Austere American beauty
Joyce Carol Oates on the photography of Walker Evans
In this issue

Whenever we try to visualize the rural America of the Great Depression we most likely see images created by Walker Evans. His understated portraits of poor Alabama sharecropping families, published with a passionate text written by James Agee in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men, have become part of collective visual memory. Even people who have never heard of the great photographer recognize his gaunt, dignified subjects when they see them staring out from magazines and dust jackets. Yet it is easy to forget that a classic that has inspired composers, writers, social idealists and photographers alike began life as a failure, Fortune magazine, which had given Walker and Agee their original eight-week assignment in 1936, declined to publish the finished product because it was too pessimistic and Agee’s prose too subjective. When the pair eventually took their work to a publisher in wartime five years later, the book sold 600 copies, only half its run. Evans had to wait until its reissue in 1960 before his photographs began to take on iconic status. By then, Agee had drunk himself to death.

Evans’s assessment of his work was unsentimental: “I suppose I was interested in calling attention to something, even shocking people. But I don’t think I had the purpose of improving the world thereby ... I just say what’s what.” In her TLS cover review of Walker Evans by Svetlana Alpers, the novelist Joyce Carol Oates pays tribute to a photographer who eschewed “an obvious love of the American vernacular, the democracy of ‘found objects’, the ‘enchantment of the aesthetically rejected subject’”. Evans, who spent an unhappy but formative year in Paris in the 1920s, cited the unconscious influence of Baudelaire and, especially, of Flaubert - “both his realism or naturalism, and his objectivity of treatment”. Alpers, an art historian, also sees an artistic resemblance between Evans and Cézanne: “Both of them ... despaired and rejoiced in the practice of making images that would be in some way equal to the world”.

We rely on photographs taken by the Allies after the liberation of the Nazi death camps for pictorial evidence of the Holocaust. In his review of Wendy Lower’s Ravine, Bryan Cheyette points out that there are only a handful of incriminating pictures taken from the side of the perpetrators because “producing documentary evidence in the act of mass murder was severely prohibited”. The truth “threatened the security of the people”. That’s a phrase with a long life to it.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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No ideas, but in things
The quintessential American minimalism of Walker Evans

JOYCE CAROL OATES

WALKER EVANS
Starting from scratch

svETLANA ALPERS
257pp. Princeton University Press. £34 (US $38.95)

“...wasn’t looking for a thing, things were looking for me” - Walker Evans.

O
F GREAT AMERICAN PHOTOGRAPHERS of the approximate first half of the twentieth century - a distinguished group that includes Alfred Stieglitz, Lewis Hine, Dorothea Lange, Paul Strand, Alfred Eisenstaedt, Imogen Cunningham, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Berenice Abbott among others - it is Walker Evans (1903-75), with his characteristically spare, unadorned, deceptively simple and austere beautiful photographs (rural churches, abandoned barns, scraped automobiles, derelict wagons, signs, billboards and posters, barbershops, storefronts, “anonymous” persons), who has come to embody the quintessential American minimalism we admire in the prose of Sherwood Anderson’s Winesburg, Ohio (1919) and the early Ernest Hemmingway of In Our Time (1924), the poetry of William Carlos Williams and the more vernacular music of Charles Ives, and the uncultured dreamlike realism of Edward Hopper’s paintings.

Williams’s famous mantra “No ideas, but in things” (Paterson, 1946) is a helpful distillation of Evans’s aesthetic of documentary lyricism: not abstract ideas, indeed not ideas at all, but objects should be the focus of attention, sometimes decontextualized in the interests of pure vision; where given a context, as in the beautifully understated portraiture in Let Us Now Praise Famous Men (1941), Evans’s celebrated collaboration with James Agee, in which three sharecropper families are represented in formal poses outside their shingle-board houses in Depression-era Alabama, this context is itself minimal, straightforward. The aesthetic ideal is a kind of folk documentation that establishes the “authenticity of the past” by a selection of (symbolic) images linking the viewer to a violent history recollected in tranquility: Confederate battlefield monuments, plantation houses in ruins, devastated graveyards. Evans is a master of poetic absences: uniquely detailed domestic interiors that characterize their (absent) tenants, factories exuding a dispirited ugliness, acres of junked automobiles that startle the eye like fallen human figures. (“I like to suggest people sometimes by their absence. I like to make you feel that an interior is inhabited by someone.”) Avoiding excess, pretentious allusions and distracting mannerisms of the sort that, in the self-consciously “artistic” photography of his acclaimed contemporary Alfred Stieglitz, Evans particularly disliked, Evans strove to cultivate a “puritan style” of an almost geometric precision. (“I was stimulated by Stieglitz.” When I got around to looking at photography I found him somebody to work against. He was artistic and romantic. It gave me an aesthetic to sharpen my own again - a counter-aesthetic.”) In the public lecture “Lyric Documentary”, given in 1964 at Yale, where he was Professor of Graphic Design (1964-73), Evans expanded on the concept:

The real thing I’m talking about has purity, and a certain severity, rigor, sympathy, directness, clarity, and it is without artistic pretension in a self-conscious sense of the word. That’s the base of it: they’re hard and firm.

Simplicity, directness, a repotoral respect for the world as it is observed by the eye without sentiment, irony, or experimentation: this is Walker Evans’s lifelong aesthetic as a devoted chronicler of post-Civil War America. Like his contemporary William Carlos Williams, Evans exudes an obvious love of the American vernacular, the democracy of “found objects”, the “enchantment of the aesthetically rejected subject.”

Of the 43 photographic plates preceding Svetlana Alpers’s 232-page text in Starting from scratch, virtually all are of “aesthetically rejected subjects” - faces careworn from poverty, homelessness, mental illness; façades of dilapidated rowhouses, Depression-era small towns; faded signs and tattered posters (some of them advertising minstrel shows); abandoned farm equipment. Alpers includes an Evans photograph of a city block in Selma, Alabama, in 1936, that replicates Edward Hopper’s famous “Early Sunday Morning” (1930) - so much less

Floyd Burroughs on Tingle porch, 1936

serenely comforting in Evans’s stark neutrals than in Hopper’s mellow colours. With an eye for the “transcendent” detail as attentive as Evans’s own, Alpers is an ideal interpreter of his work:

There is a dignity in a wagon observed straight on, from above, with loving attention. The wheels display a crafted elegance. At first, one might not notice that the farm wagon is a wreck. The wheels are awry, the body or floor broken and twisted out of shape. It is past use. The grasses and low branches mark its abandonment, but they also protect it. In effect, the attactive photograph minimizes loss.

And, so vividly described by Alpers that we can nearly see the (remarkable) photograph: “In Atlanta, [Evans] went in and photographed an empty barber shop, titled Negroes’ Barber Shop, Atlanta, Georgia; plate 6 in Part One of American Photographs. It is a photograph Evans elected to publish, and it is deservedly well known. Did he come upon this place when looking around the neighborhood of its customers? The interior, empty of people, a pair of vacant barber chairs swung to look away from the mirrors, is suggestive of life that had been there and would be there again. Towels are folded on the arms and head rests of the chairs, and more are waiting on the shelves. The headline of a newspaper tacked to the wall happens to include the name of Eugene Talmadge, the racist Democratic governor of Georgia who, among other things, fought against the kind of government program that employed Evans. The neatness of it all, but also the simple poverty of it. It is the honorably normal nature of poverty that Evans’s photograph insists on - with the Talmadge name as an impromptu reminder of another reality of the time.”

In his long and prolific career Evans managed to entirely avoid celebrity portraiture: his dignified subjects are for the most part working-class, as in the series titled Labor Anonymous: On a Saturday afternoon in downtown Detroit. Alpers’s selection of Evans’s photographs isn’t strictly chronological but suggests a subtle pattern: beginning with a striking photograph of 1936, “Corrugated Tin Façade”, reaching back to include work of the 1920s, and ending, appropriately, with a melancholy “colour” photograph of 1973, “Dead End”. Alpers’s interest in the “unique” work of Walker Evans is an interest in the “making” of the photographs rather than in their interpretation: her approach is slow, patient, factually detailed, appreciative and illuminating; if her manner suggests that of an art history professor lecturing as she shows slides, it is conversational and rarely pedagogic. (Though she can’t resist the occasional, “I quote in French [comments made to young Walker Evans by a French instructor] and shall not translate.”)

Born in St Louis, Missouri in 1903 to “modest privilege”, Walker Evans was initially drawn to literature, and considered photography “the most literary of the arts.” A highly formative year (1926-7) in France awakened in the young Evans an enormous respect for the sharply perceptionist prose of Gustave Flaubert and the hallucinatory poetry of Baudelaire; in time, Evans would come to be called “the Flaubert of photographers”. Baudelaire was equally valued by the young Evans, as “a kind of god”, and indeed he seems to have internalized certain obsessions of Baudelaire’s for “things cast away, for debris, dirt and cigarette butts on a damaged road by a curbside”. In Evans’s words: I wasn’t very conscious of it then, but I know now that Flaubert’s aesthetic is absolutely mine. Flaubert’s method I think I incorporated almost unconsciously, but anyhow used in two ways: his realism and naturalism both, and his objectivity of treat- ment - the non-appearance of the author, the non-subjectivity. That is literally applicable to the way I use a camera. However, however, it is Baudelaire who is the influence on me.

Evans’s pronounced contempt for nature as a subject (“Nature bores me as an art form”) is less idio-
A landscape by Walker Evans is likely to be a mock-landscape defined by acres of rusting vehicles.

Street Scene, Vicksburg, Mississippi, 1936

distinguished career as an art historian focused on the greatest of European painters - Rembrandt's Enterprises: The studio and the market (1990), Tiespolo and the Pictorial Intelligence (1994), The Making of Rubens (1996), The Vexations of Art: Velázquez and others (2007) - Alpers takes up the subject of photography by an American of the twentieth century - a first for her, as she acknowledges in her introduction; indeed, it is the art historian who is boldly "starting from scratch" in a new field. (Alpers was born in 1936.) Initially, it was the "singularity" of the art-work (painting) that interested Alpers: the "making". By contrast, the "making" of photography isn't about singularity at all but about the possibility of infradocumentation, thus infinite variants of an essential image, and infinite interpretations.

