tells the story of one day in his life, one successive day per part; each begins with a meditation on the same painting, of a purple and brown cross, and ends in a monologue of Catholic prayer. Neither art nor faith offers Asle consolation: he returns to his painting every morning because he isn't sure whether it is any good; he ends his day in prayer, worrying, "now do I really believe in this, no, not really". Asle fills his days recalling his past, his deceased wife Ales, and obsessing about another Asle, also a painter, a drunk who lives alone in the nearby city of Bjørgvin. Yet in the narrator's telling, these two Asles, his past self and his "Name-sake", quickly become hard to distinguish: "I'm driving north in the dark and I see Asle sitting there on the sofa ... and he's dressed just like I'm dressed, black pants and pullover".

Kevin Brazil's *What Ever Happened To Queer Happiness* is forthcoming

In part one, the narrator drives from Bjørgvin to Dylgja and back again, and by chance passes the drunken Asle unconscious in the snow. After dropping him off at a hospital, he encounters another drunk, a woman called Guro (or is it Silje?), who claims to have had a relationship with the narrator, of which he has no memory. In the subsequent three parts, as Asle drives back and forth to and from Bjørgvin, preparing for an exhibition, he recalls increasingly harrowing memories of a character he calls "Asle" - though whether it is the narrator himself or the Asle now hospital, it is never quite clear. At the end of the fifth part, Asle's recollections of his past have progressed to the point where he first met his "namesake", drinking in a bar, both preparing to study at art school in Bjørgvin. If *Septology* is an extended meditation on the nature of identity, it is also about alcoholism. That Asle cannot remember the affair with Guro - who, in another doubling, shares a name with his neighbour Åselik's sister - might be the source of intense metaphysical speculation. It might also have been because he was drunk.

There is a particular kind of confidence possessed by the writer who refuses to take his work completely seriously. As with Beckett or Bernhard, Fosse undercuts his metaphysics with slapstick comedy. Are Asle and Asle really the same person, or is it simply the case that sometimes "people look like other people"? Risk is also central to the novel's treatment of faith. Fosse wrestles with the contradictions of what can be called a kind of negative theology in the vein of the medieval mystic Meister Eckhardt, whom Asle cites in his prayers. He admits that "Gott ist nichts, was man in Worte fassen kann" (God cannot be grasped in language), yet he offers sprawling disquisitions on theology and metaphysics, as if he might, by chance, find the formula of words to define the divine. And as for faith, so too with art. Asle constantly reminds us that painting, not writing, "shows something that can't be said". So what are we, as readers, to make of this document?

This lack of sincerity and self-belief is what, paradoxically, makes Fosse far more sincere than his student Knausgaard, and indeed many an author of confidently narcissistic autofiction. Fosse's style makes demands on its reader. And at a time when the scope of so many novels has narrowed to what their thinly disguised authors ate for breakfast, Fosse's belief that writing about mundane details can lead us away from the kitchen table and to the discovery of "something that silently speaks in and behind the words and sentence" makes his *Septology*, for all its self-doubt, worth every risk of reading. ■

## Now is the time!

A young man's encounter with the seven deadly sins

**HARRY STRAWSON**

**SEVEN NIGHTS**  
**SIMON STRAUSS**

Translated by Eve Bacon and Lee Bacon

138pp. Rare Bird. \$16.

**"I** AM WRITING THIS OUT OF FEAR", announces the narrator, S, at the beginning of Simon Strauss's slim debut novel *Seven Nights*. Strauss might be better served by a more literal rendering of the German: S is twenty-nine and writing out of *Angst* at the prospect of turning thirty - a transition, he worries, that means deciding on "a life, job, a woman", and stifling the passions of youth. He quotes Schiller: "Our best seeds for the great and good are buried under the pressures of bourgeois life".

In S's mind, it is not too late, however. "There's still time to band together, to start a group with the

name 'New Sensualism'", he writes in a manifesto-like first chapter. "I'll start academies that research emotions, not theories. Where you don't leave your heart on the cafeteria tray." The opportunity to research emotions out in the field arrives in the form of a Faust-like pact proposed by a near-stranger ("he looked at me and led me into temptation"). The deal is this: over seven nights the stranger will send S out into the city to encounter one of the seven deadly sins. In return S must write seven pages recounting his experience by 7am the next day.

The week-long sin-spree is framed with a reference to Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* of 1843 (published, incidentally, when Kierkegaard was twenty-nine) in which hedonistic "aesthetic" lives are contrasted with responsible "ethical" lives. In seven short, diaristic chapters, S rehearses this dilemma as he seeks to defy the cynicism and apathy of the adult world: now is the time "to decide: either-or". We follow S as he bungee jumps (pride), eats meat at a flash restaurant (gluttony), gambles on the horses



Harry Strawson lives in London

(greed), browses library shelves "wanting to be Rimbaud" (envy), watches with indifference a xenophobic speech on late-night television (sloth), attends a masked ball (lust) and sits in a car (wrath).

The project S undertakes is not so much "seven nights against time" as seven nights against the times. "Aren't you ashamed", S addresses the reader, "not to have an answer to the question: what is an opinion of yours that the majority doesn't share?" For example, now that "eating meat has become evil", he explains, while eating beef in a restaurant, carnivorousism is for he who "does not imitate what others do". S eats meat "to disagree with myself and my time". He also does it to be manly (he cites Gramsci and Hemingway), though in truth, S is someone who "takes ear plugs to the concert" (*sic*), "puts his socks on the kitchen table the night before to save time on the way to work" and "can't even open his girlfriend's bra with his left hand".

In its energy and enthusiasm (as well as its occasional poor judgement), *Seven Nights* succeeds as a document of youth, though Strauss's provocations of political correctness are not original, deeply felt, or even particularly minority. The thrill of going against the grain is as close as we get to the sensualism promised at the outset. If the enterprise occasionally feels sophomoric, however, it comes with the ready-made excuse that this is part of the point. ■



# Everyone the centre of a world

The tale of five young lives that never were but might have been

**LINDSAY DUGUID**

**LIGHT PERPETUAL  
FRANCIS SPUFFORD**

326pp. Faber. £16.99.

**F**RANCIS SPUFFORD'S GENEROUS writing style combines a close-up view of events with a distant perspective. In his first novel, *Golden Hill* (TLS, July 15, 2016), set in pre-revolutionary America, the rich descriptions and wide panoramas were the literary equivalent of high production values in the cinema. *Light Perpetual* is similarly exhilarating. A sense of history also infuses everything. The novel opens on a Saturday afternoon in 1944 with a searing description of a V-2 rocket attack in South London. Five small children who are in Woolworths with their mothers are killed and their futures wiped out, eliminating "All the would-be's, might-be's, could-be's of the decades to come". The narrative then follows the putative lives of Jo, Valerie, Alec, Ben and Vernon in five carefully dated sections from 1949 to 2009, moving from a world of bombsites, false teeth and National Health specs to one of mix-tapes, postcodes and doner kebabs.

In spite of the suggestion of an alternate reality in the novel's high-concept format, *Light Perpetual*



**Prams containing evacuees' possessions, after the V-1 and V-2 attack scare ended, Euston, September 1944**

is firmly fixed in time and space. The separate stories are typical both of the main characters' personalities and of their era. Elements of a serial or family saga are part of the pleasure, alongside narrative shocks, comic moments, horrifying incidents and moving contemplations of past and present. Ordinary things, such as football matches, buses and singing lessons, both change and remain the same. The passing of time is charted in details of money, clothes and houses, as well as in more subtle signs, such as the attitude of teachers to pupils and the teachings of the Church. Place is important. The central setting is the Borough of Bexford with its market square, Odeon cinema, church and war memorial, and its big houses on the hill ripe for gentrification. Bexford is north of Sidcup, "in the eaves of London", a suburb set against glimpses of the city's brown river, its distant smells of petrol and smoke and the glint of a plane on the flight path to Heathrow.

It is in London proper that bad things happen.

*Lindsay Duguid is a freelance writer*

In 1964 greedy Vern sets about conning investments for his Rent Act-dodging housing scheme over a rich lunch in a French restaurant in Mayfair. Vern's victim is an up-and-coming Millwall football player who is earning "about twenty-six pounds ten shillings a week"; a fellow diner is Maria Callas. The same year, not far away in Soho, Jo sings with a girl band at the Pelican Club. Her twin sister Val rides pillion on a scooter to sunny bank holiday Margate, gets high on dexedrine, and meets her fate in the form of a man in a peacock blue suit.

The year of the midlife crisis is 1979. Ben, a bus conductor who has always grappled with nightmarish visions, collects the fares on the 36C from Bexford to Queen's Park and is saved in a stand-off with a gang of skinheads by the West Indian bus driver Trevor. Clever Alec, who started work on the local paper, now has a job as a typesetter on *The Times*. He copes with unions and picket lines, aware of the clanking of the outdated printing machinery and of the change on Gray's Inn Road as it runs from the "enclosed playground for lawyers" in Holborn to the "scuzziness" of King's Cross. In 1994 Val is involved in a racially motivated murder in an underground car park in Camden, while Ben finds salvation in marriage and the church. In the final section, set in 2009, life's weary course is almost played out and we see the long-term effects of impulsive actions in divorce, bereavement, prison, a care home and a hospice, with the promise of hope in marriage, children, stepchildren and grandchildren, as well as in a wider, more inclusive society. Memories of the past blend with visions of the future: "There's no such thing as forever".

Spufford's tone is benign and unsatirical throughout, with the occasional hint of malice (there is Val's rival in California, a blonde girl "trying hard to fall out of a halter top"; Alec's struggles with his role as "the tetchy granddad"). Quotations from songs and prayers, and moments of intense meditation, provide a counterbalance to the detailed descriptions of daily life and return the continuing narratives to the original metaphysical impetus and the idea that everyone is the centre of a world around which events assemble. ■

## Cannibal culture

A comedic take on the shibboleths of an imaginary community

**GERALD JACOBS**

**MOTHER FOR DINNER  
SHALOM AUSLANDER**

272pp. Picador. £16.99.

**W**HILE WE ARE ALL FAMILIAR with the dictum, commonly attributed to Mark Twain, that "truth is stranger than fiction", less familiar is the reason Twain gave for this: "because Fiction is obliged to stick to possibilities; Truth isn't".

Try telling that to Shalom Auslander, whose new novel, *Mother for Dinner*, concerns domestic cannibalism in contemporary New York, a theme that most would agree brazenly flouts Twain's "obligation". Yet the writing has such an inner logic and consistency that it conceals its potentially destabilizing undercurrents and, remarkably, gives Auslander's bizarre story the ring of authenticity.

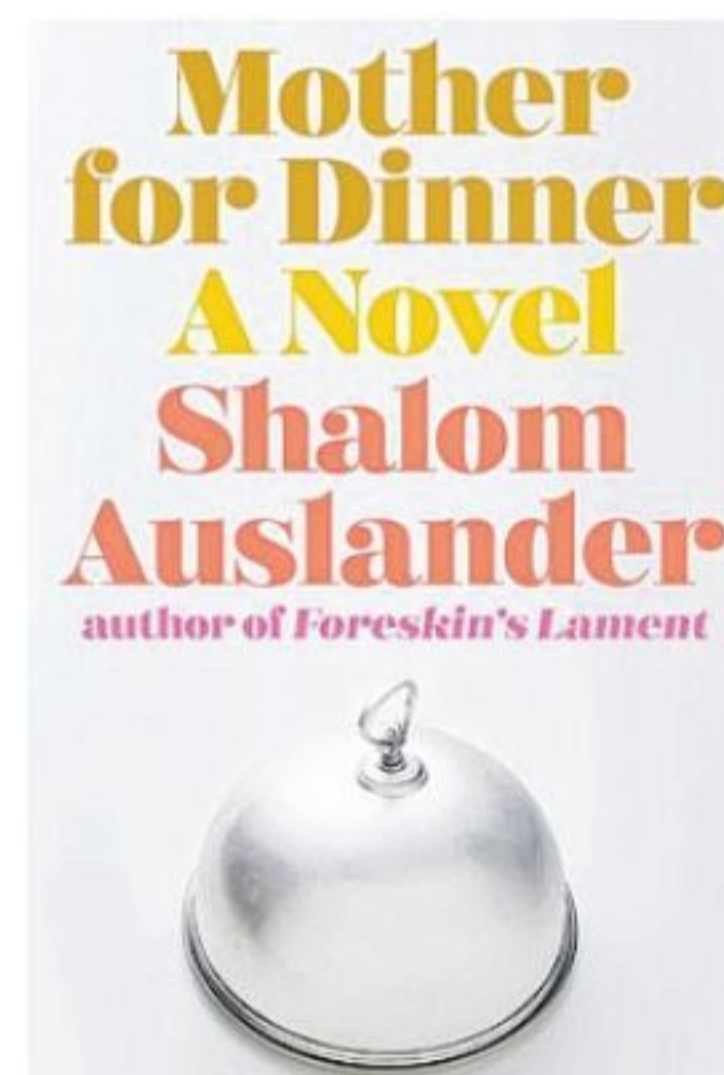
A monstrous matriarch is dying and making herself ready for her gigantic, purposely fattened body to be ceremoniously eaten by her many children. The plot is largely concerned with those children's deliberations about whether and how to do this. The family is part of a marginalized community: "Can-Ams" (Cannibal Americans) and its matriarch, who is also a bigoted bully, is named Mudd Seltzer. Her thirteen

rectilinear offspring (all but one are sons) are named according to their order of birth: "First", "Second", "Third" and so on. The sole female in this world of traditional tribal succession is called "Zero".

The central character is Seventh, who works in a New York publishing house where every manuscript submitted is a farcical variation of an identity-political novel, authored by such aspirants as a "Gender-Fluid-Hearing-Impaired-Liberal-Democratic-Palestinian-Canadian-American". "It's about time", says the *New York Times's* rave review of this particular offering.

Seventh is an ironic reader and admirer of Montaigne, and quotes him repeatedly, identifying with the great essayist's outsider status, which Auslander himself perhaps does, having grown up profoundly unhappily in a severe Haredi Jewish family in Monsey, New York - an experience he has described in his memoir, *Foreskin's Lament* (2007).

To many religious American Jews, Auslander is an *enfant* even more terrible than Philip Roth, if not quite operating at the same literary level. Where Roth publicly disdained all religious people, Auslander has gone further, venting his resentment bitterly - and wittily - in his writing, principally in *Foreskin's Lament* and the novel, *Hope: A tragedy* (2012), both of which render the lineaments of Haredi practice and the shibboleths of modern Jewish history as a theatre of the absurd. *Hope: A tragedy* audaciously reincarnates Anne Frank as a filthy, foul-mouthed harridan.



*Mother for Dinner* is not as funny as those two books, but it provides plenty of dark laughs and inspired comedic riffs as Auslander describes the solemn yet preposterous details of Can-Am life: how should the loved one's corpse be drained, cut up and divided? And with what instruments? How long should the interval be between death and digestion? And then there is the blessing: "May you be drained as your ancestors were before you". The rituals, proverbs and aphorisms of Cannibal American culture have their obvious corollary in the religious community of the author's childhood. Mudd even echoes the concluding Passover wish for "Next Year in Jerusalem" with her annual invocation: "Next Year in New Jersey".

It seems clear that Shalom Auslander is still fighting his own demons, throwing off the weight of old commandments. And, in his fiction, still sticking, after all, to Mark Twain's possibilities. ■

### Spooked?

**Camilla del Grazia**

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*Gerald Jacobs is the literary editor of the Jewish Chronicle. His latest book is the novel Pomeranski, 2020*



# Staying on the steamship

How Pushkin got a modern makeover

**JULIA VAINGURT**

**THE UNLIKELY FUTURIST**

Pushkin and the invention of originality in Russian Modernism

**JAMES RANN**

280pp. University of Wisconsin Press. \$79.95.