In a passage considering the distinction between artists who are determined to complete their work and artists who seem, instinctively, to resist completing it, Alpers is wonderfully revelatory:

In the ongoing nature of his practice (which includes his dismissal of all fine printing), all of Evans's photographs might be likened to drawings in a sketchbook. . . . I have described Evans's striking unwillingness to favor one out of a series of images of the same subject as his acceptance of the inherent repetitiveness or multiplicity of the medium. . . . What is lacking with Evans is something equivalent to the lack of a finished painting by Cézanne. Here is a final twist that brings Cézanne's sense of painting close to Evans's sense of photographs: Cézanne, who famously found finishing a painting next to impossible, is similar to Evans in his reluctance to settle on an iconic print. Both of them rejoiced and also despised in the practice making images that would in some way be equal to the world. It is really Starting from scratch that is a "unique" work, a close reading of classic photographs by a discerning eye (Alpers's) that conjoins the institutional with the intimate, the scholarship of the historian with the candour of the memoirist. By way of amplifying Evans's photographs Alpers finds kindred themes and motives in other artists as varied as William Carlos Williams, William Faulkner, Fred Astaire, Elizabeth Bishop, even Bob Dylan - connections that are sometimes, if not arbitrary, yet fruitful and always interesting. Excellent as much of Starting from scratch is, the book seems to gather a dramatic momentum as it proceeds, culminating in a brilliant and, indeed, thrilling final chapter titled "Turning In", in which Alpers considers the phenomenon of "late style" as it relates to artists other than Walker Evans:

I myself come at the question of late style from a lifetime working on historic European art. The late style of masters like Titan or Rembrandt was a much cherished and much studied phenomenon. If artists in general were related to others through the period style in which they worked, what was notable about certain older artists is that they went off on their own, painting in a matter that was independent of others . . . Think of the individual handling of the paint by Titian and by Rembrandt. Picasso's once ignored later works might be included under the rubric and also the surprising last works of Miro. The "late styles" of Atget and Evans are considered: "They are, in great part, discoveries of [the photographers'] own pleasure ... Nearing the end, each man can be described as playing at losing himself in something he loved: Atget in landscapes, Evans in manskapes." This richly contemplative book ends with a poignant quote from Evans, from an Interview given not long before his death in which he speaks with excited enthusiasm, about a new camera he has discovered ("the Polaroid SX70"): Oh, extend my vision and let that open up new stylistic paths that I haven't been down yet. That is one of the peculiar things about it that I unexpectedly discovered ... You photograph things you wouldn't think of photographing before. I don't even yet know why, but I find that I am quite rejuvenated by it.
Atrocity exhibits

Two photographs, and the Holocaust stories behind them

BRYAN CHEYETTE

THE RAVINE
A family, a photograph, a Holocaust massacre...revealed

WENDY LOWER
257pp. Apollo. £20.

GRIEF
The biography of a Holocaust photographer
DAVID SHNEER

ONE’S FIRST ENCOUNTER with the photographic inventory of ultimate horror is a kind of revelation, the prototypically modern revelation: a negative epiphany.” This was Susan Sontag’s response, in retrospect, after seeing images of Bergen-Belsen and Dachau in 1945 as a twelve-year-old. “Something broke. Some limit had been reached, and not only that of horror... To suffer is one thing; another thing is living with the photographed images of suffering.” Wendy Lower and David Shneer, in contrasting books, attempt to fathom the “negative epiphany” of atrocity photographs as well as the historical resonance of “photographed images of suffering.” They write in opposition to Sontag, who believed that one ultimately becomes desensitized to such images after repeated viewings. An enduring knowledge of the “history and content” of an atrocity photograph, Lower contends, can enhance the viewer’s awareness rather than diminish it. The Ravine and Grief are both written in this didactic spirit.

Each book contextualizes a micro-image of the Holocaust in different ways. The Ravine begins with Lower in an archive reading SS police reports. She is interrupted by a Ukrainian specialist who shows her a photograph of a woman and a boy being shot on the edge of a ravine in October 1941. This leaves Lower with an ethical dilemma. “What does one do upon discovering a photograph that documents murder?” The mother and child are surrounded by two German soldiers and three Ukrainian auxiliaries whose rifles are almost touching their recently shot victim. The viewer cannot see the woman’s face as it is covered in smoke from the gun fire. But we can see some of the killers smiling. Lower, who is best known for Hitler’s Furies: German women in the Nazi killing fields (2013), immediately recognized the rarity of the image. Although the Second World War was the most photographed conflict in history, there are only a handful of extant “incriminating photographs”. Producing documentary evidence in the act of mass murder was severely prohibited (although soldiers often had cameras), as it was regarded as threatening the “security of the Reich”. There were, instead, plenty of images of people and communities before they were murdered and, afterwards, as “piles of corpses”.

The Ravine reads like a compelling detective novel as it confines much of its historical detail to the endnotes. It records the author’s quest to uncover every aspect of the photograph. What do we know of the murderers and victims? Who took the picture? How was the small Jewish community in Miroslava destroyed? Can we still find bodies in the ravine? Lower’s pursuit of the truth is both captivating and meticulous as she attempts to find answers to these questions. She knows that the two massacres on the outskirts of Miroslava, killing 960 civilians, were part of a much wider pattern of genocide and mass murder on the “killing fields” of the eastern front. But details matter. The police unit that shot Jews in Miroslava in September 1941 continued onto the ravine at Babi Yar, near Kiev, where 33,000 Jews were annihilated soon after. Within six months of the German invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941, half a million Jews were slaughtered in what is known as the “Holocaust by bullet”. When Vasily Grossman, the renowned war correspondent, entered the Ukraine in 1943, with the liberating Red Army, he wrote an article entitled “Ukraine without Jews”. His mother had perished in the Berdichev ghetto. By the end of the war, a million Jews were killed in the Ukraine with, to this day, only about half of those missing accounted for. Most of the culprits remained free.

Given the vast numbers of victims on the eastern front - 27 million Soviet citizens died in all - Lower focuses more on individuals and families. Personalizing the casualties, and finding justice for some of the perpetrators, gives a human face to the vertiginous statistics. Discovering the German killers is her first priority. To this end, she tells the war crimes trials in West Germany were fantastically inadequate. She has success in finding some of the Germans who followed the Wehrmacht and carried out the genocide. In a small town such as Miroslava, murders are intimate. Neighbours betray neighbours, the killers grew up with their prey, steal their belongings and occupy their houses. Unlike West Germany, the Soviet Union was rather more ruthless in bringing the Ukrainian auxiliaries to summary justice. The Vasylkiv family in the photograph is identified and includes the young boy who was holding Khiva Bironin’s kaya Vasylkiv’s hand. After a painstaking analysis, a baby was discovered under Khiva’s clothing and was, presumably, still alive when she was shot. Their history and extended relatives are part of Lower’s dazzling forensic excavation. The remains of those massacred are also found as a result of the gruesome signs of geological disruption over seven decades. Most unusually, the Slovaka photographer, Lubomin Skravina, turns out to be a maverick who was by no means a supporter of the Nazi project. His dissident biography chimes with the rarity of his evidentiary photographs which he managed, at great personal risk, to preserve for posterity.

The photographers in the two books could not be more different. Dmitri Baltermants, a Red Army Lieutenant, and official war photographer for Izvestia, was not a dissident. His iconic image “Grief” was one of many atrocities photographs designed to rally a population that was valiantly blocking the German army from making inroads east of Stalingrad, Moscow and Rostov. Such pictures demonstrated what the Germans would do to the Russian population if conquered. They were both an incentive to fight and a call for revenge. “Grief” was produced in 1942, a few weeks after the massacre of around 7,000 civilians in a ditch - about a mile long, six feet deep and fifteen feet wide - on the outskirts of Kerch on the strategically important Crimean Peninsula. The picture was one of the earliest demonstrations of how blood-thirsty the Germans were. It was made possible by the successful but short-lived Soviet counter-offensive, which took back the peninsula in January
1942. Baltermants was with the troops and witnessed grieving mothers and widows looking for the bodies of their husbands and sons (although the bodies of women and children could also be found in the ditch). Both the Mirolo and Kerch photographs obey the “rule of thirds” (relating the horizontal and vertical dimensions of the image), but only Baltermants was steeped in the aesthetics of socialist realism and photomontage. His newspaper image, which was also exhibited on the walls of Russian towns and cities, was designed to aid the Soviet war effort. It captured in miniature the barbarity of the enemy.

Shneer does not utilize the information in “Grief” to identify the distraught women or onlooking soldiers. Rather than uncovering evidence, he writes a remarkable “biography” of the photograph. This includes tracing the use of photomontage which transforms it into a work of art, its reception during the war, and its part in Cold War propaganda and rapprochement. In its final incarnation, after the fall of the Soviet Union, “Grief” became a “Holocaust Photograph” although Baltermants, a Soviet Jew, chose a landscape where none of the participants were Jewish. He knew well that those massacred were regarded as no more than “Soviet citizens”. Both before and after the war his gifts as a photographer were at the behest of an ethnically and nationally diverse Soviet empire. In fact, “Grief” was largely forgotten during the war once its remit changed to take battle photographs to bolster the counter-offensive. His was the most prominent image of Stalin’s re-election in 1950 and he effectively visualized the Soviet Union as a superpower. Throughout the Khrušcheyev years (1958–64) he was particularly influential as a conduit to the West and the East European satellite nations. During these years, “Grief” was re-discovered and became a global image. By the early 1960s, his work travelled to the United States, Britain, Australia and Brazil.

The commodification of “Grief” in the United States, part of the growing art photography market, and its re-interpretation as an image of the Holocaust, reinforced one another. The picture was almost always on the cover of Baltermants’s exhibitions in the West. Launched in the name of the sacrifices of the Soviet Union, or universal human suffering, or global peace. Once it was canonized as an image of the Holocaust, it was readily understood in the West, its collectable value increased. Sonntag has spoken of the “dual power of photography” to generate documents and to create works of art. Such resonant images of genocide in the Ukraine, and its after-effects, exemplify the doubleness of photography. These superb books, ironically, aesthetize to achieve documentary veracity and deduce to understand historical reception. Even trauma images can narrate a multitude of different stories.

Marrying the Viennese poet, critic and theatre director Berthold Viertel in 1918, and giving birth to three sons over the next six years, barely kept Salka Viertel-Steuermann, as she was now billed, off the stage. Amid the fluctuating success of her and Berthold’s theatrical careers in Germany, they both began to work in film; she dabbled in acting and screenwriting, while he directed a handful of productions, including the critically praised, now lost montage film Adventures of a Ten-Mark Note (1926). In 1928 F. W. Murnau, who moved to Hollywood after the international success of The Last Laugh (1924), asked Berthold to join him at Fox Film, where he soon floundered as a screenwriter. It was Salka who became the primary breadwinner after her relationship with Greta Garbo - which began in 1928 - was passed on by Ernst Lubitsch and lasted until Salka’s death - led to a succession of screenwriting assignments for MGM. Plans to save as much money as possible and then return to the vibrant cultural scene in Germany’s so-called “golden twenties” were frustrated by the Depression and the political rise of the Nazis.

Much of the book’s second half is devoted to Salka Viertel’s own kind of strangerings and to friends, as European exiles, both renowned and otherwise, began to pour into California. After acquiring the now famous house at 165 Mabry Road in Santa Monica, Salka hosted regular Sunday afternoon gatherings. Guests, who included Arnold Schoenberg, Charlie Chaplin and Oona O’Neill, Tallulah Bankhead and Otto Klemperer as well as, in Salka Viertel’s words, “the not yet famous”, enjoyed sandwiches, her famous chocolate cake and table tennis (at which Schoenberg was said to be a particularly fierce competitor). While little is revealed of who said what to whom at these salon-like picnics, Salka does sketch a touching, gently comic vignette of Heinrich and Thomas Mann at the former’s seventieth birthday party. They delivered duelling, seemingly endless perorations about each other’s fight against fascism as the roast beef was finally served “overdone”. Perhaps the most amusing account is recorded in Christopher Isherwood’s diaries. During a more intimate evening he overheard Salka and Aldous Huxley fantasizing about a lesbian takeover of the major studios, which would be renamed “Warner Sisters, Louisa B. Mayer, United Artists, Twentieth Century Yxen, etc.”