**I**N THEIR MANIFESTO “A Slap in the Face of Public Taste” (1912), the Russian futurists David Burlyuk, Alexei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Velimir Khlebnikov declared their aspiration to break with literary tradition and to create in radically new ways. Casting themselves as poetic hooligans, the “slappers” vowed to “throw Pushkin, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy ... from the steamship of modernity”.

Scholars have typically taken these outrageous claims at face value, but James Rann’s excellent book offers a correction. Despite promising to do away with Alexander Pushkin, the Russian futurists seemed unable to stop addressing, quoting, alluding to and otherwise engaging with their grand predecessor. *The Unlikely Futurist* seeks to explain why they could not let Pushkin go. In the process, it offers a sophisticated revision of the futurists’ complex relationship with the Russian literary tradition of which Pushkin is the central pillar.

Rann’s argument hinges on a paradox: by metaphorically killing off Pushkin, the futurists in fact disinterred and resurrected his poetry. If the official cult of Pushkin had stultified the poet, then the futurists’ endeavours made Pushkin new. According to the formalist critic (and friend to the futurists) Victor Shklovsky, art sharpens our awareness of reality by “defamiliarizing” habitual perceptions. In Rann’s reading, the futurists’ defamiliarization of Pushkin was itself an enactment of the renewing power of art.

The futurists indeed evinced an affinity with Pushkin, albeit not with the Pushkin perpetuated by Soviet mythmaking. This latter, idealized version emphasized the poet’s Apollonian clarity, earnestness and order. Yet it also sanitized his image, effacing the bawdy, uncouth, experimental and rebellious elements that appealed to avant-garde poets.

It was by treating Pushkin with irreverence that the futurists unshackled him from his monumentality and brought him into their future-oriented contemporaneity. The poetic conquest of time was futurism’s cherished aim, and Rann shows how each



Julia Vaingurt is Associate Professor of Russian Studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago and the author of *Wonderlands of the Avant-Garde: Technology and the arts in Russia of the 1920s*, 2013

of his protagonists - Khlebnikov, Mayakovsky and Kruchenykh - drew inspiration for his own preoccupation with time from Pushkin’s poetry. Khlebnikov took up Pushkin’s theme of poetry as prophecy, while Mayakovsky’s interest in immortality manifested itself in a fixation on the Pushkinian imagery of statues and their animation. Rann shows how Mayakovsky updated two poetic genres - the *exegi monumentum* and the elegiac conversation with the dead - by not only addressing the dead Pushkin, but also having him get off his own pedestal and take a stroll. By inciting Pushkin to get moving, the futurist iconoclast revitalized him for the modern age.

The chapter on Kruchenykh is particularly eye-opening. A major figure in Russian cubo-futurism, Kruchenykh is admired less for his poetic talent than for his conceptual ingenuity. His most famous poetic creation is the short verse “Dyr bul shchyl”, written in the universal language of *zaum*. While sounding somewhat similar to Russian, the poem’s clusters of letters did not form recognizable words. Yet for Kruchenykh they conveyed a meaning that lay “beyond sense” and therefore required no translation. Rann offers an innovative reading of *500 New Witticisms and Puns from Pushkin* (1924), in which Kruchenykh repurposed actual quotations from Pushkin in order to make them more *zaum*-like. Revealing the sonic properties of Pushkin’s own verse, Kruchenykh transformed him into a cubo-futurist, as well.

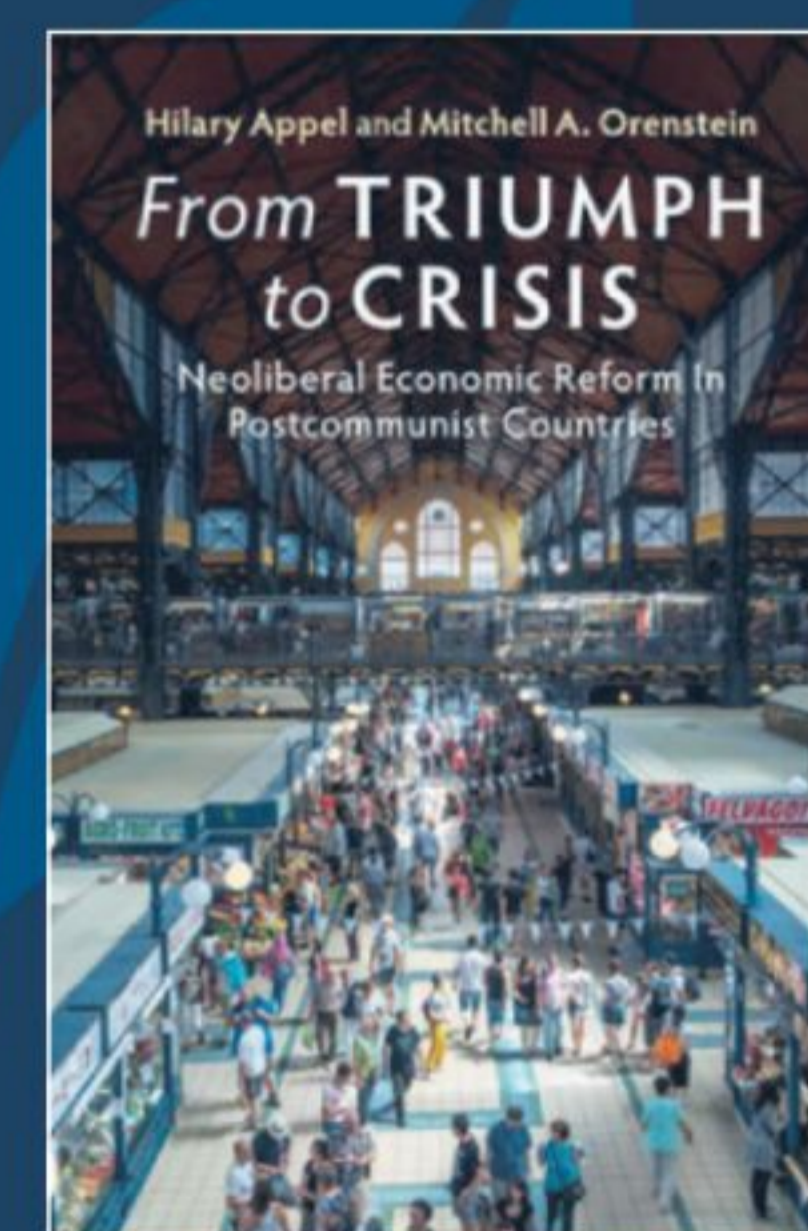
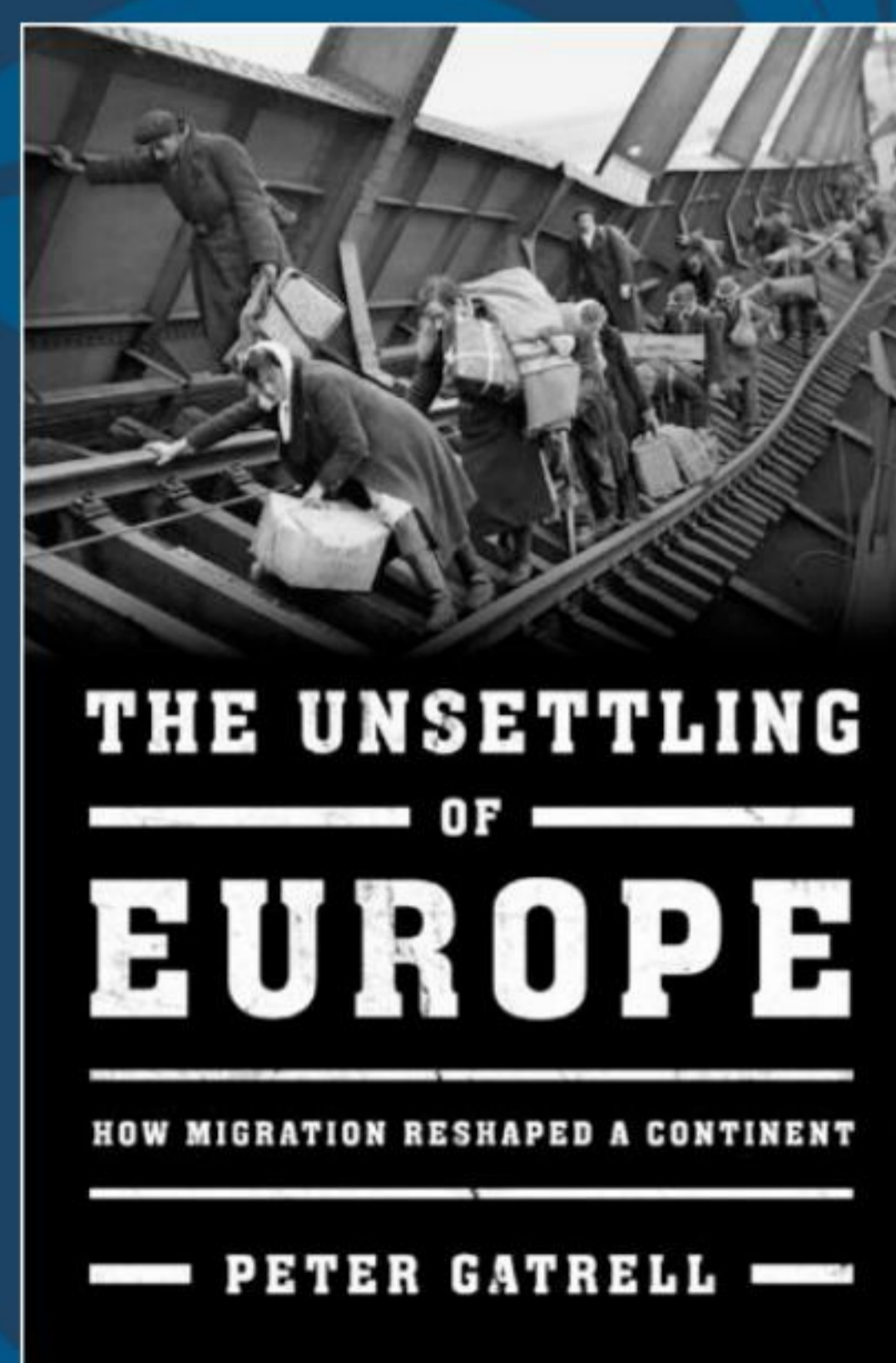
Just as the futurists defamiliarized and revitalized Pushkin, James Rann revitalizes Russian futurism by illuminating its productive tensions and paradoxes. It is precisely such contradictions that keep the avant-garde forever on edge, perpetually new. ■



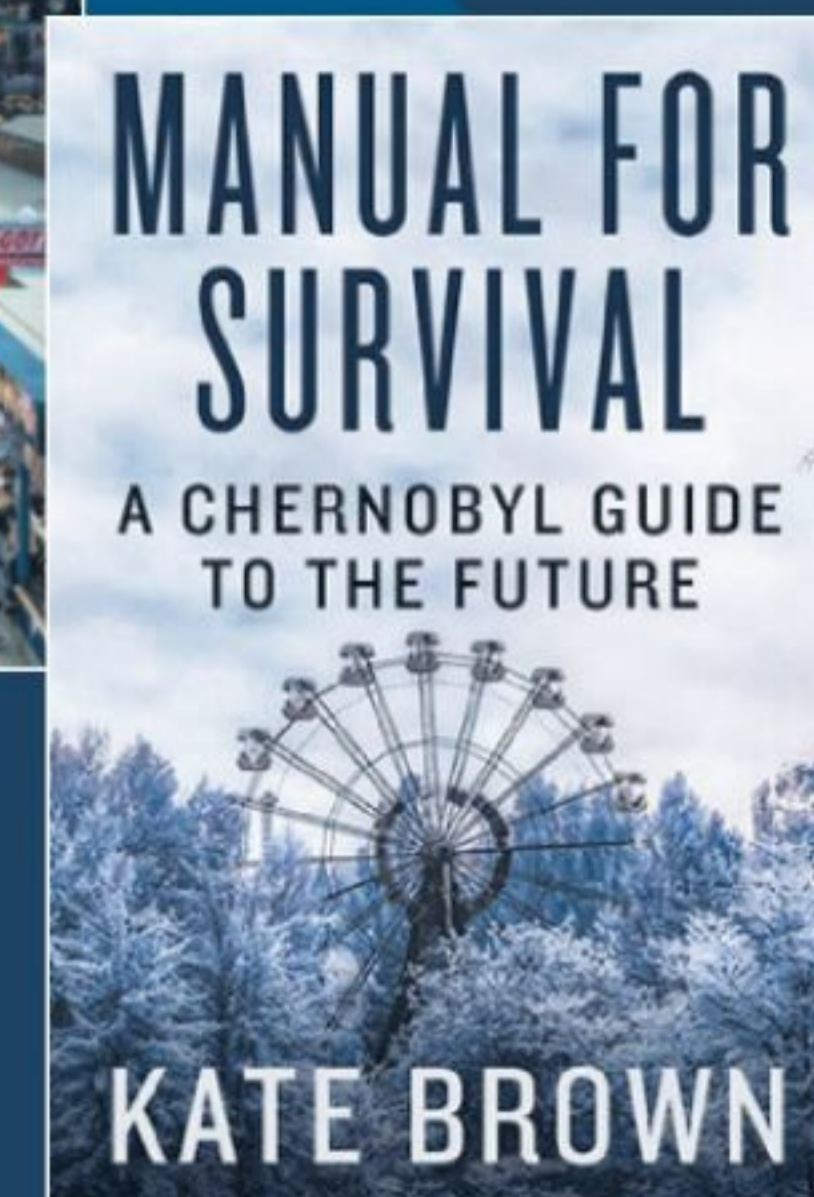
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# Twenty-sixth-century blues

Restoring the jagged boldness of a totalitarian dystopia

**BRYAN KARETNYK**

**WE**

**YEVGENY ZAMYATIN**

Translated by Bela Shayevich  
304pp. Canongate. £14.99.

**T**HE TWENTY-SIXTH CENTURY of Yevgeny Zamyatin's *WE* is still a way off, but the case for this cult novel's oracular qualities has already been won in the court of public opinion. As Margaret Atwood rightly observes in her introduction to Bela Shayevich's fine new translation, "So much in *WE* seems prophetic". On the hundredth anniversary of the novel's composition, the parallels between its content and the dystopian realities that would emerge in its wake remain striking: the total absorption of the individual by the state; the replacement of identity with numbers; the mass surveillance of every thought, utterance and deed; the merciless liquidation of the regime's every opponent; the staging of show trials and executions; the state enactment of eugenics; the erection of great walls and the advent of a kind of thoughtcrime, whereby any criticism of a regime may be equated with disloyalty to a cause. All this Zamyatin wrote about before Mussolini's famous formulation, "Everything within the state, nothing outside the state, nothing against the state"; before the Moscow Trials and the Great Terror; before the Third Reich and the horrors of Auschwitz. And before today's world of privacy-surrendering, digitally enmeshed surveillance capitalism.

The label of "prophecy", however, perhaps belies a far more disturbing truth. Responding to old criticisms that her *Handmaid's Tale* was "far-fetched", Atwood once pointed out that she had in fact written nothing "that humans had not already done somewhere at some time". With Zamyatin, it is not the case that all these horrors had come to pass, but their potential was already well apparent. When he read *WE* in the mid-1940s, Orwell wondered how Zamyatin could have produced a vision that would so closely resemble totalitarianism at its zenith. "Writing at about the time of Lenin's death", marvelled the author of *1984*, "he cannot have had the Stalin dictatorship in mind." No, indeed. And nor did he have to, for Lenin's reign had already provided more than adequate material. Zamyatin's own reality was replete enough with repression, mass killings, political persecution and terror, all in pursuit of an absolute ideological goal that vaunted the collective, disavowed the individual and spiritual in man and ruthlessly crushed opposition. The trajectory had been set. As with so much of the best science fiction, this was less a case of foresight than insight.

Zamyatin (1884-1937) was among the first writers to appreciate the terrible potential of ideal totalitarianism. Reasoning that man was happiest in his Edenic bliss, which he destroyed through his own wanton folly, Zamyatin's One State claims to have



restored "mathematically infallible happiness" to its people by dispensing with their freedom. Under the aegis of the elusive Benefactor, its citizens are subjugated and enslaved: known only by numbers, they live in literal glass houses, all the better for the secret police to keep watch; their recreation consists of marching to the strains of the state anthem; private life has all but been abolished and love itself has been conquered, "organised and mathematised".

Yet amid this seemingly crystalline perfection, there are significant defects. For all that the One State has anaesthetized its citizens to genuine human experience, there are still those who are "sick with a soul". The protagonist D-503, the chief engineer of the spaceship *INTEGRAL*, dreams, imagines and falls criminally in love, horrified and rent by his own atavistic impulses, which the state deems to be symptoms of mental illness. His love interest, the courageous and beguiling I-330, and her co-conspirators in an underground organization called the Mephi not only indulge in hedonistic pleasures, but even plot to overthrow the state and destroy the so-called Green Wall that surrounds the city and holds its citizens captive, separate from the outside world. In Zamyatin's dynamic, radical thinking, revolution must necessarily give way to revolution - "Revolutions are infinite", I-330 tells us - while human nature, with its infinite capacity for imagination and change, is at once totalitarianism's Achilles' heel and man's ultimate hope of salvation.

This early revelation and Zamyatin's determination to have it known were enough to have him silenced by the totalitarian state in which he lived. Though an Old Bolshevik, he began to style himself as a heretic, writing against more "nimble authors" who curried favour with the authorities. Punished for this with the "death sentence" of censorship, he eventually petitioned Stalin, in typically audacious terms, to let him leave the workers' paradise. "I beg to be permitted to go abroad", he wrote, "with the right to return as soon as it becomes possible in our country to serve great ideas in literature without cringing before little men." The request was granted, with help from Maxim Gorky, and in 1931 Zamyatin left, becoming one of the first Soviet dissident writers. He never did return to the Soviet Union, and in Paris he languished in exile alongside compatriots who similarly dreamed of another revolution to sweep away the regime that gripped their homeland. Little consolation though it may have been, his novel, having long since been smuggled out of the Soviet Union, was already making its way around the free world in English, French and Czech translations. It would have to wait until 1988 for its debut in Russia.

Just as there is no final revolution, so, too, can

"Painting of the Sun Exploding" (detail) by Anton Brzezinski

Bryan Karetnyk is a translator and Wolfson Scholar in the Humanities at University College London

there be no final translation. In a market of competing editions, however, Shayevich's stands out, and for very good reason. Reading her version alongside that of her principal rival, Clarence Brown (1993), one is reminded of the degree to which tastes and expectations have changed in recent decades. Both are truly excellent renderings of the novel, but in pronouncedly different keys. Where Brown's suave, perhaps too suave, version refines Zamyatin's often fragmentary prose to a timeless elegance, Shayevich's retains the novel's bold, jagged, elemental energy, recapturing for today's reader some of the immediacy and freshness of Gregory Zilboorg's version in which *WE* made its world debut in 1924. Compare, for instance:

As I write this I feel my cheeks burning. Yes: to integrate completely the colossal equation of the universe. Yes: to unbend the wild curve, to straighten it tangentially, asymptotically, to flatten it to an undeviating line. Because the line of the OneState is a straight line. (Brown)

I write this and feel: my cheeks are burning. Yes: to integrating the profound equation of the Universe. Yes: to uncurving the coil of savagery, towards the asymptote, along the tangent - setting it straight: for the line of the One State is straight. (Shayevich)

Only occasionally does one detect the slightest hesitation, a reluctance to give full vent to the implications of Zamyatin's word choice in terminology now deemed contentious (for example, the more euphemistic "strange" in place of "primitive"). But ultimately such choices reaffirm the modern, socially conscious sensibility of the translation, which remains true to the spirit of the work in a way that the author himself would have applauded.

Zamyatin believed in art's immutable reality and ability to effect change, qualities that can often seem dubious or opaque today. Yet the totalitarian regimes of old, and not so old, knew this truth only too well, for why else would they have acted so zealously in their attempts to prevent so many words from seeing the light of day? Zamyatin's contention that change is the only constant was alone enough to set the blue pencil working, but his intuitive grasp of totalitarianism, with all its professed rationalism and inherent irrationalities, made of his novel an utterly inadmissible literary fact. Born not of wild imagination but of cold, horrified observation, *WE* is less a prophecy than a reckoning with the possibilities of its own present, one that continues to reveal new meanings as time gives way to new realities. Reading it afresh in Shayevich's translation, one can only feel that the twenty-sixth century is forever closer than we might think. ■

"There are no distant places any longer: the world is small and the world is one."

—Wendell Willkie, 1943

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# Oiling the wheels

What drives America's relationship with Saudi Arabia

**BARNABY CROWCROFT**

**OIL POWERS**

A history of the U.S.-Saudi alliance  
**VICTOR MCFARLAND**

384pp. Columbia University Press. £27.

ONE OF THE LASTING IRONIES of the Donald Trump era in foreign affairs may be quite how few of its policies its successors seek to change. In the Middle East, in particular, there are some obvious candidates for continuity. The extraordinary "peace agreements", for example, reached between several Arab states and Israel, which may substantially transform the region for the better; the vanishing numbers of American forces fighting in Iraq or Afghanistan; even the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, which has neutered that regime's ability to interfere in its neighbours' affairs.

In one area, however, many will be hoping for an emphatic break with the past by the new Biden administration: in the US's relations with Saudi Arabia, under its almost archetypically Trumpian leader, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS). The inevitable conclusion, however, to be drawn from Victor McFarland's major new study of this relationship, *Oil Powers: A history of the U.S.-Saudi alliance*, is that critics are going to be disappointed; that last week's declaration of the end of US support for Saudi Arabia in Yemen and shift towards "democratic alliances" will prove to have about as much substance as the Obama administration's "reset" with Russia in 2009. And yet the consequences of this partnership, if McFarland is to be believed, have been even more damaging than many imagine, fueling not only the region's pattern of endless wars and foreign intervention but contributing to the broader decline in democratic norms and transparent government in the US itself.

The history of US foreign relations has recently become one of the most dynamic areas of university history departments, as international perspectives and sources have transformed what was once a surprisingly parochial domain. Where accounts used to detail the "exceptionalism" at the core of the American project, new studies place the US in an emphatically global context, as just one of the many provinces that collectively constitute humanity. In a now-classic of the genre, Thomas Bender's *A Nation Among Nations: America's place in world history* (2006) went through a series of the great themes in US history - from its revolution and civil war, through to industrialization and manifest destiny expansion-



Richard Nixon, Henry Kissinger and King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Jeddah, 1974

ism - to show how all of them closely mirrored similar and simultaneous nation-making projects elsewhere in the world, from China to Hungary. This field itself now has a new, more appropriately cosmopolitan name: not the history of US foreign relations, but "America and the World".

In this spirit, *Oil Powers* reconceives the US-Saudi alliance: not as a story of opposites attracting (as it is almost always told) but of two, kindred nations coming of age together in the twentieth century. The creation of the modern Saudi state, for example, was as much a product of the "transportation revolution" as it was of camel-riding warriors and puritanical Islam: since it was only through importing hundreds of automobiles in the 1920s that its founder, King Abdulaziz Al Saud (a noted motor enthusiast), was able to consolidate his authority over vast and largely ungoverned stretches of central Arabia. Indeed, in the 1930s, when Americans engineers were developing Saudi Arabia's eastern oil wells, the US was pioneering all the new oil-fuelled technologies that were making new kinds of state and society possible, from Riyadh to Reno. McFarland relates a striking vignette illustrating such global connections: a party of American geologists, camping out in the Empty Quarter in the late-1930s, keep up their Saudi Bedouin guides with tales of America's wars against the Indians - "America's Bedouin" - while their interlocutors sadly relate the story of Little Bighorn to their own experiences of being brought under the authority of the Saudi state.

McFarland's effort to recast the US, on the other hand, as the world's quintessential "petro-state" is history for the Extinction Rebellion age. The results can be extremely novel, to say the least. For example, the construction of the US interstate road network in the 1950s - normally viewed as one of the principal achievements of the Eisenhower administration - is here revealed to be the result of a sinister "Highway Lobby", intent on encouraging wider private car use and marginalizing public transport. The broader shift from coal- to oil-powered technologies is exposed as a successful ploy to "undermine the left" by providing a source of fuel that did not depend on an industry controlled by progressive labour unions. Even the suburban American dream is outed as a chauvinistic desire of white Americans not to live in more energy-efficient urban apartment buildings. Yet the silliness of such arguments aside, one does gain a strong sense of the slow-motion train wreck that was post-war US energy policy. Ever more worried about dwindling supplies, successive governments nonetheless seemed to do almost everything possible to encourage the growth of a society whose existence depended on the massive, and constantly increasing, consumption of oil.

The real action in US-Saudi international relations only began following the oil shocks of the early 1970s. Indeed, the shape of a new partnership was set out almost immediately following them, when Richard Nixon made the first ever presidential visit to the Saudi Kingdom, in June 1974. On the agenda during his meetings with King Faisal bin Abdulaziz was not

simply the world oil supply in the new OPEC era but what the Saudis ought to do with all the billions of dollars they were now raking in. The answer: invest them in US financial markets and spend them on US goods and weaponry. A bonanza in US-Saudi economic relations follows. Indeed, it may be this meeting in Riyadh (where Nixon was Faisal's guest), rather than that more famous one on a US battleship in February 1945 (where Ibn Saud was Roosevelt's), that should be regarded as the real birth of the modern alliance.

*Oil Powers* consists largely of an attempt to do for Saudi Arabia what John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt did for Israel in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy* (2007). McFarland charts the growth of deep connections between the Saudi government and American big business, lobbyists and other corporate interests in the Washington DC "swamp", and shows how these have entrenched executive power in the US, and royal power in Saudi Arabia, with the result that both governments have become less responsive to their people. The book then proceeds through a schedule of major US foreign and economic policy shifts of the late-1970s and 1980s, to suggest that Saudi influence rather than American interest determined decisions, with the result that both countries were pushed "to the right" throughout the 1980s. From accounts of interest rate shifts to foreign military interventions, readers will doubtless be alarmed to see documentary evidence revealing oily Saudi fingerprints on everything.

The problem with such incorrigibly global perspectives is that they often seem to come at the expense of some of the more basic aspects of the historical method - such as explaining causation. Thus McFarland is compelled to resort continually to metaphor in making the book's more all-encompassing claims. The phrase that the US-Saudi alliance "laid the groundwork" for all manner of future events (or "sowed the seeds", or "paved the way") is repeated with such regularity at critical moments in the narrative that it begins to sound like the comical refrain of Alan Partridge's fictional autobiography, *Bouncing Back*.

And even in the individual episodes of purported influencing, readers may not find McFarland's Saudi-centric account convincing. Was it, for example, "ideological affinity" between the US and Saudi Arabia that dashed American hopes for partnership with left-wing Arab states in the 1960s - or was it revolutionary Arab nationalism, which had proved itself to be existentially (and volubly) anti-American? Was it because he wanted to "impress the Saudis" that Jimmy Carter formulated a doctrine of greater US involvement in the Persian Gulf - or because there had been an Islamic revolution in Iran, whose armed supporters had invaded the US embassy in Teheran and were holding 52 American diplomats and citizens hostage? For that matter, were "evangelical Christians" really the main force behind the shift in US support for Israel after 1967?

The real problem here is that we don't need to find Saudis under every bed to explain the history of the US and the Middle East through the second half of the twentieth century. The reality is more straightforward, and more challenging of our assumptions for how we should best understand this compelling corner of the world - namely, that the US never succeeded in finding a better alternative to partnership with Riyadh. After all, there was no shortage of attempts by American administrations to partner with (in their view) more acceptably "progressive" regimes, from John F. Kennedy's engagement with Nasser's Egypt to Barack Obama's with Iran, countries that in each case treated such efforts as weakness to be exploited rather than goodwill to be reciprocated. Ultimately, the Saudis proved to be better allies on their worst days than any other state in the region did on its best (with the notable exception of Israel). This, rather than any sinister Saudi lobby, explains why this curious alliance has endured. Only when this is no longer the case should we be confident of, or even particularly hopeful for, its speedy demise. ■

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It was only through importing hundreds of automobiles in the 1920s that King Abdulaziz Al Saud was able to consolidate his authority

Barnaby Crowcroft is writing a new history of the British Empire

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# Beyond terror and textbooks

Can the West counter Saudi Arabia's promotion of extremism?

**AYAAN HIRSI ALI**

## THE CALL

Inside the global Saudi religious project

**KRITHIKA VARAGUR**

232pp. Columbia Global Reports. \$15.99.

**O**VER THE YEARS, many analysts have tried to “follow the money” when it comes to the intended and unintended consequences of the Saudi Wahhabi religious proselytization effort. This promotion of both *dawa* (the call to convert to Islamism) and *jihad* (armed struggle) has bedeviled pluralist and genuinely moderate Muslims all over the world for nearly five decades. In the years after 9/11, the connection between extremist ideologies and terrorism became a subject of burning interest to many Americans. Yet even as the US government confronted explicitly terrorist organizations by engaging them militarily, cutting off funding, and targeting their leadership, a sustained effort to tackle extremist Islamist proselytizing failed to materialize.

In her important new book *The Call: Inside the global Saudi religious project*, Krithika Varagur carefully and methodically investigates the sprawling Saudi proselytization efforts in two of the world's most populous countries, Indonesia and Nigeria, and in one politically fragile country in the Balkans: Kosovo, formerly a part of Yugoslavia.

Varagur is not a pioneer in this field, but she makes four very valuable contributions. First, her book exposes the scale and nature of Saudi influence, even where it is elusive. In the decades since 1973, the Saudi *dawa* effort has involved tens of billions of dollars, multiple official government agencies (including state ministries, endowments, embassies, ample quantities of embassy attachés, etc), non-governmental organizations, private actors (mostly businessmen) whose influence can either be plausibly denied or blamed for its excesses, as well as mosques, schools and numerous trusted local allies abroad. Public and private efforts often converge, and relatively little coercion has been necessary in the effort. Through in-depth discussions with key figures on the ground, Varagur shows that much of the success of the Saudi effort has hinged on trusted interpersonal networks and contacts.

No one person, no single organization, has really been “in charge” of the effort. This is both a key

strength and crucial weakness of Saudi *dawa*. Varagur demonstrates through the rise of “rogue” individuals - people who were trained and nurtured by the Saudis before they became impervious to restraint from above and engaged in militant jihad on their own terms - that the Saudis have effectively created a monster they cannot control. Although they intended to use *dawa* and religious “soft power” to gain influence and bolster the domestic legitimacy of the royal family against allegations of un-Islamic hedonism, the Saudis could not control when and where extremist *dawa* morphed into jihad. Sometimes the jihad was fought in areas where it was deemed appropriate (Afghanistan, Yugoslavia), but at other times it erupted in areas where Saudi authorities would not countenance it (particularly in Saudi Arabia itself, where terrorists have regularly accused the royal family of betraying Islam).