By the early 1940s the FBI was also listening. Information about Salka’s association with Brecht, Hanns Eisler and other left-wing artists and intellectuals gathered from wiretaps, opened mail and several informants. In her chronicle of these years, the gentle humour and comic timing that characterize Travels as a whole give way to condensed satirical indignation. She quotes the classification of herself as a “premature anti-fascist” (a code word for Communist) and maliciously shortens the title of the House Committee on Un-American Activities to “the Un-American Committee”.

Sundays with Salka

The rich life, in exile, of Greta Garbo’s MGM screenwriter

LEO A. LENSING

THE KINDNESS OF STRANGERS

SALKA VIERTEL


THE SUN AND HER STARS

Salka Viertel and Hitler’s exiles in the Golden Age of Hollywood

DONNA RIFKIND


THE MODERATE PLACE that the Austrian-American actor and screenwriter Salka Viertel (1889-1978) occupies in film history has been built up with her work on the films Greta Garbo made for MGM in the 1930s and 40s. Their creative partnership functioned for the better part of a decade, beginning with the critically and commercially successful love story Queen Christina (1933), about the seventeenth-century Swedish monarch, which emphasized her preference for male dress and for peace over war, and concluding with the universally panned comedy Two-Faced Woman (1941), in which a husband’s supposed adultery (his suspicious wife pretends to be her own twin sister) had to be re-edited after release to satisfy the Catholic Legion of Decency. Viertel briefly scratched out a living in the cut-throat world of Hollywood scriptwriting by colluding with Garbo to advance projects that added a European edge to the formulaic entertainments favoured by the studio, and managing the inevitable compromises demanded by producers and directors.

A theatrical life. Vienna - Berlin - Hollywood, the subtitle on the dust jacket of the original 1969 edition of Viertel’s memoir The Kindness of Strangers, evokes the cultural richness and the existential perils of Salka’s life; the title itself comes from A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), in which Blanche DuBois tells the doctor who is about to institutionalize her that she has always relied on “the kindness of strangers”. The book begins before Vienna, however, with Salka’s privileged childhood as Salomea Sarah Steuermann in Sambor - now in Ukraine, then a bustling garrison town in Galicia on the fringes of the Habsburg Empire. Her adolescent rebellion is framed as dramatic fantasy: “When I put up my red hair I was Mary Stuart. When I wrapped a black shawl tightly around me, uncovering my breasts, I was Cleopatra”. She adds that she lost her head completely when she first saw Macbeth. Her earliest stage performances under the names Salome, Mea or Mia Steuermann would include not only Schiller and Shakespeare but also Hebbel’s Judith and plays by Ibsen and Strindberg. Although she laterironizes the psychological impact of such roles with a deadpan description of breastfeeding her oldest son Hans during rehearsal breaks for Franz Grillparzer’s Medea, these examples of passionate and manipulative women may have been just the right preparation for later dealings with studio moguls.

Salka Viertel, then Salomea Sara Steuermann, as a young actress

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The final chapters document her flight from Cold War America, her mourning for Berthold, amicably divorced but still loved and her constant correspondent until his death in 1953, and a moment of hope when she sees their young granddaughter Christine for the first time in the Swiss resort Klosters, where she spent the rest of her life.

While the NYRB edition is welcome, the decision to settle for a photomechanical reprint means that typographical errors and other minor signs of haste in composition or production remain. With almost 150 additional pages, the German translation, published a year after the 1969 edition under the title Das unbelehrbare Herz (“The Incorrigible Heart”), omits some Hollywood material, but also adds passages critical of American society as well as pointed evocations of German-Jewish culture. Donna Rifkind's two-page afterword would have been the place to analyse at length the substantial differences between the two editions, but that opportunity has been missed.

The Sun and Her Stars mentions the German translation only in passing and borrows liberally from The Kindness of Strangers, which is paraphrased and cited more than 200 times. Katharina Prager's biography “Ich bin nicht gone Hollywood!”: Salka Viertel - ein Leben in Theater und Film (2007) seems to have supplied Rifkind with most of the many quotations from a major source, the 450 letters exchanged by Berthold and Salka throughout their lives, and provided a closely followed model for discussing some of the major screenplays.

Rifkind's focus on Salka Viertel's California years, announced in the subtitle, with its odious genitive, reveals signs of a biographer struggling to master the complex cultural history produced by the collision of Weimar modernism and Hollywood conformity. She has not kept up with the progress made by decades of critical writing about the studio system - as may be observed, for example, in her description of Murnau's tragic death in a car accident in 1931 and of a funeral supposedly shocked by Hollywood A-Listers shocked at his homosexuality. Rifkind repeats the gossip that “Murnau had been ‘servicing’ his teenaged male Filipino chauffeur while the boy was driving” and the spurious count of “only eleven people, including Garbo, who gathered at a Los Angeles funeral home for a last farewell”. Les Hadder’s pamphlet F. W. Murnau: For the Record (2010) puts paid to these distortions, citing police reports, the coroner’s inquest, and articles in the Hollywood Daily Citizen. The “boy” was actually Murnau’s twenty-eight-year-old valet Eliazar Stevenson, the son of an ex-pat English father and a Mexican mother. The car rental company’s chauffeur, who was sitting in the passenger seat, confirmed that Stevenson had lost control after swerving to avoid a truck and that Murnau had been in the back with his German shepherd Pal. “Hundreds of mourners” - whether Greta Garbo was among them is unclear - attended the funeral, at which Berthold Viertel and two film directors gave eulogies in German, English and French.

The biography’s most glaring deficit, though, is its failure to give the full spectrum of Salka’s later, often politically charged, screenwriting its due. Omitted entirely, perhaps because it is only mentioned in The Incorrigible Heart, is Loretai, a treatment for a biopic based on the life of Heinrich Heine, whose works the Nazis burned in 1933. Salka, who completed the 108-page screenplay in early 1947, reports that she was perhaps naïve to think that there would be interest in the great German-Jewish poet of the nineteenth century, the “political fugitive who had prophesied the Germans’ race madness and the descent into barbarity”.

While we wait for an English translation of Katharina Prager’s excellent biography, we have Salka Viertel’s The Kindness of Strangers itself. Her wonderfully economical characterization of one Franz Kafka, in 1918 an occasional dinner guest at her and Berthold’s apartment in Prague, as “tall, dark and handsome”, is one of the book’s many treasures.

With a foreword by Ruth Bader Ginsburg

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Richard Rorty and John Rawls

It is not the case, contrary to Martin's dismissal of Richard Rorty (February 5), that Richard Rorty "recanted" or that "his enthusiasm for philosophy was revived by Rawls's Theory of Justice". Nor is it the case that Sam Harris's claim of Rorty's unhappiness with Rorty's earlier turn from philosophy was echoed, yet again, by Hilary Putnam, reviewing the TLS in the TLS in 1998.

Rather than portray Rorty as once guilty of "scientism" but nowｃａｎｃｅｒｄｏｗｎｙｅｓａｔａｓｐａｃｙｒｅｎｃｙｔｈａｔｗａｓａｓｐａｃｙｒｅｎｃｙｔｈａｔMorningone-year-interval-offehr ticks while others concur that it is God — an immaterial, non-spatio-temporal, being. The reason quarrels among metaphysical claims about the nature of Reality seem so ludicrous is that each of them feels free to pick a few of his favourite things and claim that they are the only thing that exists and so he continued his attempt to escape from Parmenides and Plato, and from Russell or Hegel. "Poetry" was not being offered as an intimation of the ineffable in lieu of philosophy's justifiable true beliefs, or as an alternative, ahistorical, natural kind-the only form of discourse in need of more quotidian comfort. It hardly suffices, in riposte, to argue that "the question of how I or we should live is not a scientific question". It isn't for squid, either, though they will not be tempted into "an inquiry into ultimate values (or something along those lines)". That last phrase might be being another nod to negative theology, perhaps, or just a bet-hedging hint of creating neo-Kantian faith.

Andrew Young

Edinburgh

Ravenna

In the course of his informative review of Judith Hurinn's Ravenna (February 12), Michael Kulikowski states that "It is a worthy project that surprisingly has not really been attempted before". Please could I put in a honourable mention for Ravenna in Late Antiquity by Debra Maassoph Deliyannis, which covered much of the same ground in 2004?

I was also intrigued by Professor Kollowoy's description of Ravenna's narrative as "paradoxically conventional". It would have been useful if he had spent a couple of sentences sketching out a less conventional version as an alternative.

Keith Hewitt

Newcastle

Robert Bruce Lochhead

I was surprised that D.J. Taylor dismissed Robert Bruce Lochhead as "a received, cliché-ridden writer whose equivalent would not stand the slightest chance of attracting a publisher's deal" (Review, February 12). Lochhead's first volume of short stories deals with his exploits as the thirty-year-old centre of the "Lock- head Plot", supposedly to overthrow Lenin's revolutionary regime. It was semi-fictionalized for Hollywood in 1934 as British Agent, with Leslie Howard playing a renamed Loch- head, "Stephen Locke".

During the Second World War, Lochhead was in charge of the Brit- ish propaganda outfit Political War- fare Executive. In the unlikely event of there ever being a Robert Bruce Lochhead (given Britain's diminished role in the world), I doubt he would have trouble finding a publisher for his memoirs. Securing official permission to write them might be another matter.

Peter Rushton

Ribbleton, Lancashire

Hobson Johnstone

In his review of Empire by Samuel Johnson (February 5), Sukhdev Sandhu writes that "Sandhara draws on the Hobson Johnstone Dictionary of Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases to highlight empire's imprints on the English language through well-known examples such as juggernaut, tobaggon, and "zombie". Neither "tobaggon" nor "zombie" are to be found in Hobson Johnstone. "Tobaggon" is from French Canadien, based on a Micmac Indian word for "sled". "Zombie" is of Bantu origin from West Africa and later Haiti, as Sandhara's book makes clear.

Fred Warfield Jr.

Charlotte, NC

George Eliot

I enjoyed Angelique Richards's review of books by Amy King and Ian Duncan on science, faith and evolution (February 14). However, George Eliot's story in her final work, Impressions of Theophrastus Such (1879), was called "Tobaggon and the Comin' Race", not the "Comin' Race". That was the title of an influential proto-science fiction novel (or "scientific romance") by Edward Bulwer- Lytton, to which Eliot's title alludes.

Clive Davenhall

Royal Observatory, Edinburgh

Zoophilia

I was surprised there was no mention of zoophilia, or animal sex, as a driving force behind zoophilia (or bestiality) in Houman Bareaq's review of Joanna Bourke's Loving Animals (February 14). That surely must be a motivation among the lonely and dispossessed. This is the premise behind the act in Tony Morrison's novel Beloved (1987), in which the young male slaves regularly engage in sex with calves. They have no access to women and any attempt to establish a sexual relationship with a section of the novel caused considerable outrage in the US and some quarters of society wanted the book banned. Morrison demonstrated that in some cases "inter-species love" is no such thing, but desperation caused by oppression.