Secondly, Varagur also documents an intriguing phenomenon: young, intelligent Muslims, trained in Wahhabi ideology at Saudi institutions, who nevertheless became genuinely pluralistic, disenchanted with fanaticism and extremism. The Kosovo Imam Drilon Gashi was educated at the Islamic University of Medina but turned away from Wahhabism due to his own scepticism. Gashi would frequently ask his Wahhabi professors philosophical questions during lectures, even following them to their cars for clarification, before being told to stop asking such things on threat of expulsion. In Indonesia the liberal scholar Ulil Abshar-Abdalla studied at LIPIA (the Islamic and Arabic College of Indonesia) from 1988 to 1993 but rejected the ideology that was pushed on him and went on to found the Liberal Islam Network instead, provoking the ire of Islamists: in 2002, a bomb package intended for him blew off the arm of a policeman. Scholars who are interested in genuine counter-radicalization efforts would be wise to devote attention to the intellectual trajectories of men such as Gashi and Abshar-Abdalla.

Thirdly, Varagur demonstrates that the Saudi *dawa* effort is both more complex and more influential than commonly believed. Here, the author brings helpful nuance: “The Saudi project can be chaotic and full of contradictions, both supporting and rigidly denouncing Muslim Brotherhood activists, or simultaneously funding shady charities and counter-extremism centers that work within miles of each other”. Varagur emphasizes that although there has been, and is, ample overlap between Wahhabism and Salafism, the two are far from perfectly

**Kosovar children who have returned from Syria, at the foreign detention centre in Vranidoll, Kosovo, 2019**

“**Although today's *dawa* effort remains powerful, it is not as influential as the one that existed prior to 9/11**”

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congruent and there are important divergences, both in theory and in practice on the ground.

Finally, she demonstrates the outcomes of the Saudi effort, in contexts as different as Indonesia, Nigeria and Kosovo. Varagur shows clearly that the *dawa* effort has set up an ideological infrastructure around the world allowing extremist intolerance to take root and thrive. Some of this infrastructure may result in violent jihad, but much of it may not. As the author argues, it depends on local circumstances, institutions and personalities.

Previous studies of Saudi *dawa* have frequently revolved - for good reason - around “terror and textbooks”. Varagur convincingly shows that it has gone far beyond this. Yes, she argues, Saudi *dawa* has sometimes resulted in explicit acts of violence. Mostly, however, it has produced zealous intolerance, fractured pluralism and placed a durable, corrosive burden on politics and society that does not quite cross the threshold of violence. In fragile societies where political institutions are already precarious, the effects of Saudi *dawa* can have devastating and highly unpredictable consequences. The presence or absence of violence is the wrong metric to use to measure the severity of the damage.

What can be done about all this? Varagur demonstrates how, although today's *dawa* effort remains powerful, it is not as influential as the one that existed prior to 9/11. For one, the Saudi leadership is increasingly wary of fanaticism in religious matters, as stated by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The extent of MBS's own commitment to genuine pluralism remains, as yet, unclear, as he has engaged in acts of absolutism that have caused concern in the West, even as he has deflected personal responsibility for the elimination of Jamal Khashoggi. Some sympathetic to MBS have argued that if the crown prince is to embark on serious reforms within the Kingdom, he cannot countenance betrayals or sabotage from within the elite (whether by Khashoggi, as has been alleged, or by others), particularly given the real danger posed to the Kingdom by countries such as Iran and Qatar. Others have been concerned that the crown prince has at times dealt less harshly with fundamentalist clerics who are politically quietist than with more pluralist clerics who meddle in politics. Nevertheless, MBS does appear inclined - for now - towards modernization in both the economic and religious spheres, even as he seeks to consolidate his personal power base.

With a dose of sombre realism, Varagur notes that the future may depend less on what the Saudi leadership decides to do than on what other countries are already doing. In recent years, a growing competition has arisen to provide ideological leadership in the Islamic world. In prior decades, this effort was unquestionably led by Saudi *dawa*, but today the world also faces Qatari, Turkish and Iranian attempts to exert influence, all of which facilitate extremist ideologies in other countries, and all of which present a challenge to pluralist opponents of an uncompromising Islamism. The harmful role played by these three regimes currently causes me far more concern than the role played by Saudi Arabia, even as the Kingdom's opaque governance structure makes it difficult to determine the likely future course of its *dawa* effort. MBS may be the crown prince, and wary of religious extremism, but on issues such as the future of the *dawa* effort abroad he does not rule alone.

The lingering question is: are we, nearly twenty years after 9/11, too late? It is impossible to say. Many of the young individuals profiled in Varagur's book were successfully persuaded by the extremists. What decisions would they have made had they been offered a persuasive, genuinely pluralist alternative? In future years, the West has to find out the answer to this question, partly to ensure its own survival, and partly because the young individuals profiled in this excellent and insightful book deserve far better, safer alternatives than the Saudi-sponsored path from *dawa* to jihad. ■



# Suspension of belief

How atheism was treated in the early novel

**ALISON SHELL**

## GODLESS FICTIONS IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

A literary history of atheism

**JAMES BRYANT REEVES**

260pp. Cambridge University Press. £75.

“LET THE DOG BE AN ATHEIST, or worse, if worse can be”, the painter Joseph Highmore wrote to Samuel Richardson about Lovelace, who abducts and rapes Clarissa in Richardson’s novel of that name. Richardson disagreed, arguing that the pious Clarissa would never have been attracted by an atheist in the first place. While Lovelace is a libertine, he is carefully never made an unbeliever - which only adds to the tragedy of the story. But the exchange illustrates how, for many in the eighteenth century, atheists and villains were synonymous.

Lovelace could have been deemed a practical atheist, someone who acted as if there were no God to monitor and judge one’s behaviour. This category could include those who only paid lip-service to religion: in his satirical pamphlet *An Argument Against Abolishing Christianity*, Jonathan Swift levelled the charge against ecclesiastical time-servers. It was routinely distinguished from speculative atheism - thinking one’s way into an atheistical position - and the two were condemned for different reasons. In our own time, when mainstream commentators so often link religious belief with bigotry or intellectual naivety, it can be hard to remember that their eighteenth-century counterparts thought atheists stupid, quoting the Psalms for support: “The fool hath said in his heart, there is no God”.

Of the writers covered by James Bryant Reeves in the main body of his book - William Cowper, Sarah Fielding, Phebe Gibbes and Alexander Pope as well as Swift and Richardson - not one denied the overarching authority of the Christian revelation. That said, they were often surprisingly friendly towards other world faiths: upright Hindus were a reproach to bad Christians, and could be seen as making common cause with good ones. Yet the status of virtuous infidels, of concern to Christians from the beginning, became more insistent as the British Empire spread. Both the East and the past offered challenges to eighteenth-century Christianity, and Swift - who read Epicurus and wrote against Hobbes - is just one writer of the period familiar with classical and early modern materialist thought. Even so, the subtitle of this book, “A Literary History of Atheism”, seems oddly broad, given the eighteenth-century focus.

The eighteenth century was certainly a pivotal period in the move towards unbelief. Reeves tells us there were no self-described atheists in England before the 1780s; since that time, they have never gone away. And, while atheism and secularization are not the same thing, they have a symbiotic relationship that imaginative writing helped to shape. The era is synonymous with the rise of the novel, which, with its focus on humanity and the material world, has often been seen as an engine of secularization. But, in this context as elsewhere, secularization should not be seen as a one-way street. Charles Taylor, a leading philosopher of secularism



- much drawn upon by Reeves - has instead defined it as “a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and ... unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace”.

The idea of belief being one option among others often inspired literary dialogue. Atheistical interlocutors, usually satirically presented, are common in the eighteenth century, and their unbelief can even provide the impetus for a story. In his poem *The Task*, for instance, Cowper presents the chilling tale of a ride taken by Misagathus the atheist and Evander the Christian. The former aims to prove he is unafraid of annihilation after death by galloping towards a cliff. His horse stops at the cliff-edge, but later tosses Misagathus down another precipice; he drowns, having tempted providence too far and fallen victim to his “own tremendous choice”. As Reeves elegantly puts it: “Authors contained atheism by incorporating its threat into the very fabric of their works ... instead of arguing against the rise of unbelief, they imagined its fruition”. At the end of Pope’s satirical epic *The Dunciad*, for instance, Religion “veils her sacred fires” just before “universal darkness buries all”: here, atheism is anything but an agent of enlightenment.

The idea that unbelief works against altruism and social cohesion mattered greatly to most writers covered in this book, who were haunted by the question: what motive is there for virtue if one is not answerable to God? As Richard Dawkins’s *Selfish Gene* and other New Atheist tracts illustrate, it has not gone away, and can even form part of an apologia for atheism. Relatedly, while secular organizations are ubiquitous in our own time, those in which secularist thought prompts activity for the common good have a long way to go to match the might of religious organizations. All the same, they exist, and have done so for a while. My own institution, University College London, is one such: founded in 1826 to bypass the Anglican hegemony of Oxbridge and provide tertiary education to those of all religions and none.

Geographically and ideologically nearby, Bloomsbury’s Conway Hall has been a freethinkers’ cathedral for nearly a century. Pre-pandemic, it hosted one branch of the Sunday Assembly, which collects for food banks and organizes gatherings reminiscent of church services, the latter featuring such secular anthems as Louis Armstrong’s “What a Wonderful World”. Reeves’s conclusion features newly discovered correspondence between Percy Bysshe Shelley and the inventor Ralph Wedgwood, in which Shelley - who was sent down from Oxford for atheism - portrayed unbelief as, in Reeves’s words, “spiritually satisfying, sympathetic and sociable”. As a visionary poet committed to secular forms of enchantment, might Shelley have been a Sunday Assembly congregant if he were living now? ■

An episode in *Le Comte de Valmont* by Philippe-Louis Gérard: the Baron de Lausanne dies an atheist’s death, despite the efforts of Valmont to convert him; engraving after J. M. Moreau the Younger by A.J. Hulk, 1807

“For many in the eighteenth century, atheists and villains were synonymous

Alison Shell is Professor of Early Modern Studies in the Department of English at University College London and the author of *Shakespeare and Religion*, 2010

# From Jesus to Lord Voldemort

Why modernity led to secularization

**ALEXANDRA WALSHAM**

## THE BIRTH OF MODERN BELIEF

Faith and judgment from the Middle Ages to the Enlightenment

**ETHAN H. SHAGAN**

408pp. Princeton University Press. £30.

## UNBELIEVERS

An emotional history of doubt

**ALEC RYRIE**

272pp. William Collins. £20.

WHY DO SO MANY PEOPLE in the modern West self-identify as atheists? What lies behind our growing tendency to place our faith and trust in something other than a transcendent deity? In different ways, both of these stimulating and provocative books address this cluster of questions. Written alongside and in partial dialogue with each other, they represent fresh attempts to grapple with the longstanding problem of why the rise of modernity has been accompanied by the decline of religion.

The subject of Alec Ryrie’s *Unbelievers* is, at first sight, the more familiar one: “a disappearance: the evaporation of a once very widespread religious culture”. Ryrie’s central claim, however, is that traditional narratives that attribute this to the rise of philosophical scepticism in the eighteenth century occlude a vital part of the story. Instead of offering an intellectual history of doubt, his aim is to provide an emotional one. His account hinges on the dynamic interplay between two strands of feeling that grew up within rather than outside Christianity: anger and anxiety.

By contrast, Ethan H. Shagan suggests that seeking to locate the origins of unbelief is the wrong question. He is interested less in tracing the roots of “nascent incredulity” than the fundamental transformation that took place in what it meant to believe. A study not of the content but the category of belief, his book delineates the process by which belief became synonymous with subjective and sovereign individual judgement. Where once Christian belief occupied a separate epistemological space from other forms of knowledge and opinion, over time the “partition wall” separating them was shattered. Belief has not waned but proliferated in the modern world, displacing the cultural energy once directed towards religion onto the secular. A dazzling display of erudition, *The Birth of Modern Belief* is an ambitious history of ideas, exploring the shifting contours of thought about a historically contingent construct across the *longue durée*.

Both books have what Ryrie calls an hourglass shape. They begin in the Middle Ages, then focus in on early modernity and the Enlightenment, before taking the story forward to the present day. The arc they trace is, as Shagan admits, “unabashedly teleological” at times. It is based on the idea that unbelief was a minor irritant in the medieval world, which rarely existed in fully articulated form. Although the seeds of alternative conceptions of belief were implicit within scholastic thinking, it

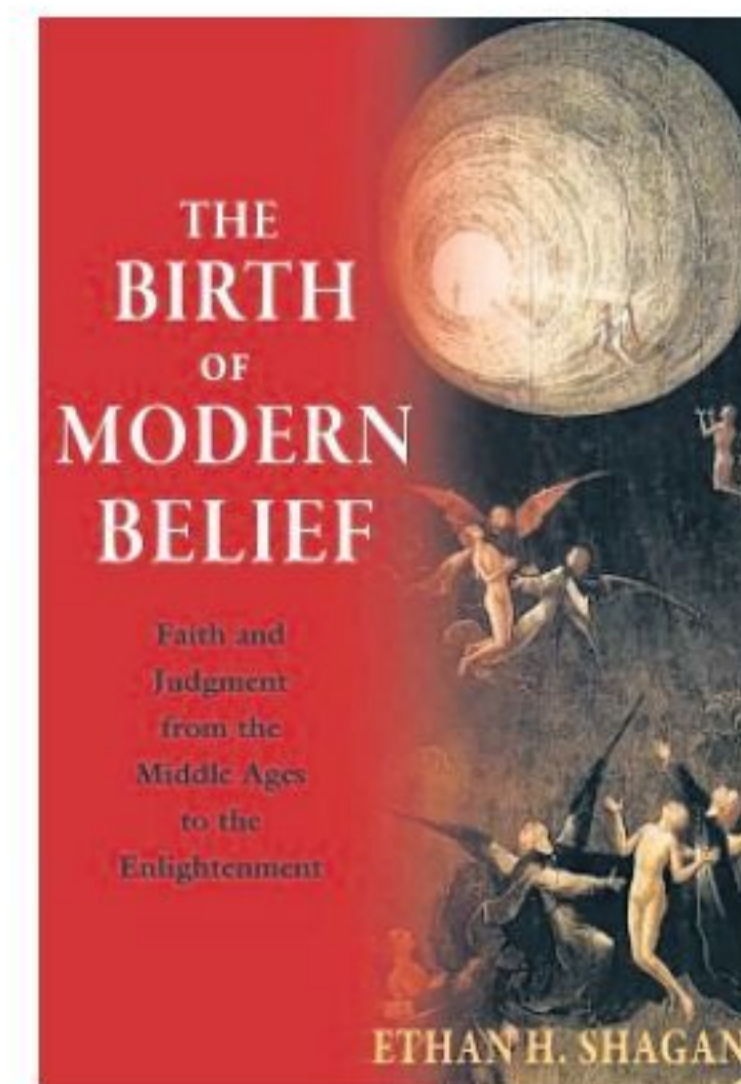


was not until the religious crisis of the sixteenth century that these tensions came to fruition. Both authors accord the Reformation a critical part in this process, not least in inventing the very idea of “atheism” itself. For Shagan, the novel effect of Reformation theology was to render unbelief the default condition of the sinful world and to make believing a “Sisyphean task”. It led logically to the conclusion, most clearly expressed by the radical spiritualist, Sebastian Franck, that “there is not a single believer on earth”. For Ryrrie, it was the weaponizing of credulity in the theological battles between Protestants and Catholics that helped bring this about, creating the perception that society was rife with people of no real faith at all. Within the minds of the devout, it fostered the intense worry that they themselves were incapable of truly believing. Scepticism ceased to be the opposite of belief and became, on the contrary, “a necessary component of it”.

There are divergences in interpretation and emphasis too. Ryrrie’s is a disproportionately Protestant-led story, which recognizes doubt as a creative element in reformed spirituality, but within which Catholicism merits little mention. By contrast, Shagan sees the transformation of belief into a terrible psychological burden as a rather sinister project in which both confessions took part. If Protestants limited its attainment to a godly remnant of the elect, Catholics reduced it to a form of obedience, subject to Counter-Reformation discipline and dogmatism. The logic of this aggressive programme was to exclude the vast mass of the populace from the privileged condition of believing. The consequence was a powerful backlash resulting in a second revolution which made religious knowledge commensurate with other types of belief - in science, history, humanity and the products of the imagination.

The Reformation may have been the inadvertent midwife of this process, but in and of itself it was no “engine of modernity”. Modern belief was born in fierce counter-reaction to the religion of Luther, Calvin and the Council of Trent. Initially forged by dissident thinkers, it entered the mainstream in the era of Descartes, Spinoza and Pascal. Its emergence was largely a positive development, “a recipe for the release of infinite invention” and a form of emancipation for which Shagan says we should “be thankful”. Shagan is too nuanced a historian to ignore the darker side of this development - the intolerance that it has ironically unleashed. He nevertheless heralds it as “the glue that prevents diverse societies from spiralling into chaos”. To this extent, *The Birth of Modern Belief* presents a robust challenge to Brad Gregory’s influential *The Unintended Reformation* (2012), in which lament for the demise of traditional Christianity is combined with a passionate indictment of the “hyperpluralistic” secular society to which Gregory argues its dissolution gave rise. It carries a subtle undercurrent of celebration of the liberation of human judgement from the shackles of “an alternative authoritarianism based upon the supremacy of a believing minority over an unbelieving world”.

Ryrrie writes as a committed Anglican, albeit “with a soft spot for atheism”. Aimed at a general audience, his book seeks to enable believers and unbelievers to better understand the “long and fractious marriage between faith and doubt” and engage in more constructive dialogue. Although written with characteristic panache, it sometimes comes across as breathless and, especially towards the end, the argumentation feels rushed. The final chapter is a little too quick to join the dots between the process by which unbelief claimed philosophical respectability in the eighteenth century and



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the wider shift to a society in which many, if not most, profess to be of no religion. It ends, digressively, by considering how Hitler and other dark lords - from Darth Vader to Voldemort - have eclipsed Jesus Christ as the moral yardstick by which we judge good and evil. The strongest sections of the book are those that probe the paradox of Puritan atheism and the explosion of irreligion in Civil War England. It is here that Ryrrie comes closest to recovering the elusive “mood” of unbelief in his exposition of the agonized doubt of individuals who earnestly hoped that they had saving faith but feared they did not. Elsewhere, however, this self-billed “emotional history” reverts to an exposition of the writings of a familiar caste of elite male thinkers from Montaigne and Walter Raleigh to Edward Herbert and Thomas Hobbes. Rather surprisingly, it neglects to engage with the rich scholarship on the history of emotions that its title invites its readers to expect. Curiously, this is a methodology more directly invoked in Shagan’s avowedly intellectual history. His book offers occasional glimpses into the “unbearable weight of believing” in Reformation Europe, but it leaves to others the task of excavating the lived religion of ordinary men and women: what it meant and how it felt to believe.

*Unbelievers* and *The Birth of Modern Belief* are the product of a moment in which older debates on the secularization of Western societies have gained fresh urgency. Both books subvert assumptions that the eclipse of religion is a hallmark of modernity. Alec Ryrrie brings sympathy and style to his fast-paced survey of the religious underbelly of atheism, but Ethan H. Shagan’s sophisticated reassessment of the changing meaning of belief itself is likely to leave a more lasting imprint on scholarship in this field. ■

# Confirmed as a batchelor

The true story of a hoax gospel

**MICHAEL PRESS**

**VERITAS**

A Harvard professor, a con man and the gospel of Jesus’s wife

**ARIEL SABAR**

430pp. Scribe. £18.99.

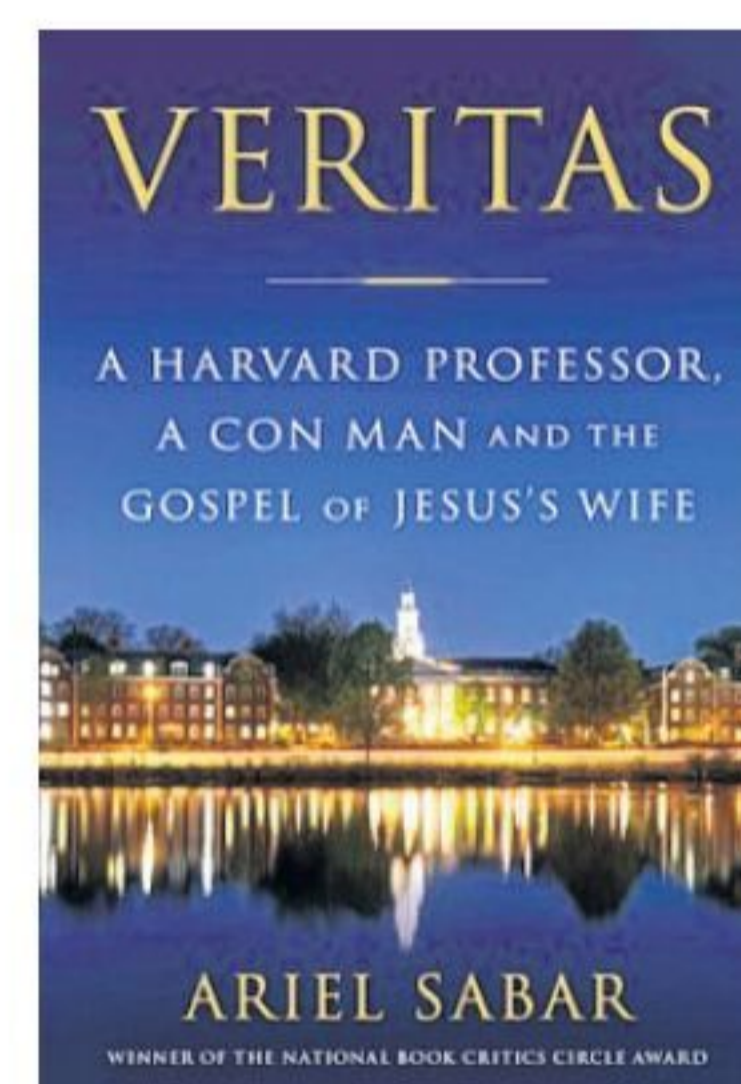
**I**N SEPTEMBER 2012, just across from the Vatican, a Harvard professor made an explosive announcement: she had discovered an ancient papyrus fragment showing that, in the minds of some early Christians, Jesus had a wife. The fragment grabbed headlines worldwide. But some scholars immediately suggested that there were problems with the fragment: no one knew where it originated, it had basic grammar errors, and its handwriting was unparalleled. By 2016, after four years of debate, the story had fallen apart: experts concluded that the fragment was a modern forgery.

This is the background of Ariel Sabar’s remarkable *Veritas*. (“Veritas” is both Harvard’s motto and the theme of truth that underlies the tale.) The book belongs to a genre, popular in recent years, of real-life narratives of trafficking and forgery of biblical antiquities, alongside Nina Burleigh’s *Unholy Business*, Chanan Tigay’s *The Lost Book of Moses*, and

Matti Friedman’s *The Aleppo Codex*. Though Sabar insists he is simply reporting facts, his story is (in his own words) narrative nonfiction. Like other examples of the genre, it is crafted with definite fictional elements: an exaggerated contrast of heroes and villains, and a gripping, non-linear narrative organized to build suspense. At its centre are an unlikely pair: Walter Fritz, the conman and forger, and Karen King, the Harvard professor who ended up promoting the fragment, subsequently shown to be a forgery, as much as Fritz did. As if to highlight the dramatic element, Sabar organizes the book into five acts. Nonfiction to be sure, but not quite the just-the-facts image of journalism.

Another standard feature of the genre is that the journalists (the books are typically by journalists) write themselves into the story. In this case, Sabar’s contribution is pivotal: the article he wrote for the *Atlantic* in 2016 was the crucial investigation of the papyrus fragment’s provenance, an investigation that King and the other scholars involved could not or would not pursue. But Sabar doesn’t stop there. *Veritas* contains many important new details that make it essential reading even for those who have followed the case closely. We see the ugly details of a peer-review system that utterly failed, at multiple points, to put the brakes on the dissemination of what turned out to have been a forgery. At times, the details can be overwhelming. We feel like voyeurs for dwelling too long on such unexpected turns as Fritz’s involvement with porn websites and the abuse he allegedly suffered as a child. These details are part of the genre: they are meant to build a character profile, to establish a pattern of behavior. Nevertheless, Sabar’s reporting is itself a key part of the saga of the “Jesus’ Wife fragment”, and he should be applauded for shining a strong if discomfiting light on so many elements of this story.

Towards the end of the book, however, the story takes an unexpected turn. Not content to reveal King’s several mistakes and lapses of judgement in the Jesus’ Wife affair, Sabar tries to undermine her entire scholarly career. He attempts to dispatch entire monographs in a single page based only on his



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own textual analysis, although he has no background in the study of early Christianity. He concludes that King is a bad historian because she has an agenda. “History, in the traditional view, answers a single question”, according to Sabar: “What happened? It is a dispassionate record of people, places and events, set in the context of a particular time.” But how many historians would say this is how the study of history actually works? What Sabar sees as sinister agendas are simply frameworks, the ways that we understand the world and filter evidence; they are not deliberate distortion but what we all do without even noticing. This idea is commonplace in writing on the theory of history, not just among the post-modernists of whom Sabar is sceptical. All scholars have an agenda, including Sabar.

Sabar touches on important questions about the problem of theologians doing history and about bias in scholarship. A nuanced discussion of these issues and how they may have contributed to King’s promotion of the fragment would be welcome, but instead Sabar gives us a caricature. For him, King becomes uniquely dishonest, willing to adopt and discard ideas purely for convenience. Mistaking her basic theoretical framework for an axe to grind allows Sabar to establish a pattern of behaviour that explains her role in the Jesus’ Wife saga - to follow his own agenda, if you will.

The truth is that these arguments aren’t even necessary. Sabar has already proven his basic case, that King’s actions in the episode were repeatedly troubling. Instead of taking a superficial dive into the rest of King’s publications, we might do better to look at such actions in the context of scholarship’s long dance with forgery and antiquities trafficking. For well over a century, different scholars have authenticated unprovenanced items for dealers, purchased them, or smuggled them out of their source countries, with little concern for national antiquities laws, international agreements, or codes of ethics. Some still do. In this light, the Jesus’ Wife affair looks quite different from Sabar’s depiction. The real tragedy of Karen King’s story is that it, far from being unique, is all too common. ■



# Zipboom hurrah bang

## PARADISO

### PARADISE

Dante's Divine Trilogia Part Three: Englished in prosaic verse

ALASDAIR GRAY

144pp. Canongate. £14.99.

Paradise by no means lost but simplified and abbreviated is what Alasdair Gray offers in this posthumously published third part of his *Commedia*. Daring and confidence are required to translate let alone transform Dante, and Gray hides both under the modest subtitle, "Englished in prosaic verse". The verse is not prosaic at all, but in spirited pentameters, and though Gray ducks terza rima, he still musters enough full and internal rhymes to leave a trace of Dante's scheme. The language is salted with Scots-lite ("bonny", "bairns", "blethering") and even deftly plays off Burns - "A fool may think // the cosmos squint. No planet goes agley" - but above all his version aims for clarity and compression. Given the complexity of the original, this is no small task. Dante warns his reader in "picciolletta barca" to turn back before *Paradiso's* high seas. Gray addresses those who follow "because they like the story in my song". Yet by shortening every canto and simplifying its content, he maintains a jaunty narrative pace.

Gray is fully aware of the liberties he is taking to make this supremely challenging poem approachable: "God by His light creates complexity, // yet sees it as one good grand simple shape". Here the word "simple" is rightly given a positive spin, as "semplice" often has in Dante. But simplification also comes at a cost. Gray's choice of Whigs and Tories to represent the feuding Tuscan Guelphs and Ghibellines, for example, hardly works on any level. Still, readers - like me - who struggle to recall the three warring factions may not mind that much. A greater loss occurs where Gray sidesteps in the last canto the crucially resonant image of Neptune marvelling as the Argo's shadow passes overhead.

Completed in the last year of Gray's life, the writing shows no diminution of talent and vision, though unlike his two previous *cantiche*, sadly it comes to us without his bold, sinuous line drawings that owe much to Blake, another poet who receives a sly nod in the poem: "Christians also know / Eternity loves the products of time". Dante says no such thing, but rather that the first love of eternal beings is towards their Maker. These swerves from the original are in no sense a betrayal but rather a playful way of bringing the poem into a different time and cul-

ture. Gray's narrative gifts as well as his visual imagination serve him well in rendering this poem and its incandescent language for the invisible.

Jamie McKendrick

## MERZ

### SCHWITTERS

ULRIKE DRAESNER

480pp. Penguin Verlag. €25.

Ulrike Draesner is one of Germany's finest living authors. A novelist, poet, essayist and translator - her German translations of this year's Nobel prizewinner Louise Glück are especially notable - she has garnered widespread renown for her multimedia projects, combining literature with sculpture, music and other performance art.

In her latest novel, *Schwitters*, Draesner turns her attention to a fellow artistic experimenter, Kurt Schwitters. In nineteen chapters, this biographical novel attempts to enter the mind of this exceptionally creative personality. The novel begins in 1937 when Schwitters, defamed by the Nazis as a "degenerate" artist, is forced to leave Germany. He flees to Norway, taking his son with him and leaving behind his increasingly estranged but loyal wife, Helma, in his hometown of Hanover. Following Norway's occupation by the Wehrmacht in the late spring of 1940, he moves to England where he finds himself in the internment camp Hutchinson on the Isle of Man; he later settles in the Lake District. Having discovered that his master work, "Merzbau" - a room-sized sculptural construction of angular shapes, columns and found objects in his villa in Hanover - has been destroyed in a British air raid, he determines to build a new version in a barn near Ambleside, Cumbria.

Particularly taken by bricolage, Schwitters had a clear eye and ear for the shapes and rhythms of ordinary things. There is much mention in Draesner's novel of his term "MERZ", a nonsense construction combining the words *Kommerz* (commerce), *Herz* (heart), *Scherz* (prank), *Schmerz* (pain) and *März* (March), which came to resemble his wider philosophy. Though its plot is fairly straightforward, *Schwitters* is a verbal collage in itself: an artful assemblage of snippets from the artist's letters, combined with partly invented historical material. Along with its main subject, other characters stand out, including Helma, who dies of cancer back in Hanover, and Schwitters's English lover Edith Thomas, who stands by his side to the bitter end.

Schwitters's fondness for linguistic play is memorably expressed in the way he grapples with the lan-

guage of his new home: "If English people got closer to each other they formed a vessel, a relationship. That he called their 'naval obsession': Be close to one another, let frigates plough through the bed sheets". Throughout, Draesner blends empathy for her narrator with a measure of irony, in a voice that moves between Schwitters's inner monologue and that of an external observer in the third-person.