Sam Milne

Clygates, Surrey

Belling the cat

Alan Rusbridger reviews We Belling for Eliot Higgins (February 19) and adds: "as in belling a cat, to wound the lion... Alas, Homer has nod; I vividly remember, from my childhood Aesop, the illustration of the wise old mouse asking the assembled council of mice to belling the cat."

David Madden

Oxford

Urban renewal in the 1960s

In responding to Gillian Tindall's critique of "the wrecking" of the urban landscape in the 1960s in her review of Prestupka, Jim Hum- berstone makes some astonishing statements about the "plunder" of the 1960s (Review, February 19). He talks of "new blocks of flats" which provided a "rich and civilized environ- ment for ... folk living in ... slum conditions". Leaving aside his patronizing manner, much of the property that was cleared was perfectly good and needed only renovation. Instead, communities were destroyed and replaced by developments that "arose from an ignorance of motives and social logic" (Patrick Dunleavy, Architects Journal, June 23, 2007). It wasn't just "slum" clearance that wrecked the urban landscape; it was also the wholesale destruction of town cen- tres. My own hometown, Uxbridge, was described in Pears' Cyclopaedia in 1910 as a "market town", but it didn't survive the onslaught of the planners. The town had many old industries, including a steam laun- dry, a maltings, a corn chandler, "buck and other bone-dry" mills, and Harman's Brew- ery. By the time the redevelopment had finished, they had all gone, and in their place was a feature- less, wind-swept billboard in the town centre, at its centre, a small tower painted to look old, the final irony.

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8 FEBRUARY 26, 2021
Chosen, destined, but not superior

The disputed intellectual territory of Jewish exceptionalism

ABIGAIL GREEN

WHAT ARE JEWS FOR?
History, peoplehood and purpose

ADAM SUTCLiffe


THIS BOOK HAS a brilliant title: arresting, clever and deliberately confrontational. For we live in a political moment when only Jews seem to be comfortable using the J-word, while everyone else seems to treat it as an embarrassment: in the public discourse of twenty-first-century Britain, we have Christians, Hindus, Muslims and “Jewish people”. This, oddly, is not an issue in North America. Nor is it one that Adam Sutcliffe addresses directly in What Are Jews For?, which provides an intellectual history of what the author calls “the Jewish purpose question”. And yet, it is curiously relevant to Sutcliffe’s argument, since the reason British society is edging away from the self-assumedly intimated connection with the fact that Jews have traditionally been imbued with a totemic significance and messianic purpose in the Christian culture of Western Europe, and its secularized, post-Christian variants. When we talk not about “Jews” but about “Jewish people”, we are trying to normalize Jewishness by escaping the heavy connotations that still cling to the term in our collective subconscious: we are trying to get away from the sense that Jews have a “purpose” at all.

This, as Sutcliffe demonstrates, represents a radical divergence from the established patterns of thought among both Jews and Christians (this book is, emphatically, a history of Jewish, Christian and post-Christian thinkers; other traditions do not figure at all). Jews, of course, have always believed in their special purpose as God’s “chosen people”, carefully distinguishing that idea of Jewish destiny from notions of racial superiority articulated in other contexts during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Christians, too, acknowledge Jewish particularity in God’s world order: Jewish choosenness might have been superseded by Christian revelation, with its universalist aspirations and appeal, but Jews could still serve a providential function in world history and Christian nations on both sides of the Atlantic have sought to claim the mantle of choosenness that once enveloped the biblical Israelites. As such, Sutcliffe reminds us, “the Jewish purpose question” has provided Jewish and Christian thinkers over the centuries with both disputed territory and a certain intellectual common ground.

What Are Jews For? traces the history of that disputed territory from the early modern era to the present day. In so doing, it provides an elegant yet fairly conventional slice through a modern Jewish history populated by the great names of Western European and Jewish thought, from Baruch Spinoza to Jacques Derrida – too many, and too well-known, to list here. The discussion of these thinkers and their ideas is rich and subtle, even if the intellectual genealogy Sutcliffe constructs is not really surprising. There are women in this canon, but it is still recognizably the established canon of modern Jewish thought. Geographically, too, the scope is surprisingly limited. With the exception of France, the birthplace of revolutionary secularism, the Christian world is curiously neglected. I found only two page references to Italy – home, after all, to both the Vatican and the ghetto, a project born out of a belief in “Jewish purpose”. Thinkers from the Habsburg world also receive scant attention, save for those familiar figures Sigmund Freud, Theodor Herzl and Karl Kraus.

That, it turns out, is the problem of writing a book with such a brilliant title: almost inevitably it promises more than it delivers. Sutcliffe is too intelligent not to realize this, and courageously he endeavours to answer his own question in a final chapter entitled: “So what are Jews for?” Needless to say, however, this proves to be a rash undertaking: he concludes rather blandly that “Jews are for hope”. As Howard Jacobson observed in an earlier review of this book, Sutcliffe may present himself as an objective observer but he is in fact parti pris: if, for Jews, the “Jewish purpose question” is ultimately about the tension between universalism and particularism, it is clear that Sutcliffe is with the cosmopolitan universalists, not the Zionist particularists. While I agree with this, Jacobson’s review also misrepresents Sutcliffe’s position: we might do better to understand him less as a chronicler of the philosophical debates about Jewish purpose than as a participant in his own right. Indeed, Sutcliffe is upfront about the way in which writing this book spoke to his own “Jewish purpose question” and, one suspects, the tensions between Jewish identity and left-wing politics thrown up by the Jeremy Corbyn era of Labour politics.

That is fair enough, but the book’s preoccupation with the Western canon ensures that it misses the elephant in the room. We live in an age when the tectonic plates of history and culture are shifting. Is the fundamental question in the Jewish world, in 2021, still particularism versus universality, as it was in Europe from the Enlightenment to the Holocaust? Surely the whole point of critical race theory and the Black Lives Matter moment is to recognize that universalism was never really universal at all, just an unreflecting cloak for European domination and “white privilege”? So where do Jews sit in this new intellectual and ideological constellation? To those of us watching from the UK, American Jewry seems to be trying itself in knots over these questions. Yet there is precious little about these existential dilemmas in Adam Sutcliffe’s thoughtful and scholarly book.

The Russian and Polish Jewish community of New York City, 1890s

Surely the whole point of critical race theory is to recognize that universalism was never really universalist at all

Abigail Green is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Oxford. She is writing an international history of Jewish liberal activism since 1848

Inquisitive after bookes

Singing the praises of the Bodleian’s vast Jewish collection

TOM STAMMERS

JEWISH TREASURES
From Oxford libraries

REBECCA ABRAMS AND CÉSAR MERCHÁN-HAMANN, EDITORS
304pp. The Bodleian Library. £35.

LIBRARIES ARE THE ARMOURY of the learned”, in the words of Rabbi Adolph Jellinek in 1849. This volume celebrates those collectors whose diligence and learning turned the Bodleian into one of the pre-eminent arsenals of Jewish manuscripts in the world. The essays selected and edited by Rebecca Abrams and César Merchán-Hamann contain vivid accounts of the quest to obtain rare Hebrew manuscripts, their circulation across borders and their passage through many hands. The odyssey of these texts follows the diaspora of Jewish communities but also signals the changing value of Jewish heritage in the eyes of its Christian interlopers.

The seventeenth century was the heroic age of Oriental Studies at Oxford University, a time when the acquisition and study of Hebrew texts was seen as integral to the goal of purifying the scriptures from corruption and error. Central figures in this enterprise were the polyglot and polymath John Sel- den and the unhappy archbishop and chancellor of the university William Laud. In 1635 and 1640 Laud presented the Bodleian with forty-seven Hebrew manuscripts, along with 147 in Arabic, 74 in Persian or Turkish, and 51 in Greek and Maltese. While his hopes for reforming Protestant worship ended in disaster, helping to precipitate the Civil War and sending him to the Tower of London, Laud’s generous commitment to Oriental languages created an enduring legacy.

Several manuscripts gifted by Laud had been acquired in Aleppo by his agent Edward Pococke, Regius Professor of Arabic and Hebrew, and the author of the Porta Mosis (1655), a bilingual edition of Maimonides’s essays from the Commentary on the Mishnah (1145-68). In his stint as chaplain to the merchants of the Levant Company, Pococke had managed to obtain manuscripts of outstanding rarity. In Oxford Pococke was also tutor to Robert Huntington, another chaplain in the Levant whose own haul from Aleppo was even more astonishing. In 1652 the entirety of Huntington’s collection was bought by the Bodleian for the hefty sum of £1,100: his 200 Hebrew manuscripts include the first two books of the Mishneh Torah (1170-80) code of religious law containing an autograph by Maimonides himself.

These global exchanges did not diminish over the following centuries, even if the Oxford scholars stopped venturing out into the field. From the 1740s Benjamin Kennicott had the grand ambition of cataloging every known manuscript of the Hebrew Bible, seeking thereby to uncover “the originals of Moses and the Prophets”, and to remove all doubts about the reliability of Jewish textual transmission (Masorah). Ken- nicott was nonetheless pioneering in his geographical reach, aiming to document the distribution of all extant Hebrew manuscripts (an eighteenth-
The Kennicott Bible, 1476

century prototype of “big data” studies.
Meanwhile, in Central Europe, the Chief Rabbi of Prague, David Oppenheim, set about assembling every Jewish book ever printed. Eventually running to 4,500 printed titles and 1,000 manuscripts, his library spanned a dazzling range of genres, from astrology and philosophy to the mystical Kabbalah as well as ephemeral and demotic publications, such as broadsides, Sabbatean tracts and Yiddish prayers directed to women (ablynés). Oxford managed to acquire the lot in 1829 for £2,080, a comparative steal considering that Moses Mendelssohn had told Oppenheim’s heirs that the library was worth 50-60,000 thalers (around six times that sum). With the purchase of the Heimann Michael collection in 1847, the university’s tally reached 2,000 Hebrew manuscripts, much to the envy of continental scholars. Leopold Zunz compared the bibliographical riches amassed by Oxford to “the fountain for which I have been thirsting since ancient times”.

Read together, the essays in Jewish Treasures illuminate the development of Hebrew Studies in Oxford, from the religious controversies of the Civil War through to the flowering of the nineteenth-century Wissenschaft des Judentums. They also point the role of Jewish intermediaries and interlocutors: Pococke corresponded with Rabbi Jacob Roman of Jerusalem (“a man very inquisitive after books”, he told Selden in 1653, “the most that I ever knew any Jew”), while Kennicott profited from manuscripts owned by members of Bovis Marks Synagogue and prevailed on community leaders in London to afford him introductions to European co-religionists. Our ability to study these riches today owes much to the bibliographic labours of Moritz Steinmann (1816-1907; born in Prossnitz, now Czeckia) and Adolf Neubauer (1831-1907; born in Nagybicske, Slovakia), two émigré scholars who created research tools of lasting value and whose careers in Victorian Oxford demonstrated the kind of intellectual mobility enabled by Jewish emancipation.

The success of such a volume hinges on the quality of its illustrations, and Jewish Treasures is a visual feast. The abundant and superbly executed reproductions showcase the astonishing artistry and scribal precision of medieval Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities. The colours still dazzle in the leaves photographed from celebrated manuscripts, such as the Laub Mahzor, the Michael Mahzor, or the Kennicott Bible (a masterpiece of cultural syncretism, completed in La Coruna in 1476, and adorned by Joseph Ibn Haim with elegant Gothic and Islamic motifs). The profusion of mythical beasts, vegetation, architectural elements and geometric patterns decorating the borders of less celebrated manuscripts provoke curiosity and delight. This erudite yet engaging and opulent book is a monument to the bibliophile’s passion and well worthy of its long-listing for the 2021 Wingate prize.

Tom Stammers is a historian of modern Europe at Durham University and a specialist in the history of collecting.
Divinity in stone
Reassessing the prevalence of statue-centred worship

DAN-EL PADILLA PERALTA

ROMAN CULT IMAGES
The lives and worship of idols from the Iron Age to late antiquity

PHILIP KIERNAN


From the Near East to the Atlantic Rim, the ancient Mediterranean was practically bursting with images of gods, from larger-than-life cult statues to palm-sized miniatures. Despite—or possibly as a result of—this superabundance, a procession of thinkers in antiquity (headed by Marcus Terentius Varro, the contemporary of Cicero and Julius Caesar, whose prolific writing on Roman religion earned him, centuries after his death, Augustine of Hippo as a sparring partner) conjured up a remote past in which communities had worshipped the gods without the benefit of images. Some of the impetus for this idea came from philosophical critiques of an anthropomorphic approach to the divine: as early as the sixth century BC, Xenophon of Colophon had pointedly remarked that if horses or cows or lions could make works of art, they would make figures of gods in their own image. But there was an anthropological dimension as well.

When writers such as Varro projected aniconic—or "image-less"—worship back to the distant past of their own communities, they also not infrequently ascribed that same style of worship to barbarian Others. (Varro named the Jews as one example.) This primitivizing view had consequences. Although it took different forms under the pressure of late antique clashes over pagan statuary and medieval contests over iconoclasm, the presumption that there was a linear historical momentum from aniconic to iconic cult nonetheless turned out to have remarkable staying power. It received a fresh infusion of life from nineteenth- and twentieth-century anthropologists and historians of religion who adapted it for the definition and entrenchment of ethnic and racial difference.

In recent years, however, archaeological finds have called this one-directional scheme into serious question. Philip Kiernan's Roman Cult Images, arguably the most authoritative entrant into the conversation, delivers the payload of two books for the price of one. The opening chapters deal a blow to the aniconic thesis by bringing together the rapidly expanding evidence for icon-centered worship in the Iron Age western Mediterranean, both in early Italy and in pre-Roman Gaul. Face to face with the Lord of the Glanerg or the seated warri- ors from Roquepertuse or Glanum, one would be hard-pressed to believe that Celtic communities made no use of divine statuary. The remaining chapters painstakingly detail the life and death of cult statues in Roman Gaul and the Rhineland—stressing the many, and sometimes surprising, continuities in their form and worship during centuries of conquest, provincialization and fragmentation. In late antiquity, when statue-centered worship did meet its end, Kiernan shows that those responsible were not only marauding Germanic tribes or Christian zealots. In some cases, the archaeological record reveals, Gallo-Roman communities acted to dispose of their own cult icons with intention and care.

If Kiernan had limited himself to an accessible anglophone vademecum of recent archaeological advances in the study of Gallo-Roman religion, that would have been enough to ensure this book's success. The feather in the cap of this book's scrupulous archaeological documentation (generously enhanced with photographs and line-drawings) is an appendix on those Gallo-Roman temples for which we have clear evidence for cult statue placement. But what makes this book all the more admirable is its willingness to confront some big questions in the history of ancient Mediterranean religions. This willingness is advertised in the book's subtitle, through the choice of a word that I have refrained from using in this review until now: idol.

By springing it free from the term's polemical (and Christianizing) traps, Kiernan hopes to recover the idol as a taxonomic category. Since, as he correctly observes, “some statues in Roman temples had a different status than others, in legal, religious, and moral terms”, we need some means of differentiating and sorting them. For all the baggage that “idol” traits, Kiernan stays with the term out of the (justified) belief that Christian polemics who inveighed against pagan idol worship knew something about the shape and dimensions of that forcefield within which certain statues came to be supercharged with divine - or demonic - energy and agency. The statues that were most central, by virtue of their placement within the innermost main room (cella) of a temple, or their proximity to the altars where sacrifices were performed and offerings deposited: these were the statues that most excited Christian animosities in the High and Late Empire, and that Kiernan seeks to distinguish from the many other cult statues that crowded sanctuaries but were not themselves at the beating heart of everyday ritual activity.

Some readers (count me among them) will take exception to the rehabilitation of idol as a term of art. But this is a minor quibble with an otherwise riveting book: Kiernan has worked around the distortions of the ancient literary evidence to recover a western Mediterranean awash in anthropomorphic gods, from the heights of La Tène culture to the Roman Empire's fall.
M ore will mean worse.” Kingsley Amis’s mordant prediction in 1960 about higher education expansion is one of the few confident forecasts about this area of policy to be widely remembered. Whatever the qualitative aspect, he indisputably nailed the quanti- tative - to the extent that whereas then the participation rate of young people in higher education was well below 10 per cent, now it is not far short of 50 per cent. At the heart of Peter Mandler’s book is the story of the forces of “meritocracy”, con- cerned with the education of an elite (whether that be in the universities, or intellectual, in supply-and-demand equation. Put another way, this is not top-down pro- ducer history, but (in emphasis anyway) bottom-up consumer history, marking a welcome corrective to recent histories relating to the welfare state. It is perhaps a shame that there are in these pages relatively few consumers, with their own distinctive and individual voices, hopes and experiences. Yet if a certain thickness of texture is lacking, the very considerable compensation is a crisply written, tightly argued and hugely informative Olympian survey in which an incisive but humane historian, who has written a book with a wide range of subjects, brings all his talents to bear.

The first great bust of expansion was under way well before the famous Robbins Report of 1963, but was cemented and validated by it. And Mandler quotes with evident admiration what became known as the Robbins Principle: namely, that higher education should be made “available for all those who are qualified by ability and attainment” to pursue that education and “who wish to do so”. Crucially, Lionel Robbins envisaged the pool of qualified applicants as far from static, declaring that “when more is taken for higher education in one generation, more will tend to be available in the next”. It proved a justified confidence, as numbers grew rapidly over the rest of the decade, with the new universities such as Sussex (established 1960) emblems of a new era, arguably forged on the back of postwar social mobility. “They were undoubtedly middle class,” reflects Mandler (in turn drawing on the work of the sociologist Mike Savage), “but that came to be a new middle class’ identity, modern, technical, ‘strategically mobile’, in some ways self- consciously going for a ‘classless’ style; as regards students or intellectuals, whether at the newly ‘placc- glass’ universities or elsewhere (‘redbrick’ ones like Leeds and Manchester were also expanding), he notes that ‘student life as a traineeship for middle-class differentiation, living with other students in residential halls or lodgings, was markedly becom- ing the norm’.

Then from the early 1970s to mid-1980s came a wholly unexpected halt, as participation rates in higher education, having peaked at around 14 per cent, stagnated or even went backwards. Why? Undeniably there were compelling supply-side rea- sons, above all fiscal constraints, especially as keenly applied in the first half of the 1980s by Margaret Thatcher and Keith Joseph, both at least as much on the “meritocratic” as “democratic” side of the equation since they were obsessed with controlling the Indian summer of the high-earning manual worker (before the evisceration of the unions), lack of awareness that the future lay with the “knowledge economy”, ‘the economy of the next twenty years’ which were not students put off by student unrest, and a general atmosphere of pessimism discouraging a new gener- ation from breaking with family habits all contrib- uted to a serious slacking. Mandler’s analysis is necessarily imprecise, but he gets further than anyone else has towards solving the question despairingly asked by higher-education policymakers in 1974 at an emergency conference called by North East London Polytechnic, “What has happened to the students?”

By the time that the Thatcher government in the late 1980s eventually turned the taps on again, largely driven by Kenneth Baker for technocratic economic reasons, the pent-up demand had accumu- lated, to the extent that for several years it threatened to overwhelm supply, and over the following years, helped by New Labour’s encouragement (again largely for eco- nomic motives), that demand seldom looked like diminishing, notwithstanding steeply hiked tuition fees and other sobering aspects, Mandler points there was a significant economic rationale (the grade- based premium and all that) for this demand, coming from “all classes, both genders, all nationalities”, but again casts his explanatory net wider, citing Martin Troen’s cardinal observation about the similar Ameri- can transition from elite to mass higher education: that higher education has become “one of the deficiencies of life rather than an extraordinary privi- leged reserved for people of high status or extraordi- nary ability”. In other words, “uni” as an invest- ment good, yes, but also a consumer good, and surveys in both 1996 and 2006 of final-year undergrad- uates, asking them to explain their choice of courses, found enjoyment to be the most frequently mentioned factor. As for life’s common “decencies”, the Millennium Cohort Study found in 2007 no less than 96 per cent of the least advantaged mothers expressing a desire for their seven-year-olds to go on the core course to university. Will demand at last slacken in the 2020s? Mandler does not commit himself, albeit noting that “no-one has ever yet lost any money in betting on widening participation, and a continued upgrading of educational qualifications, far into the future”.

The notion of life’s decencies, of the shared amenities of citizenship, also features prominently in Mandler’s treatment of state secondary educa- tion, in particular the move in the third quarter of the century away from the 11-plus division of child- ren into grammar schools (for the few) and secondary moderns (for the many), and instead towards a largely comprehensive system (aka “grammar schools for all”). In essence he argues that, as a result of parental pressure on local education authorities, this was decisively in train long before the Labour Education Secretary, Anthony Crossland, issued in 1965 his famous/famous Circular 10/65, which formally requested schools’ conversion to comprehensive education; and that, by and large, it was a popular shift which quickly became the settled dispensation. In passing he takes issue with my interpretation of survey evidence about working-class attitudes. All I would say here is that though the story as a whole is an intensely compli- cated one for which we still lack the definitive account, he is surely right in his chronological emphasis, but failure to pursue through the bones to clarify his invocation of a “great social move- ment” against the 11-plus, underplays working-class fatalism at that time about the provision of state education, and is also dismissive about the oppo- nents of the shift to comprehensivisation.

Yet even so, his overarching narrative does make psychological sense. “No-one was suggesting”, he reflects, “that there was a sharp division between grammar schools and the comprehensive or that grammar schools were sucking up the more able or the middle-class. Rather, he suggests, the comprehensive was seen as a middle-class solution, a way of maintaining the status quo.”