William Hazlitt observed of Milton's imagination that it "melts down and renders malleable, as in a furnace, the most contradictory materials". This is a fitting description of both Ulrike Draesner's accomplished novel and of Schwitters himself, a man deprived in exile of his cherished *Herkunftsland*, but never of his creative spirit.

Rüdiger Görner

## ANTI-COLONIALISTS

### EXILED FROM JERUSALEM

The diaries of Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi

RAFIQ HUSSEINI, EDITOR

409pp. I. B. Tauris. £90 (paperback, £28.99).

The Seychelles archipelago may conjure up images of green palms, white sand and blue water, but in the 1920s and 30s it was no tropical paradise to the Arab anti-colonial leaders who were deported to the islands and imprisoned there. The British government exiled prominent nationalists from Egypt, Yemen and Palestine to the Seychelles as punishment for challenging British colonial rule and in order to cut them off from their supporters at home. The story of the Seychelles' Arab prisoners is not nearly as well known as that of the Indian rebels who were sent to the Andaman Islands in the wake of the Rebellion of 1857. Hussein Fakhri al-Khalidi's English diaries are the first detailed account of life as a Palestinian deportee and prisoner on Mahé, the largest of the Seychelles. Khalidi was a native of Jerusalem, a practising physician there, and a member of the Arab Higher Committee formed in 1936 to lead the popular revolt against British rule in Palestine and against Jewish settlement. Khalidi was also serving as the elected mayor of Jerusalem in October 1937, when the British Palestine Government deported him along with four other prominent Palestinians, Fu'ad Saba, Ya'qub al-Ghusayn, Ahmad Hilmi, and Rashid al-Haj Ibrahim.

Khalidi's diaries are vivid and intimate. They begin with an embarrassed British police officer knocking on the door of his Jerusalem home, and delivering the news that he has ten minutes to pack and say goodbye to his wife and children. The reader is then drawn into Kha-

lidi's private world of exile. The Jerusalemite physician, trained in the Ottoman Medical School in Istanbul, is appalled by the fumbling and amateurish ministrations of Mahé's local British doctor, who is unable to treat Khalidi's illness. Khalidi waits eagerly for long-delayed letters from his wife Wahideh, only to be frustrated by the colonial authorities' buffoonish censoring.

He follows developments in Palestine obsessively, reflecting on news of the ongoing Palestinian revolt, of the visit of the Woodhead Commission in 1938, and of the escape of the Mufti (head of the Arab Higher Committee) from British arrest. Khalidi even hires a local lawyer in Mahé to challenge his deportation order, fully aware of the futility of the act, but wishing nevertheless to put the injustice "on record and in writing". And in order to distract himself, he reads and reads, taking particular pleasure in American writers - Margaret Mitchell, Pearl Buck, Eugene O'Neill. But depression and anger consume him. One hot moonlit night, he writes: "This island is driving me mad. I am craving for my wife and my dear four children. I had a last look at the moon; and look at him! He is smiling the beggar, and showing his tongue: 'Who are you to oppose Great Britain! We have armies - warships - aeroplanes - poison gas ... and you are only a handful of Arabs'".

Laila Parsons

## TRANSCENDENCE

### TRANSCENDENCE, CREATION AND INCARNATION

From philosophy to religion

ANTHONY O'HEAR

234pp. Routledge. £120.

Anthony O'Hear is one of several recent philosophers who have turned their backs on the idea that their subject is a purely academic discipline, to embrace the old but still attractive principle that it entails a personal quest for meaning. He believes also that philosophy rests on religious foundations. *Transcendence, Creation and Incarnation*, an important and often riveting book, discusses aspects of human life and experience which could be thought to support such a stance. The worldview in question is articulated with the help of Ruskin and Rilke: it involves a kind of "transcendence in immanence" which is revealed in certain kinds of aesthetic experience. In such contexts, O'Hear argues, we "feel ourselves ... close to the spirit which harmonises the universe, close to the mystery of life and to penetrating the veil with which it is normally obscured from us".

The clue to how this "transcendence in immanence" is to be understood comes in a chapter devoted to Roger Scruton's approach to God's supposed absence in the world, where O'Hear introduces and quotes from the book's most significant protagonist - Simone Weil: "God has entrusted creation to necessity. Otherwise, God would be in the process ... his presence would then bring all creation to nothing, or else God would himself not be goodness". This is held to supply the required dimension of transcendence: "God is not in the empirical world, as that world is revealed to us in science and ordinary life. God, if God is to be revealed, must be on a different level, a level of grace and Incarnation". Weil finds such revelation in experiences where space seems to be "torn open" and the world is seen "as one held in the arms of a divine love". On Weil's approach then, God is both hidden and revealed, and revelation comes at the level of charity.

*Rustique figuline*, attributed to Bernard Palissy, French, c.1560, J. Paul Getty Museum; from *Ceramic, Art and Civilisation* by Paul Greenhalgh (512pp. Bloomsbury Visual Arts. £30.)

O'Hear's final and most impor-







tant task is to clarify Weil's position, and to determine whether it could solve the problem of life's meaning. The discussion culminates in her radical idea that the God-absent world is redeemed by God's entering it in human form as a beggar. Such "divine indwelling" is lost on those who are looking for signs of coercive control, but as a philosopher Anthony O'Hear makes a strong case for seeing God's abjectness as a sign of greatness, and love as a power which exceeds the limits of domination.

Fiona Ellis

## TRAVELLERS

### THE VIRAGO BOOK OF WOMEN TRAVELLERS MARY MORRIS, EDITOR

With Larry O'Connor  
544pp. Virago. £14.99.

In the introduction to this anthology, Mary Morris (no relation) writes that "women's literature from Austen to Woolf is by and large a literature about waiting, usually for love". The writers selected here are the ones who didn't wait: they set out, by boat or bicycle, camel or dugout canoe,

and sought their own adventures. The collection covers some 300 years of travel writing, beginning with the extraordinary Lady Mary Wortley Montagu (1689-1762), who had just - scandalously - made the journey from London to Constantinople alone, and finishing with the American writer Leila Philip, an apprentice potter in early 1980s Japan, learning the art of harvesting rice by hand with a sickle. The range, in terms of location, style and mood, is vast.

Some pieces are lyrical: M. F. K. Fisher brings Dijon to life through the battling scents of the city's famous mustard, gingerbread and the fragrant altar smoke billowing from a church door; Vita Sackville-West conjures the fading light of a picturesque Persian garden at dusk. Others are scathing. An extract from Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832) demonstrates a satirical eye her son clearly inherited: "She lived but a short distance from us, and I am sure intended to be a very good neighbour; but her violent intimacy made me dread to pass her door".

The anthology's feminist perspective is sometimes to the fore, as with Mary Wollstonecraft, who movingly records her fears for her infant daughter, Fanny: "I feel more

than a mother's fondness or anxiety, when I reflect on the dependent and oppressed state of her sex". Some of the writers have an explicit agenda: Ethel Tweedie argues forcefully for women to reject the side-saddle and save their weakened backs. Others choose to flout societal expectations directly: Sarah Hobson travels through Iran as "John", with cropped hair and bound chest, and Emily Hahn sets off for China, earnestly seeking to fulfil her childhood ambition to become an opium addict (with alarming success).

It is slightly surprising that a reissue of a collection first published in 1993 should contain no new material, and this edition would have benefited from a revised introduction with a fresh view of the genre after thirty years, or from the addition of some more recent, post-colonial voices. Overwhelmingly, the stories here are by women whose circumstances and resources afforded them the luxury of adventure. Still, alongside privileged perspectives are glimpses of more precarious lives: "Box-car Bertha", living a hobo existence on the 1930s railways; or Maud Parrish, who fled her marriage at nineteen and made her living playing the banjo for Yukon prospectors.

As we watch our own horizons shrink by the day, Parrish's courage and zest appeal all the more: "Even now, I feel the zipboom hurrah bang of that dance hall and the 'what do we care' spirit in the air".

Mary Morris

## FOOD AND DRINK

### RED SANDS

Reportage and recipes through Central Asia from hinterland to heartland

### CAROLINE EDEN

288pp. Quadrille. £26.

In Caroline Eden's previous travelogue-cum-cookbook, the intrepid traveller, always looking for the "genuine unforeseen", shared the fabled history and recipes of the lands surrounding the Black Sea. Now, in the equally evocative *Red Sands*, she is drawn to the deserts further east, where she sets up an opposition between the majestic natural landscape of jagged peaks, undulating sand dunes, golden steppe and turquoise lakes, and the built environment of Brutalist architecture, crumbling sanatoriums, and the remains of failed Soviet engineering projects. She artfully disentangles layers of Islamic, Tsarist and Soviet influences.

Food and drink provide the through-line on her journey from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, prompting her musings. At times, the juxtapositions turn surreal, as when she drinks green tea at a traditional *chaikhana* to the strains of the theme song from David Lynch's *Twin Peaks*. Essays consider the Silk Road and modernity ("today's trucks are yesterday's goods-carrying camels"), Edenic gardens, cosmonauts and dive bars. A visit to Karaganda leads to the book's most powerful chapter, "Milk Factory", where Eden describes the sacredness of milk in Kazakh culture, how to milk a horse, and how to make the dried curds that gave Genghis Khan's warriors strength. In the 1930s, the same dried curds saved the lives of women imprisoned in the vicious Karlag labour camp. Elsewhere, we learn about cotton honey "the colour of cloudy wheat", Kokand halva "marbled like fine Italian paper", and apple trees planted in a decorative pattern "like living embroidery". One can nearly taste the "Tajik Snickers" of dried, raisin-studded melon, and the super-sweet ripe Golden Eyebrow melon.

The book ends on a slightly elegiac note. Eden is careful not to succumb to nostalgia, but the destruction of old communities and the threat of climate change to the region's fabled walnut groves and orchards leave the reader grateful that she has documented these rich cultures before they disappear.

Darra Goldstein

## INTIMACY

### VIRGINIA WOOLF AND THE ETHICS OF INTIMACY

ELSA HÖGBERG

234pp. Bloomsbury Academic.  
£76.50.

As with the rest of the modernist canon, it can be difficult to imagine that there is much left to say about Virginia Woolf's life and work; yet the monographs keep appearing, with publishers seemingly as keen as ever to print volumes that promise new insights and hitherto untrodden paths in Woolf criticism. The target readership for Elsa Högberg's *Virginia Woolf and the Ethics of Intimacy* is a purely scholarly one, since a clear understanding of contemporary theory by Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray and others is an essential prerequisite in order to make sense of this complex and densely argued study of four of Woolf's novels.

In *Jacob's Room* (1922), Högberg concentrates on concepts of melancholia and primal intimacy. Outward expressions of mourning, she argues, might be viewed as Woolf's comment on the modernist era's crisis in storytelling, and where "Kristeva's transformative insights into literary melancholia can make us perceive a non-violent ethics at the heart of the fragmented, melancholic poetics of Woolf's first distinctly modernist novel experiment". Högberg views *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) as a much more uplifting novel, with its "intensely pleasurable poetics", while also noting how its general introspection offers some sort of authorial revolt. Ahead of its time in its depiction of mental illness, together with its critique of the Establishment, the novel leads Högberg to bring in Butler's theory of ethical violence, in order to shed light on Woolf's sense of what it means to be responsible for oneself and one's actions from psychological, social and political viewpoints.

Close analysis of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) turns to Irigaray, meanwhile, and her writings about the ethics of love and affection, to describe a kind of post-impressionist intimacy in the novel, whereby "fluid colours and a lack of shape open up a space for intimacy... and momentary dissolution of the boundaries separating self and other". Finally, *The Waves* (1931), Woolf's most radically modernist novel, which breaks with multiple novelistic conventions, is examined via the twin notions of violence and vulnerability. For Högberg, its poetic experimentalism enables a critique of fascism, nationalism and imperialism, utilizing soliloquy as an effective channel to depict "the thinking mind and the individual voice".

The absence of a concluding chapter is a regrettable omission in this otherwise commendable - if complex - new study to add to the library of Woolf monographs. ■

Gerri Kimber



# Glimpsed through the gaps

Gathering the fragments of two great poets

**SIMON GOLDHILL**

**ANACREON OF TEOS**

Testimonia and fragments

**HANS BERNSDORFF, EDITOR**

1,008pp. Oxford University Press. £225 (US \$295).

**SIMONIDES**

Epigrams and elegies

**DAVID SIDER, EDITOR**

480pp. Oxford University Press. £110 (US \$145).

**A**NACREON BURST ONTO THE SCENE in sixth-century BC Athens like a cross between Oscar Wilde and Beyoncé. His short, witty and sexy songs were what everyone wanted to sing and quote. At symposia across the city his self-deprecating celebration of the humiliations of desire and the consolations of good wine made him a star. A string of ancient vases show images of men dressed in feminine clothes including turbans and carrying parasols performing Anacreon: it was, apparently, “a thing”. Unlike many a pop icon – or Oscar Wilde – he lasted beyond the initial flash of success. In several of his poems, he appears as an old man, still trying it on with younger women or men, with a winning mix of self-aware irony and exposed longing. The story goes that he died choking on a grape pip. It is most likely to be apocryphal, but it captures what Anacreon meant to his public: a man who loved the pleasures of life, a miniaturist, ironically hoisted on the petard of his own desires.

His poetry lasted too, even if it was written first for the momentary performances of a drunken evening. Plato, a couple of centuries later, quotes him and calls him *sophos* (“wise”, “smart”); and, even more remarkably, we find the first line from one of his most famous poems, “Bring me water, bring me wine, boy, come bring me garlands of flowers, so that I can have a boxing match with desire ...”, written into a mosaic in Roman Gaul in the second century AD, at around the same time that he is quoted by Lucian, the satirist writing in the eastern reaches of the Roman Empire. Seven hundred years after his death, he is still being performed from France to Syria. In Alexandria, imitations of his poetry were composed, and these poems, known as the *Anacreontea*, became hugely influential in the eighteenth century in Europe, a model of sophisticated, elegant Greek culture. Across the centuries, Anacreon has evoked the fantasy of the party you most want to be at.

Anacreon’s fame was as a lyricist – his most celebrated poems were for singing at a symposium, parties of men, lying on couches together, drinking and talking and flirting – and his popularity gave him a statue on the Acropolis in Athens, and an international career. He moved from the Ionian island of Teos, where he was born, when it was conquered by Cyrus, the imperialist king of Persia, and went to Abdera in Thrace. From there, he was brought to Samos by Polycrates, its ruler, who was building a palace culture of literature and art as well as a maritime power, and then to Athens by its ruler, the tyrant Hipparchus – the man whose assassination by

Aristogeiton and Harmodius (“the tyrant slayers”) became the founding myth of democracy. To have Anacreon in your court was a mark of prestige, a sign of your commitment to the good life. It also meant that Anacreon was singing through the most important political events of his era, hosted by major players in Mediterranean history.