THE CRISIS OF THE MERITOCRACY

Britain’s transition to mass education since the Second World War

PETER MANDLER


MIGHT THINGS HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT IF WE HAD NOT HAD OVER THE YEARS - AND IF WE DID NOT STILL HAVE - SUCH A RICHLY RESOURCED PRIVATE SCHOOL SECTOR?

The People’s Vote March, London, October 19, 2019

The People’s Vote March, London, October 19, 2019

Might things have been different if we had not had over the years - and if we did not still have - such a richly resourced private school sector?

David Kynaston’s books include Engines of Privilege: Britain’s private school problem, co-authored with Francis Green, 2019

David Kynaston’s books include Engines of Privilege: Britain’s private school problem, co-authored with Francis Green, 2019

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FEBRUARY 26, 2021
Good and faithful servant
How a brilliant mandarin papered over the cracks in Whitehall

JONATHAN BAK

WHAT DOES JEREMY THINK?
Jeremy Heywood and the making of modern Britain
SUZANNE HEYWOOD

TWO WEEKS before his untimely death, Jeremy Heywood (1961-2018) received a life peerage. Asked what he wanted to be Lord of, he replied, simply, “Whitehall”. After a lifetime of self-effacement, it was a moment of self-recognition. Heywood bosed Whitehall unbearably for three decades, occupying the most influential seats of official power: Principal Private Secretary to the Chancellor (aged thirty), Principal Private Secretary to the Prime Minister, and finally Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Civil Service. As a ruler, he was loved not feared. He valued diversity, data and ideas; he disliked formality and hierarchy. He mentored, encouraged and cajoled, never raising his voice. He embodied civil service impartiality but made himself politically indispensable to four prime ministers. His way was as oblique as it was pervasive. The question on his colleagues’ minds was not “what does Jeremy want?” but “what does Jeremy think?”

Suzanne Heywood’s book, drawn principally from conversations with her husband in the year before he died and supported by over 200 interviews with officials and ministers, provides a superbly detailed account of how the internal organs of British power function. The official chronicles of Cabinet meetings keep in mind that their confidential records, once released twenty years later, will become the first draft of history. They must therefore resemble a “perfect conversational transcript”, Macaulay’s word, corrected, syntax straightened, chuntering redacted. What Does Jeremy Think? is, unsurprisingly, not a warts-and-all account: it is as fair-minded as the man at its centre and perhaps over-generous to some of its main political players (though this did not prevent David Cameron from, according to The Times, seeking to block publication, presumably due to its account of his disastrous pre-referendum instruction that the civil service should not prepare for the possibility of Brexit). In its granular rendition of almost every crisis from Black Wednesday to the short-lived Chequers agreement on the UK’s future relationship with the EU, it provides an unfiltered human view of how decisions are made at the boundary between official and ministerial power.

Even in periods of relative calm, the conjoined buildings of 10 Downing Street and 7 Whitehall thrrob with anxiety. Heywood always carried two Blackberries to protect himself against any communications drop-out and appears here tapping away policy instructions moments before and after life-and-death hospital appointments. Looking back, prime ministers tend to remark on their discovery that, once behind the desk, the levels of power do not prove in any way the expectations. Anyone can quickly set in. A small circle of trusted political advisers is established, with a second concentric ring of senior officials. The behaviour of the wider Cabinet begins to matter. One secretary of state may be dealing with an issue incompetently; another veers beyond her brief. And, regardless of the individual, the chancellor of the exchequer will always be suspected of withholding information, or money. The central struggle of each premiership is internal against reality, manifesto against events. Success or failure depends on the prime minister’s ability to carve a vapour trail through the fog, by forcing Ministers and their Departments to deliver. That is why the Cabinet Office machinery proves ultimately invaluable to each. Heywood was famous for perspicacious emails that spotted future disasters and asked simply, “where are we on this?”

At a memorial service at Westminster Abbey in June 2019, each prime minister from Tony Blair to Theresa May paid tribute to, in the latter’s words, “not just an extraordinary adviser, but an extraordinary doer. Nothing stopped him until he found a solution” (excerpts from these tributes are included in the appendix). After the service, May said to the author, “I think people will look back and notice when he stopped”. When the records of the past three years are finally released, that conclusion will doubtless be held up. When Gordon Brown handed over to David Cameron, he left him a note saying “the country is in good hands, Jeremy is running it”. And when Cameron first stepped through the doors of Number 10, the face that welcomed him was of the man whom he had first looked in “two” twenty years previously. After Heywood’s “brilliant” redraft of his budget speech in 1993, Ken Clarke wrote to him in gratitude wondering whether “you have subtly influenced my views over the last four months so that I have changed without realising it and now coincide with your own”. The Chancellor concluded: “I think I shall not be troubled with an answer!”

Such comments tend to be seized on by the civil service’s detractors to suggest the existence of a British “deep state”, restraining and controlling the country’s elected politicians. The present government has put much energy into making a case against this type of perceived influence (albeit mostly through anonymous briefings). Less than a week after Heywood’s memorial services and a month before he joined the government as Boris Johnson’s effective chief of staff, Dominic Cummings published a blog in which he claimed that May’s government had run adrift due to a misapprehension of how decisions “are really made” in Number 10. Heywood, he argued, was running rings around the prime minister. Cummings decried “the elevation of the courtier-fixer at the expense of the thinker and the manager”.

This book does instead provide endless evidence of Heywood’s unique capacity to fix apparently insoluble policy problems, from that of troop equipment in Afghanistan to bailing out the banks. But, as Cameron says, he typically did so in “radical” and “crea-

When Gordon Brown handed over to David Cameron, he left him a note saying ‘the country is in good hands, Jeremy is running it’.

Jonathan Bak is a pseudonym. He works in the civil service.
On the road again

From covered wagons to camper vans: twenty-first-century nomads in the US

COLIN GRANT

In 2010, shortly before she became a van dweller, sixty-year-old Linda May was unable to pay the bills for her electricity and water supply. On Thanksgiving that year, she sat alone in her trailer in the dark, with her dogs and a bottle of alcohol, contemplating her future: “I’m going to drink all the booze. I’m going to turn on the propane. I’m going to pass out and that’ll be it”, she told herself. “And if I wake up, I’m going to light a cigarette and blow us all to hell.”

But Linda May did not go to hell; she took to the open road instead. Like thousands of impoverished Americans who have reached the realization that they cannot afford to grow old in their country, she traded real estate for a van (“wheel estate”) and struck out for the territory that the investigative journalist and author Jessica Bruder calls Nomadland. Bruder’s book (published in 2017) has inspired a striking new film directed by Chloe Zhao and starring Frances McDormand as someone a bit like Linda May: a single, middle-aged wanderer called Fern.

McDormand can’t actually play the role of Linda because the real-life van dweller who turned away from self-immolation befriended her on screen, playing herself and tutoring Fern in the art of survival, on how to live permanently in cars, camper vans and RVs (recreational vehicles). They are members of a growing caravan of nomads criss-crossing the US looking for piecemeal work, from the best fields of North Dakota to the campgrounds of California, to Amazon’s CamperForce warehouses in Texas. Fern signs up to this modern mobile tribe because she too, a former supply teacher in a failed company “ghost” town, fell into financial difficulty.

With a cast including many non-actors, Nomadland fuses real-life stories with an inventive narrative, creating a fictional film underpinned by facts. Abundant statistics show that millions of US households are one wage packet away from financial hardship. Following the economic crisis of 2008, many were forced to make lose-lose decisions. Do you pay your electricity bill or your health insurance? Do you scrape together enough for your food or for your mortgage?

Fern’s anguished face and battle-hardened demeanour dominate the screen; she’s the personification of the walking wounded. McDormand’s heart-rending performance is so natural that it’s near-impossible to draw a distinction between her and real van dwellers such as Bob Wells and Swankie who, along with Linda May, appear in the film.

Nomadland is innovative (at times it feels like a stark, narrator-less documentary), with a camera close to the ground tracking Fern’s every move, whether huddled in the cramped van or squatting to urinate in the bleak, rough lands. At times, Zhao’s portrayal of individuals wrestling with the vagaries of life in the barren landscape recalls the majes-
tic scope of a John Ford western. Fundamentally, though, it’s an experiential film, with the resourceful Fern as our navigator; dismissing the pitting concerns of a friend’s daughter who bumps into her in a supermarket, she asserts, “No, I’m not homeless; I’m just houseless.”

Fern does a neat job of customizing her van, which she names “Vanguard”. She has to be creative as it’s not much bigger than Linda May’s tiny “Squeeze Inn” (van dwellers, or “rubber tramps”, have a penchant for puns). In one of the few comic scenes, Fern, Linda and the gang visit a mobile home trade fair and briefly luxuriate in the palatial splendour on offer. Whatever their size, the vehicles that Bruder calls “life support capsules” are modern-day equivalents of the covered wagons of pioneering homesteaders. There’s a history here that stretches from these “rubber tramps” back to the 1930s, to Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” and John Steinbeck’s long-suffering families in The Grapes of Wrath.

The Hollywood movie of The Grapes of Wrath was an appeal to the heart; Chloe Zhao is more given to restraint. As in her earlier film, The Rider, Zhao focuses on her characters’ haunting sense of isolation. Fern appears most alone when surrounded by people. She wears a sad, tiny smile, the look of someone in pain who is, nonetheless, going to carry on with minimum fuss. Fern will not solicit help or counsel and will most definitely refuse pity; it’s just her and the world, at least until she needs advice from the old-timer Swankie (a queen of the caravan of nomads) when a battery runs down or she gets a flat tyre.

We don’t immediately learn about the catalyst that finally propels Fern into this new world, but you don’t have to clean your glasses to see that she is racked with grief, so heavy that it casts a pall over her and everyone she encounters. You may find yourself wanting, as I did, to reach into the screen to give Fern a hug, but she wouldn’t appreciate it. At its core, Nomadland is about the dangers of grief, that robs sufferers of any joy, dulls the senses and schools them not to seek solace.

At night out on the plain, with Zhao’s cameras dancing around them like fireflies, the nomads gather at a campfire to recount battle tales of their tribulations. It feels magical, like a glimpse of utopia. In the daytime, it feels more like a revival or AA meeting, presided over by the charismatic Bob Wells, a veteran of the road, spouting words of wisdom through his husky beard, encouraging the nomads to testify for the encouragement of others; Fern attests but, as ever, is spiritually on the fringes; she will receive news but will not transmit.

It’s not that Fern can’t be around people, rather she can’t enter into a certain kind of intimacy; it’s been too long. She’s a single woman who hasn’t necessarily forgotten the rules of flirtation, but can’t be bothered with it. Still, she has a suitor, another van dweller, the tender but ineffectual Dave (deli-
cately played by David Strathairn), whose social radar doesn’t pick up Fern’s lack of enthusiasm, even when on the dance floor his partner is as supple as a marble statue. Later in the film Fern’s rigid-
ity is even more painfully displayed when, despite her attempts at refusal, she handed a baby to hold; she panics, unable to see how to make her body for this new role.

Nomadland addresses the fundamental question all van-dwellers must face: how do you frame your story, challenge the stigma of its association with homelessness, and still go on?

Well, Fern is an ironclad survivor in a world of rampant capitalism where the smart money makes a killing in times of recession and repossession. That smart money is found in the pocket of her brother-in-law and friends who, at a barbecue reluctantly attended by Fern, don’t want to sell their home. In their company, Fern resembles a war veteran, home from a foreign conflict, who cannot tap into the mundane rhythms of domestic life. She is armed, though, with a fierce determination to resist degra-
dation and the judgement of others, and to spurn her sister’s suggestions that she comes in from the cold, and returns to the surety of a room in their suburban home.

Finally, Nomadland reveals traces of The Search-
ers; Fern is a lonely seeker who, if she ever finds that which has thus far eluded her, will be truly lost. Towards the film’s end it becomes apparent that her grief is for her husband. For years she has carried the burden of his death. She returns to the ghost town, to the semi-derelict home that had become a shrine to him; a house she stubbornly remained in for years because leaving it would have been a betrayal of his memory. That sense of abandonment of purpose is emphatically visualized in an echo of the scene from The Searchers, with Zhao’s camera behind Fern capturing her abject loneliness, framed by the doorway, looking out at a bleak future just as John Wayne’s character does in Ford’s mournful western. But in Nomadland, there’s also a sense of liberation, that Fern has chosen, in Bob Wells’s words, “extreme frugality [as a path to free-
dom]”; hers is an affirmation of life among the nomads, “conscientious objects from a broken, corrupting social system.”

McDormand’s heart-rending performance is so natural that it’s near-impossible to draw a distinction between her and real van dwellers

Frances McDormand as Fern

Colin Grant is the author of Homecoming: Voices of the Windrush generation, 2019

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Place your debts

How we have admired, accepted and anglicized Russian classics

LESLEY CHAMBERLAIN
DEVILS
THE JESTER OF ASTAPOVO
BBC Sounds
UNCLE VANYA
BBC iPlayer

The enduring translations of the great Russian novels have become, in their own way, cherished staples of our national culture. Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s bring us humanity, aspiration and dark humour; an unplaceable sympathy and nostalgia emanate from Chekhov’s plays, such that they transformed our theatre. No matter the subject or the century that we inhabit, their voices carry through the boundaries of time and space. Their work is a testament to their unique ability to engage with the human condition, to explore the complexities of the human experience, and to provide insight into the nature of existence.

Tolstoy’s masterpiece, Anna Karenina, is a timeless exploration of love, duty, and the consequences of personal choice. Anna, a woman of great beauty and intelligence, is caught in a web of conflicting desires and义务s. When she falls in love with Vronsky, a handsome and charismatic cavalry officer, her life is transformed. However, the love affair is doomed from the start, and Anna ultimately pays a devastating price for her transgression.

In Anna Karenina, Tolstoy delves deep into the psychological and emotional lives of his characters, creating a rich and complex narrative that resonates with readers around the world. The novel’s themes of love, fidelity, and the search for meaning in a rapidly changing society are as relevant today as they were when the book was first published.

Dostoevsky, on the other hand, is known for his dark and disturbing tales that explore the human psyche. His works, such as The Brothers Karamazov and Crime and Punishment, are characterized by their profound exploration of morality, religion, and the nature of evil. Dostoevsky’s writing is often described as moralistic, and his characters are often depicted as flawed and vulnerable individuals who are grappling with existential questions.

In The Brothers Karamazov, Dostoevsky presents a complex narrative that follows the lives of the Karamazov brothers, each of whom is dealing with his own set of moral and ethical dilemmas. The novel is a meditation on the nature of love, guilt, and redemption, and it explores the question of whether human beings are capable of good or evil.

In Crime and Punishment, Dostoevsky tells the story of Raskolnikov, a student who kills an elderly woman in order to prove a philosophical point. The novel is a psychological study of a man who is on the brink of madness, and it explores themes of guilt, redemption, and the search for meaning in a seemingly meaningless world.

At the center of these works is the Russian soul, a concept that refers to the unique character of the Russian people, their resilience in the face of adversity, and their capacity for beauty and tragedy. The Russian soul is a central theme in both Tolstoy’s and Dostoevsky’s works, and it is a concept that continues to resonate with readers today.

Tolstoy and Dostoevsky’s works have had a profound impact on Russian culture and beyond, and their legacies continue to inspire and challenge readers around the world. Their enduring popularity is a testament to the power of literature to transcend time and place, to explore the complex and often contradictory aspects of the human experience, and to provide insight into the nature of the human condition.
Paranoia of the inner voyeur
The perils of unconditional freedom in Ann Quin’s fiction

ANNA ASLANYAN

PASSAGES
ANN QUIN
123pp. And Other Stories. Paperback, £10.

THREE
ANN QUIN

He You live with such frenzied intensity. She Because there’s nothing else to do – I would be eaten up by reality.

This dialogue, taken from Passages (1969), captures the essence of Ann Quin’s writing. Her prose rejects reality outright as too tame to embody the workings of the mind; likewise, no attempts to shoehorn her into the modernist cannon under “British avant-garde writer influenced by the nouveau roman”, or similar, can do justice to her unique voice. To appreciate Quin’s originality, one has to read her work: four novels, fragments of a fifth, and some short stories, most of it recently reissued (see TLS, January 19, 2018; August 7, 2019; January 22, 2020). If Quin had to be filed under a single heading, it would be the 1960s era, or a radical change that many hoped would bring about unconditional freedom.

The main forces behind that era - sex, violence and protest - are omnipresent in Quin’s work. In Passages intimacy always implies something sinister: “kept her there until there was no sense of day, of night. A blinding flashlight on her face. No sense of who touched her, who she was stripped by, who woke her as soon as she tried to sleep”. These reminiscences echo scenes in a female protagonist’s experiences in some foreign country: “A blinding flashlight shines in the prisoner’s eyes throughout... Women are stripped naked for questioning”. Another narrative strand takes the form of a diary that reveals exercises in self-examination with allusions to Greek mythology and Judaism added in the margin. The male diarist’s fantasies are permeated by violence - “she knocked her over, raped her, beat her until the blood covered them both” - whose source he identifies as “not hunger of the body but of imagination. Body an outpost, boundaries obscure”.

Boundaries - between the mind and body, the private and shared - are similarly blurred in Three (1966). Its title refers to a married couple and their lodger, a young woman, S. ‘I found capsized’, we learn of her disappearance. “Coat identified. Also note in pocket - looks like suicide.” Despite the initial promise of a thriller, the action is restricted to the uneventful flow of everyday life, while the three narrators’ journals, once again, evoke a sense of unease. (The couple read and discuss S’s one at length, while dipping into each other’s the wife records her emotional state; the husband sticks to facts.) The tension felt throughout both books is sustained by their fragmentary style - the cuts between diary entries and unattributed dialogue in Three; the sudden switches of perspective in Passages - and by the absence of conventional plot, or revelatory denouement.

Mostly, however, the atmosphere of anxiety bordering on paranoia stems from voyeurism. In Three the characters keep glancing across the road at their neighbours, who in their turn “spy on us as the whole time”. The motif of surveillance runs through Passages too. “How she watches me”, of the marginal notes reads. “God how she watches herself watching. However if no one observes me I have to observe myself all the more.” The inner voyeur proves more persistent than the most prurient of spies.

The only way to escape observation is to become unrecognizable through continuous metamorphosis. “How to begin to find a shape - to begin to begin again - turning the inside out: find one memory that will be married beside another for delight?”, S asks. A similar desire for self-reinvention is evident in Passages: “Another town. Some other city. Another room. And begin all over again”. The sea, with its perpetual movement, is a constant presence in Quin’s writing. It also became the scene of her death in 1973, when she drowned aged thirty-seven after swimming out off the coast at Brighton.

Some of the notes in Passages draw on the myths of Dionysus, that ancient symbol of liberation erupting into destruction. A “beautiful stranger” one moment, a “raging bull” the next, the bearer of “divine madness” appears alongside “a sort of half man, half woman”, a creature that, barely born, proceeds to “unshape” its creator. Both novels posit a choice that preoccupied many of Quin’s generation, those who wanted to achieve personal liberty without leaving the confines of society: the choice between chaos and order. Embracing the former won’t set you free; what you have to seek instead is “a unity with contradictory attributes never moulded or fused together, but clearly differentiated”.

“If it is my concern for happiness that causes me the most anguish”, the diarist writes in Passages. “I would like to exhaust the limits of the possible.” A mythical time of Dionysian excesses undertaken in pursuit of happiness, the 1960s are reflected here not as a celebration of peace and love but as a frenzied Bacchanalia that creates a brief euphoria overshadowed by the damage it inflicts. Total freedom is, of course, an illusion: on finding ourselves too far out, most of us turn back to the shore, settling for “excess within limitation”. The boundaries of possibility may be easier to cross in literature than in life, and yet few writers have ever dared to follow Ann Quin all the way to the horizon.

Body, soul, man, machine
The final, post-apocalyptic part of the Buckmaster trilogy

LAMorna ASH

ALEXANDRIA
PAUL KINGSnorth

There are seventeen “cantos” in the first quarter of Alexandria, the final book in Paul Kingsnorth’s Buckmaster trilogy. These arrive every few pages, and each occupies several pages. I select one at random, but I could have chosen any because there is little to differentiate one from another.

Bak’tan
Great Lady
Mother of wights
Mother of fields
She raised Her head
Smelt Wind
Asks:
What is Man doing?
The cantos are supposed to navigate the whole of human history - from its tentative origins to man’s dominance over the Earth to the warming planet and rising seas that were by-products of our industrial prowess, to the present moment, sometime in the 3000s, in a post-apocalyptic landscape where it is thought that only seven people remain.

Ostensibly, the cantos form the doctrine of the Nitrian Order, a religious group and the last known survivors of the ruined Earth, living in what were the fens of eastern England. But they are neither suffused bycohens’ nor suffused by any substantial to give the reader a clear understanding of the timeline that precedes the narrative; nor are they significantly mystical or stylistically interesting enough to excuse such excess.

In between cantos, the story emerges in a polyphonic mode. Chapters are voiced alternately by the seven remaining members of the Order: a child, her parents, the group’s leaders (known as Mother and Father), a young man and an elderly sea who can travel through dreams, all of whom speak in the same contracted patois of the cantos. In an interview, Kingsnorth explained that he wanted to pave back the language to “its essentials”, allowing the Order to shift tenses at random to demonstrate how English would look “if a culture with a different sense of time and space was using it”. For Kingsnorth, language is not an aesthetic category but an essential aspect of his characters’ identities and their perception of reality.

The previous books in the trilogy have a similar preoccupation with linguistic style. In the Booker-longlisted first novel, The Wake (TLS, June 27, 2014), set during the Norman invasion of England, Kingsnorth included a note explaining that historical norm was “voiced in contemporary English “ring false” to him; he alighted instead on what he termed a “shadow language”, which borrowed syntax and vocabulary from Old English. In Beast (TLS, July 29, 2016), which takes place in contemporary England, the first-person narrator’s language becomes increasingly fragmented over the course of the novel, commas and capital letters falling away.