Anacreon was also said to have had a rivalrous and erotic relationship with his contemporary, Sappho, another great lyricist. The evidence offered in antiquity included his lovely two stanzas:

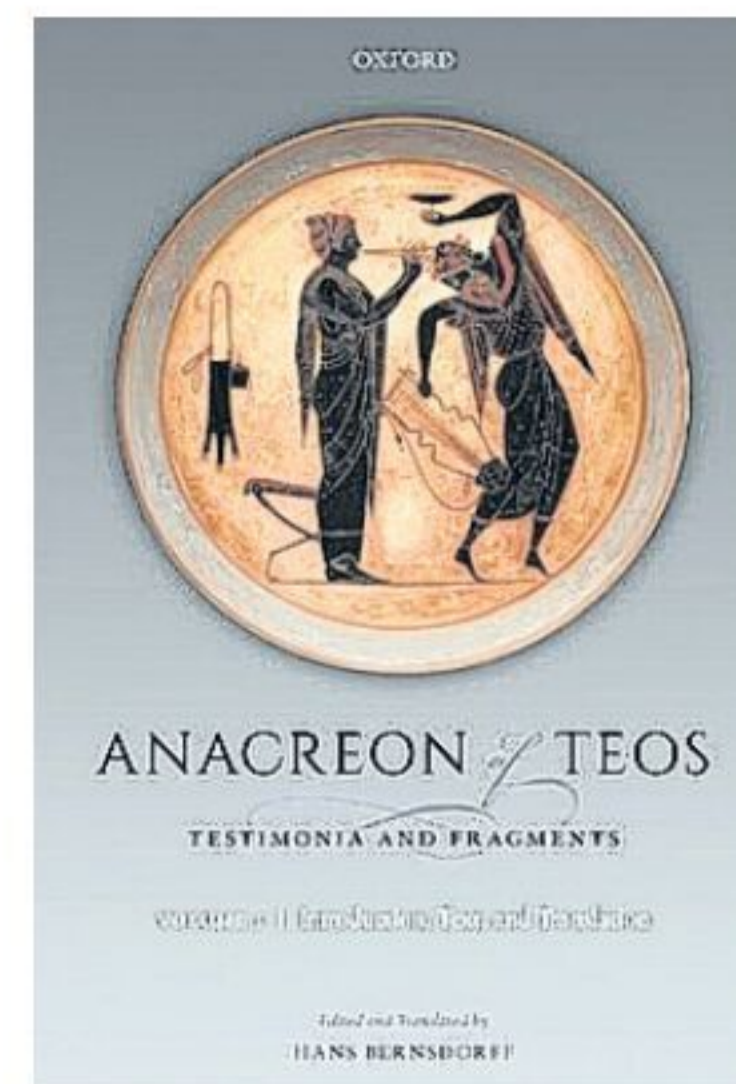
Once again, golden-haired Eros is throwing  
A purple ball at me and challenges me  
To go play with  
The girl with the fancy sandals.

But she – for she is from well-founded  
Lesbos – my hair –  
It’s white – she disses,  
And gapes at another.

The first verse is a crafted single sentence which blends the reality of an erotic encounter, where a girl has her cute shoes on, with a *divina commedia*, where the god of desire plays ball and, like a Homeric hero, issues a challenge to the poet. The second is four sentences, and does not get past its first words, “But she”, before it stumbles into spluttering annoyance and exculpation, a familiar male litany of why a woman might not respond to an advance: she is from Lesbos – either too posh or too like Sappho – she thinks he is too old; his hair is white. The last line has a pointedly nasty sting in the tail. She gapes – stands with her mouth open, a rude expression – “at another”. The grammar of the original Greek indicates that “another” refers back to “hair”. She is gaping at hair that is not his, perhaps the golden-hair of Eros himself, who always wins the games he starts; but it is also (grammatically) a feminine adjective, “some other [female] thing”. Putting that together with the reference to Lesbos, and the ancient association with Sappho, modern readers have also wondered if there is a suggestion here that it is a girl she longs for. But what is most striking is the gap between the two stanzas. Whatever is imagined to happen between the poet and the girl, it takes place, unnarrated, in the silence between the stanzas, as we move from the fantasy of anticipation to the bitterness of the aftermath. Every reader is to fill in the gap in the erotic story. We turn suggestion into narrative, just as the poem itself starts with a fantasy and ends with a different story. Roland Barthes, the modern muse of desire, said that what is truly erotic is not nudity but gaps in clothing through which the body can be glimpsed. Anacreon’s poetry loves to play with such gaps and hints and glimpses. It is an erotic poetics of the suggestive.

Alas – and all good love stories have an alas at their centre – we now have only the tatters of Anacreon’s poetry, quoted by later writers or preserved on scraps of papyrus, through which to glimpse his brilliance. There are barely any fragments longer or more complete than the poem I have just discussed. We can only glimpse the shards, and long to possess more.

Anacreon lived into the fifth century BC, when Athens had an even more expansive and uniquely rich poetic culture. Poems were inscribed on monuments to celebrate military victories or as epitaphs for the dead; victors at the Olympics and other games commissioned choral songs in their own honour; the festivals of drama and other poetic competitions required a constant stream of new works; the epics of Homer were performed before international audiences at the Panathenaia festival; philosophers such as Parmenides, and politicians such as Solon, who wrote in verse, were still earnestly read; poetry provided the basis of education and the furniture of the mind. When Plato banned poets from his utopian Republic, he was not just making a moral or aesthetic case, but establishing the authoritarian playbook of taking control of the media. Simonides, from the generation after Anacreon, lived through this growth. Born probably in



“  
Across the centuries, Anacreon has evoked the fantasy of the party you most want to be at

Simon Goldhill, FBA, is Professor of Greek at the University of Cambridge, and Foreign Secretary of the British Academy

the 550s, he overlapped with Anacreon, but lived through the Persian wars, to die at the grand old age of ninety when Aeschylus was already competing in the tragic festivals.

Simonides wrote poems for many of these possibilities: epigrams for inscription on stone, poems to sing at parties, elegies for public performance, and so on. He was a poet for hire who travelled the Mediterranean following commissions, and, like Anacreon, appears to have been at the court of the tyrants at Athens – but also to have written a commemorative poem for the tyrant slayers, inscribed on their statue in the agora. If Anacreon is best known for his sexy, drunken party poems, Simonides is best known for his poetry of public celebration.

Like most students, I first read Anacreon in David Campbell’s *Greek Lyric Poetry* (1967), six pages of text, with seventeen pages of desperately inadequate commentary – and no sense at all of why the poems might have been quite such a hit. The comprehensive ambition of Hans Bernsdorff’s edition and commentary is embodied in its scale: two volumes of fully 875 pages. The little poem I translated above has twenty-seven pages of dense commentary; Campbell has less than two. Every scrap we know, including fragmentary commentaries on the poems from the second century AD, are collected, and analysed. It is not clear for whom it will be transformative to know that a decontextualized single word might mean “coriander” or “a little girl”, but comprehensiveness requires due diligence. There is, fortunately, also a huge amount of detailed scholarship on what are often very difficult sources, where poems are quoted or misquoted selectively in much later texts, and where the sophistication of Anacreon’s imagery and narrative, even in the briefer fragments, requires a good deal of literary sensitivity as well as scholarship to appreciate. In general, this is a solid piece of scholarship, easy to use and sensible, which will be a standard reference work for a long time. There are places where more cross-referencing would have helped. The word *dêute*, which I translated “once again” in the poem above, is a buzz word of erotic poetry for the symposium – “here we go again” – and I counted eight significant discussions of it in the commentary – here we go again – but unless you go to the index this will not be obvious to anyone reading the discussion of a single poem. There are occasions when solid became stolid, and Anacreon’s suggestiveness gets crushed by Bernsdorff’s search for the “concrete”. He cannot conceive – lucky man – how drinking wine might be a fight against desire. He knows full well that “play with” means both to play ball and to flirt or even to disport with, but seems to find it hard to enjoy the ambiguity. Classical philology has always wanted to pin down too sharply what is more fugitive.

Simonides, in contrast to Anacreon, has been going through a boom in scholarly attention, with important studies by Orlando Poltera, Andrej Petrovic and Richard Rawles. David Sider’s commentary – a fine piece of historically based and epigraphically sensitive scholarship – looks at Simonides’ seventy extant epigrams, some probably spurious, and his fragmentary elegiac poetry. The epigrams are largely for gravestones or monuments, real or imaginary, but clearly had a wide influence and were collected and read in antiquity. It is also at a massive scale – over 450 pages of discussion of texts that together would make the slimmest of poetry volumes.

There is no methodological discussion in either book about what should go into a commentary, and it would be easy to wonder if the balance of modern discussion to ancient text is right. But I was surprised not only by how much I enjoyed pretty well every page of these books, but also by how comforting it was to know that Oxford University Press – in these days of the desperate search for the mythical general reader – still publishes books designed for scholars, where Greek, Latin and German are not translated, and where technical detail has its licence. ■

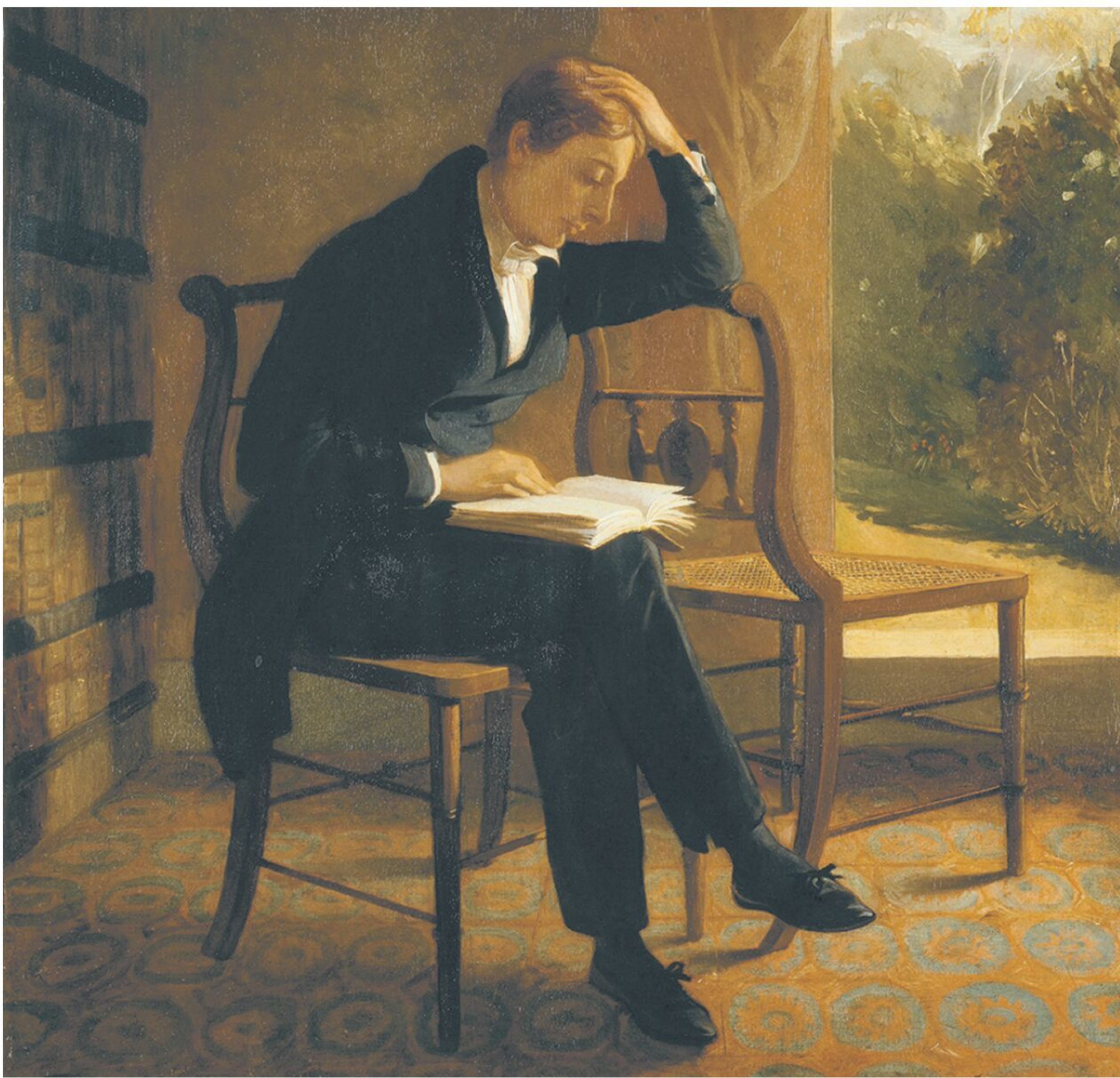


In next week's

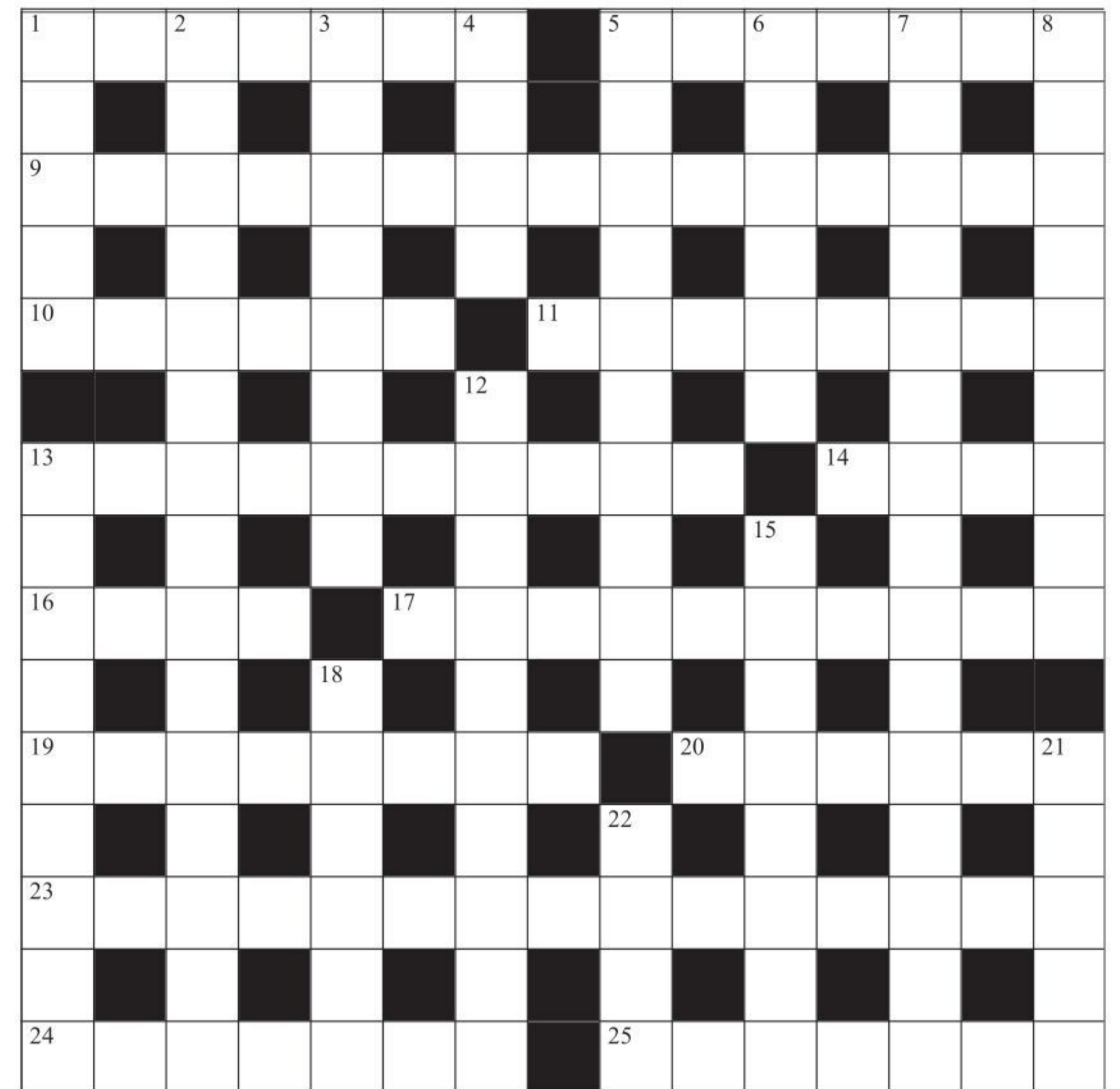
# TLS

**JONATHAN BATE**

John Keats and Mrs Jones



**TLS CROSSWORD 1363 BY BROTEAS**



**ACROSS**

- 1** Acton location with hawthorn almost completely rampant (7)
- 5** African leader with London University qualification, keeping quiet (7)
- 9** German invaders emerging from North Sea and dashing around (7, 3, 5)
- 10** One crying in Thomas's implied mourning for some in lines (3, 3)
- 11** One line in very good Burns poem (2, 1, 5)
- 13** Teeming city with extremely dirty quarter where children play ... (5, 5)
- 14** ... is the French Utopia or Neverland? (4)
- 16** Drags along uncivilised folk (4)
- 17** "Brilliant" describes a famous detective, no gent and feeling apologetic (10)
- 19** Remote island with hollow stones piled high (8)
- 20** Singer with church background getting soprano replaced by rector in Edgeworth's novel (6)
- 23** U.S.A. pilot's nearly crashed on ground (7,8)
- 24** The French captivated in following Poe's work (7)
- 25** Boring routine receiving place prize (7)

**DOWN**

- 1** Hotel with one pork pie possibly, that may be found in the kitchen (2-3)
- 2** Robert Bridges poem you're sure to see in the next 24 hours (6, 9)
- 3** Lines featuring in at least three Agatha Christie mysteries (8)
- 4** "Cherish those hearts that \_\_\_ thee" (Shakespeare) (4)
- 5** Robert Bridges poem some of you may experience before or after 2 (6, 4)
- 6** Chap introducing city hospital on TV? (6)
- 7** Ford's quote is scandalous, to damage Elizabeth's son in Shakespeare (7, 2, 6)
- 8** Tennyson poem that's satisfactory on romance, we hear (1, 8)
- 12** Poetic feature seen in Verse and Worse (5, 5)
- 13** London gangs run back with boxes (4, 5)
- 15** As true as Byzantine or Greek god (8)
- 18** A male left inside a vessel in a Scottish ballad (3, 3)
- 21** Old master Lawrence, a very famous writer (5)
- 22** Note this special person (4)

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**SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1359**

The winner of Crossword 1359 is Peter Gregson, of Bucks

The sender of the first correct solution opened on March 5, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1363, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF





# Sell, buy, date

How pleasant it is to be overtaken by events. Last week we described the precarious state of the National Library of Wales, following a decade of financial woes; on February 3, the BBC reported that the Welsh government, having previously denied that there was “extra money” available, had found the NLW £2.25 million, “to safeguard jobs and deliver new strategic priorities”.

The U-turn came after a petition calling for fair funding for the NLW had gathered more than 14,300 signatures. But apparently the library’s cause was also helped by a widely shared tweet from Philip Pullman: “it must be saved”, the children’s author had declared. And so it was.

Two days later, Pullman was at it again. “Add your name”, he commanded, referring this time to another petition (which has been signed, at the time of writing, by 3,300 people): a petition asking Waterstones to ensure that its furloughed staff receive the minimum wage (which is now £8.72 per hour for anyone over the age of twenty-five). The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme covers 80 per cent of furloughed employees’ wages; a senior bookseller for Waterstones could testify that, on furlough, their monthly pay had dropped to £170 below the minimum wage.

The petitioners’ request hardly seems outrageous, not least as we contemplate the £93 million that the hedge fund Elliott Advisors, which has owned Waterstones since 2018, just distributed between the 107 employees of its Mayfair office. But this is not the Waterstones way. A pay rise for its employees is due, according to the *Guardian*, either in April or whenever its shops can reopen. But for now, when the money is arguably most needed, the high-ups have ruled that a pay rise “would not be prudent”.

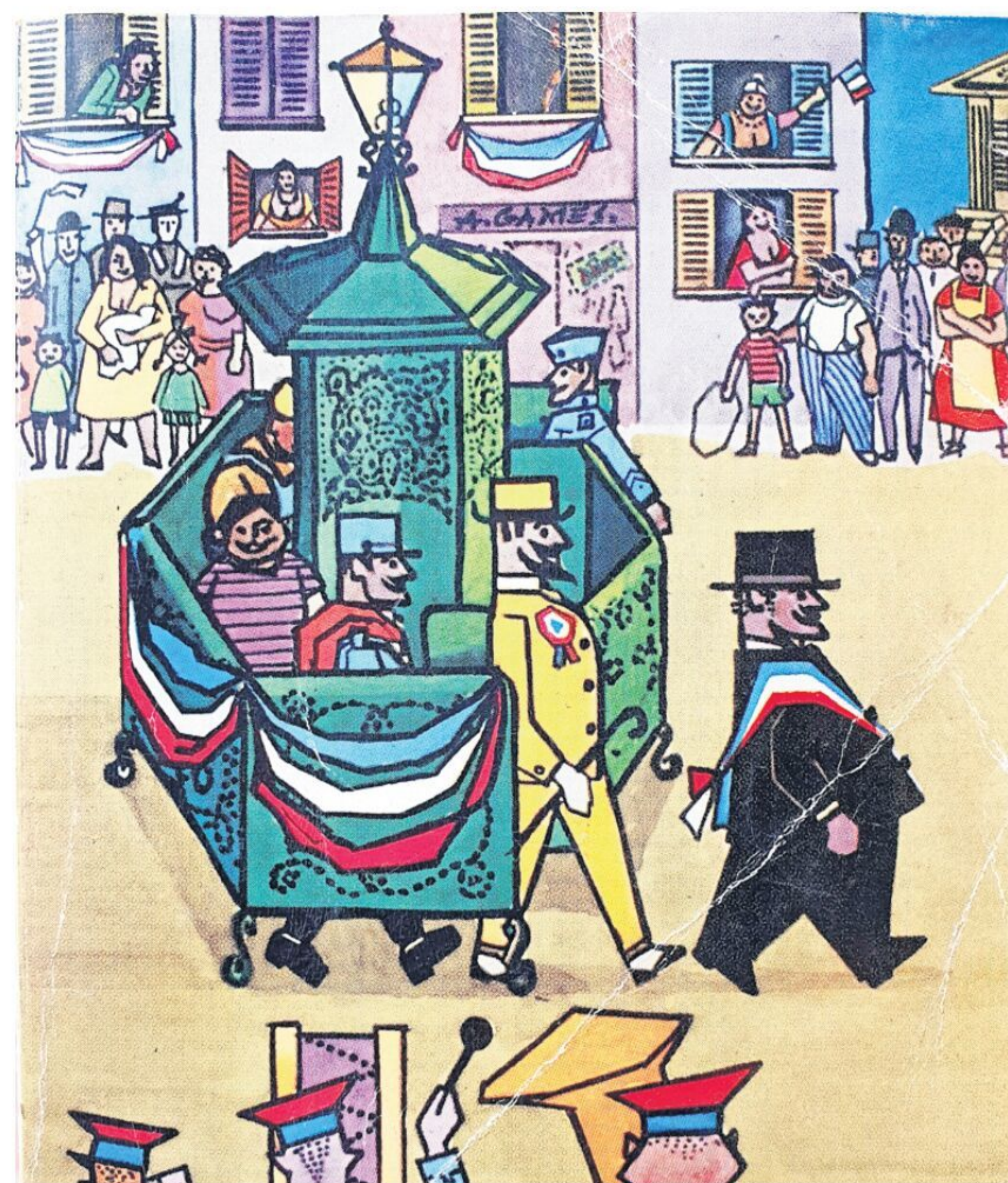
In *The Bookseller’s Tale* (2020), Martin Latham tells some treasured stories of Waterstones past - or Waterstone’s, indeed, as the chain was formerly known. The Cheltenham branch’s staff are “a crew of baroque eccentricity, who stocked it with an almost Alexandrian completeness”. “Travel, I remember, had three books on the island of St Helena.” At Canterbury, in the Classics section, a woman had a heart attack, was resuscitated and, as she was wheeled out to her ambulance, was heard to remark, “I do love it here ... it would have been a great place to go”.

And then there was the young graduate hired to run the fiction section. He “engaged in long conversations with most customers”, and his name was David Mitchell.

As Latham points out, Mitchell’s novels now have a “permanent place” on the shelves of the shop where he once worked.

Talk with a former employee of the chain - one who worked there for fourteen years, before the great pandemic struck, that is - and some less glorious memories emerge. We hear of experienced but “increasingly disgruntled” staff leaving, or being shunted from one branch to another, sometimes just to stand at an alien till for a few hours, the cost of London transport eating into a day’s pay; of short-term contracts and holiday regulations that would alienate anyone minded to regard bookselling as a sort of career; of junior booksellers having to substitute for cleaners and security staff. Would you miss your bus home because you cared about your job? “People would have done that” for the old Waterstone’s, our former bookselling friend reckons. Perhaps the next David Mitchell has already left the building.

Setting such corporate matters aside, some of us are, in these lockdown days, still hankering for an afternoon’s browsing in an idiosyncratic second-hand bookshop or two. As mentioned in this column some years ago, such a shop might once have been found opposite Balham railway station in south London. My Back Pages, on Station Road, was a proper cavern of delights, some dustier than others.



It was subsequently replaced with an estate agent, and briefly re-emerged in Earlsfield as Turn the Page. We thought it had gone for good, but pictured above is one sign of its latest incarnation: our copy of *Clochemerle* by Gabriel Chevallier.

This volume is no rarity, we confess. In 1935, a year after this satire’s publication in French, the *TLS* could report that *Clochemerle* was selling “at a rate of 2,500 copies a week”; and that, “shamefacedly it must be admitted”, the first half of the book contained “many good laughs”, which were then let down by the “inferior” second half. Its popularity, nonetheless, gave rise to the term *clochemerlesque* - for the story concerns a row over the installation of a public convenience in proximity to the village church of Clochemerle-en-Beaujolais, and such a coinage, denoting storms in parochial teacups, is too good to resist. There were sequels and adaptations - still, we suspect, the term could be applied more frequently today than it is.

Purchased for £2 - on Instagram, via mybackpages.london, we admit - our decent copy of *Clochemerle* was delivered by the bookseller in person, to our door.

A literary journalist must sometimes accept defeat in the face of the book publicists’ eloquence. In the case of Arch Hades, a twenty-eight-year-old poet “with more than a million followers on Instagram alone”, we have nothing to add to the laudations heaped upon her young head by not one but two publicists in their recent dispatches. “She’s the glamorous divorcee with a huge social media following who has turned the world of romantic poetry on its head”, they tell us, in unison. Hades’s new book, *Fool’s Gold*, is “set to become one of the UK’s most gifted Valentine’s Day items”. It is “crammed with romantic musings and verses offering insights to [sic] modern day dating, heartbreak and redemption”.

At the risk of contracting Instagram-itis - and preferring to think of

that social networking platform in relation to the endless search for secondhand books - we were compelled to find out what it felt like to have the world of romantic poetry turned on its head.

Fragile hearts, they often break  
But heal with perseverance  
And their pain, they soon forget  
Fragile, yet resilient

Reading that quatrain, which is called “Hearts”, prompted as many people to hit the “like” button on Instagram as “signed” the NLW petition. The same goes for “Emotional labour”:

It’s an unseen burden, doing the  
labour twice  
While you’re dismayed (’bout  
your mistake)  
I have to go on being nice ...  
  
You’re blind to how stifling  
this is  
There’s no room for my reaction  
here  
I have to sit with what you  
give ...

Suppressing the urge to do a little emotional labour of our own, we hope that any reader who has decided to make a gift of *Fool’s Gold* (Austin Macauley, £8.99) for Valentine’s Day will be kind enough to let us know if anybody was blinded, or indeed stifled, as a result. There is no room for our reaction here.

M. C.

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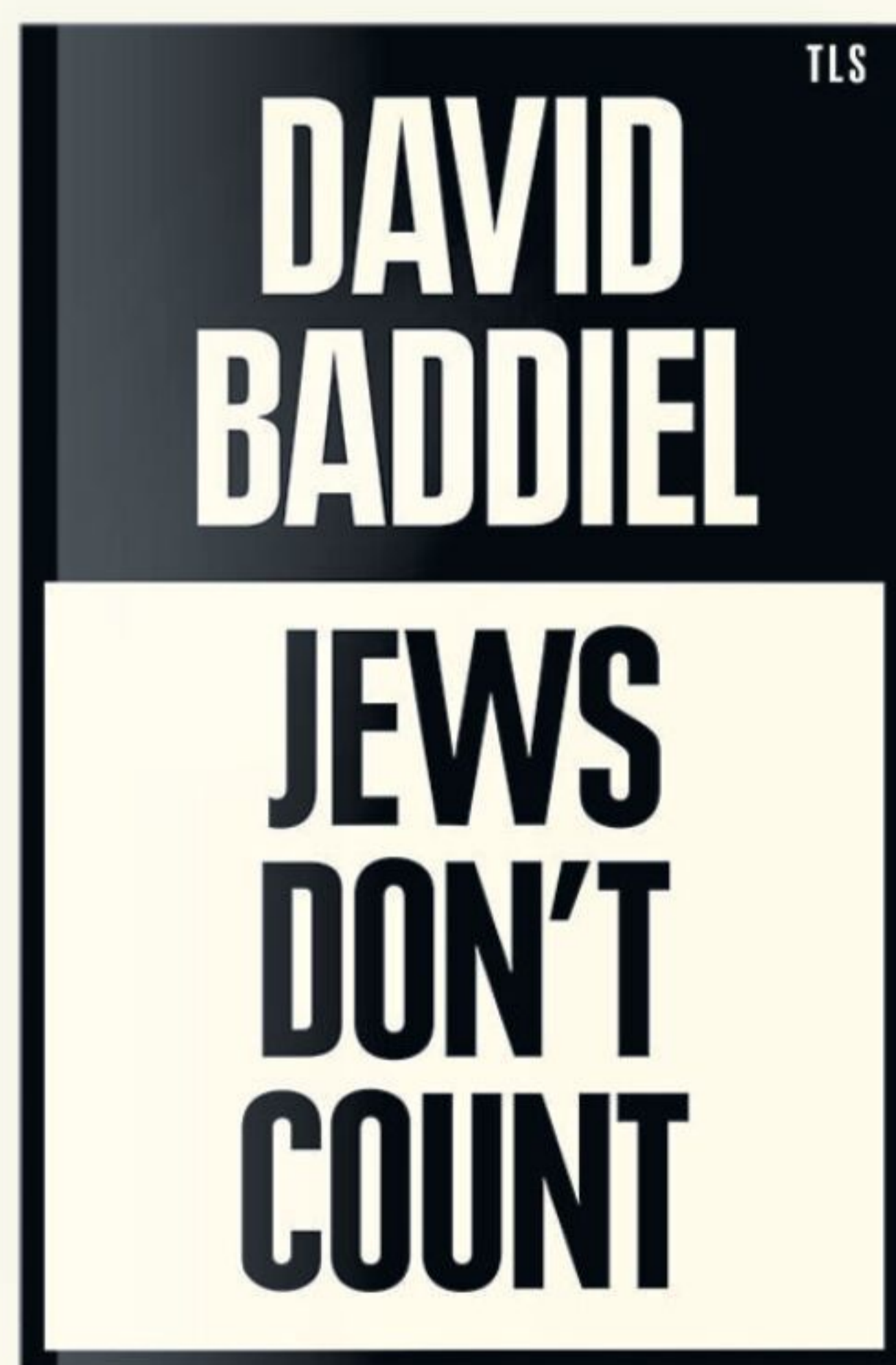
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