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In neither Beast nor The Wake is the lexicon so severely reduced as it is in Alexandria. The imagery the characters deploy is thin and narrow, their emotional range limited. They speak only with absolute, terrible sincerity: “it is good to be young and to know nothins, to think world can be made new shape through love or want, to grow old is to know how littler all one can make new”. Reading the first half of Alexandria is like finding oneself in a half-furnished house, the rooms mostly cleaned out, a bleakness and incompleteness pervading everything. But then, 179 pages in, a new voice enters the text and transforms Alexandria into a far more interesting novel than it sets itself up to be. “Ascension 479-K”, or K, is a “metahuman” created by an almighty Artificial Intelligence named Wayland - after the Old English character Wayland the Smith, who fashioned Beowulf’s mail shirt. K’s sole purpose on Earth is to tempt the remaining humans to leave their bodies behind and join Alexandria, a “republic of souls” where machines and man, in this highly inventive trilogy, spanning 2,000 years, Paul Kingsnorth traces a line between the past and future of humanity, the tremendous upheaval we have experienced, and that which may yet be to come.


They are therefore we think
A man is cast adrift in a world without humans and their systems

DAVID HOBBSS
DISSIPATIO H. G. GUIDO MORSELLI
Translated by Frederika Randall

DISSIPATIO H. G. begins two weeks after “the Event” and reconstructs what has just occurred. Everyone is gone; our narrator is entirely alone in an Alpine banking metropolis called Cryosophis. He doesn’t know what happened because at the exact moment when everyone disappeared he was trying to kill himself in an underground lake. He had only rethought his decision after taking a draught of a particularly good Spanish wine sitting over the lake, “feet dangling in the dark”.

In his posthumously published novel of 1977, Guido Morselli (1922-77) interweaves the unnamed man’s exploration of an empty Europe with accounts of his retreat from the social world in the years before, beginning with his renunciation of a job as a newspaper columnist and a falling romance, followed by his clinical treatment for neuritis and the period of pastoral isolation that ensued. His ever-deferred attempt to “come to terms with the [new] situation” reads as both melancholic and absurd; much of the humour comes from his caustic takes on the sociological theories of alienation of Herbert Marcuse, Charles Reich and above all “Good Old [Emile] Durkheim”. He refers frequently to Durkheim’s Suicide (1897), at one point disparaging the theorist’s belief that, in the narrator’s words, “we think only as a function of others”. This notion that “an idea is the individual submitting to the social” is, he quips, “more or less as if someone proclaimed that wild strawberries had been nationalized”. But Dissipatio H.G. suggests a persistent hope that our narrator’s ideas will someday be shared with others, as if it requires this for them to exist; meanwhile, the strawberries, along with the rest of the natural world, are stretching out to occupy humanity’s absence. When the narrator returns to his mountainside cabin, he finds a cow munching on his copy of Carl Jung’s Psychology of the Conscious Mind.

There are enough nuances to encourage us to make alternative interpretations. Did our narrator actually kill himself, and is he now banished to a depopulated purgatory? Is he actually still in the private clinic where he first met Dr Karpinsky, whom he still strangely expects to meet in Cryosophis? But Morselli isn’t Vladimir Nabokov, and his narrator is no Charles Kinbote. Deducing “what actually happened” seems beside the point for a novel that is so rhythmically concerned with jealousy, misanthropy and the uselessness of knowledge without the opportunity to share it: I can think of numerous others of my professional tribe, who, even supposing they were able to imagine my present situation, would say that it was unbelievable except as irony and farce. That it could only be found in a book for social satire.

But that very thing of the vision, far from being a clever paradox, is merely idiotic. These meta-moments in which the narrator insists on the reality of his situation, amusingly undermine the call for alternative interpretations. It is hard to imagine a restless soul or fantastical projection being so pedantic about how we - the disappeared - interpret his story.

The late Frederika Randall (1948-2020), who translated this first anglophone edition of Dissipatio as well as Morselli’s exceptional, self-consciously realist novel The Communist (2017; Il comunista, 1976), has provided a nimble introduction and very useful notes. She glosses, for example, the circumstances of Karpinsky’s pre-event death - he was stabbed during a fight between two nurses at his clinic - as a reflection of Franco Basaglia’s belief that treatments in segregated asylums led to unhealthy patterns of behaviour in clinicians as well as patients. Basaglia led the movement that abolished most asylums in Italy and is one of the many “off-handed” traces of the years in which the novel was written. One unavoidable trace is Morselli’s own suicide, partly born of despair at his serial failure to get published, shortly after Dissipatio was rejected by several US houses in 1973. Having begun his own progressive withdrawal from social life, he left the terest of notes: “Non ho rancori” (I bear no grudges). He was taken up by the Milanese publisher Adriopho Edizioni soon afterwards, and eight posthumous works of fiction were to follow.

One trace I would have liked to see pursued is the spectre of Enrico Morselli (1882-1929). The Turin physician was not a relative of his literary namesake, but he does appear frequently in Durkheim’s Suicide; he also developed the concept of “dysmorphophobia”, which went on to become the spectrum of body dysmorphias that we know today. This seems pertinent because, towards the end of Dissipatio, the narrator acknowledges an important change: “For a few days now, I’ve been wearing women’s underwear, obtained from the Grand Emporium... I expect I’ll extend this style of dress to outerwear as well; women’s clothes are inviting”. This opportunity for embracing an alternative lifestyle seems less born of a specific liberation from judging eyes - a burden lifted - than from simply doing whatever feels right in a world where norms no longer exist. In this case, it means embracing the chance to move through life like a transvestite, perpetually in drag while “the individual in me is liquidating”. The end of humanity means the end of the hierarchical systems that we have forged and the return of the natural systems that we have beaten down. It only takes a geological moment from the end of one world for the other to creep back down the mountainside. And as the narrator steps out on to a hotel balcony, he spies “a faded banner, prophetic” that “hangs over the street. Capitalists, it’s all over!”. 

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WHAT IS AVAX HOME?
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Collisions in the dark
Elizabeth Bowen’s tales of past trauma and present discontents

CATHERINE TAYLOR

The Anglo-Irish writer Elizabeth Bowen died at the age of seventy-four in 1973, a year in which her own reading material consisted mainly of picture books, and of being read to. As a teenager in the 1920s, I began seriously to discover literature and literature by women - through the green-livered Virago Modern Classics, in which form, from 1979 onwards Bowen’s contemporaries Antonia White and Rosamond Lehmann, Olivia Manning and Elizabeth Taylor began to appear, and through the Women’s Press, with its new feminist radicalism and risk-taking programme of publishing authors such as Alice Walker, Toni Cade Bambara and Michele Roberts.

These very different series found their way to me via my mother, a teacher turned bookseller, who encouraged my reading habits to be broad and ambitious. Elizabeth Bowen’s coolly fascinating novels and short stories were, however, absent from this list. An Education in her middle age to the status of a grand dame of letters, she seemed, by the time I arrived at her work - indirectly, through my teenage devouring of any autobiographical detail conjured by Virginia Woolf or Virginia Woolf’s essay college student had interviewed Bowen in New York during the summer of 1953 as an assignment for Mademoiselle magazine - to be largely forgotten and un-champi-oned. Indeed, in the 1977 Special Issue of her short stories by Victoria Glendinning, Bowen’s last novel, Eva Trout, had been shortlisted for the Booker prize in 1970, then a mere year into its tenure and a far cry from the global brand it is today. Published the year of the prize’s inception in 1969, and winning that year’s James Tait Black Memorial prize, this novel about a temperamentally challenged woman was courteously reviewed by critics on publication, though it was later described by critics such as Hermione Lee as “an illustration of Bowen’s late malaise”. Patricia Laurence, in Elizabeth Bowen: A Literary life, a recent and elegantly arranged biography of her life, describes the novel as a piece of her other writings, “part of her pattern of taking a traditional style and transforming it to new uses... Time and space are shattered in Eva’s mind and they ‘lay about like various pieces of a fragmented picture’.”

One fruiting of being born, as I was, at the younger end of a large family, is the perceived vastness of time’s fragmented picture, the intimate history that has preceded you. I grew up impatient to be allowed access to the forbidden films, books, and conversations that went on over my head, in another register, at one remove. John Banville, in his elegant introduction to the Everyman edition of Bowen’s Collected Stories, published in 2019, 120 years after her birth, and like previous editions including all the stories published from 1956, captures something of the outsider feeling in his introduction to Bowen, an only child who was an orphan by the age of thirteen: “straining through her ears towards the sound of nearby scolds about their incomprehensible doings to a child, all gone, all gone slightly mad.”

My initial impression on reading Bowen, whose books populated my older sister’s bookshelves, was not dissimilar to this. There was the sensation of gatecrashing a party, crouching on a garrisoning of which you have not been invited and of which you have little comprehension, but which you are aware will be significant and life-changing in some yet to be defined way. My sister’s shelves also contained volumes of Ivy Compton-Burnett and Henry Green. At first encounter, all three writers share an intriguing air of ambiguity and ambivalence, which, while I barely understood it at the time, I definitely admired. They combine a deliberately finely tuned and daring take on literary style with a distinctive psychological cruelty that seemed perverse and thrilling to me, as someone not long out of the emotional ambushes of childhood.

Bowen’s own upbringing was Protestant and resolutely upper-middle-class. Banville calls her “a determined survivor.” In her work there is “much that the mind shrinks from.” A merciless glimmering streak runs through the claustrophobic single day of her novel The House in Paris (1915), for example, as two children, Leopold and Henrietta, meet randomly, both unwillingly en route elsewhere. There is the secrecy, frenzied melodrama and violence of To the North (1933). And then there is Bowen’s masterpiece of these interwar years, The Death of the Heart (1938), in which the orphaned sixteen-year-old Portia negotiates a self-obsessed and factlessly treacherous adult world. Time and again, betrayals and retributions - run through Bowen’s short fiction, in tandem with her novels. A very early story, “The Confidante”, from her first collection Encounters (1922), begins as a brief, devastating drawing-room comedy of manners, and ends with the manipulation of a pair of duplicitous lovers, leaving them “face to face with the horror of their own lies.” “The Confidante” in “Dark is the Day,” Bowen’s final published story. An older woman in a small Irish town uses her “amorous hostility” (no one employs an oxymoron quite as Bowen does, except perhaps Henry James, to whom Bowen preferred not to be compared) to destroy the idealism of an infatuated adolescent girl staying for the summer with her uncle, whom the woman also desires.

Bowen’s emphatically “Irish” novels include The Last September (1929), about a family disastrously caught up in the Irish war of independence, and A World of Love (1955), in which a young woman finds a hidden cache of love letters - her mother’s to the fiancé who had died in the First World War. In all of her Ireland-set fiction, long and short, Bowen cultivates an apparently extravagant, but always judicious, use of description and metaphor arranged most often against a specific background: the dilapidated houses and dysfunctional memories of landowners and minor aristocrats, clinging to a formerly grand rural existence in the face of social ruin and political change.

Although born in Dublin, and living, after her lawyer father’s death (which took place when she was seven), with her mother in various shabby towns of England’s south-east coast and also at Downe House boarding school, Bowen was of these people. In 1959, at the age of sixty, her increasing lack of money meant that she was obliged to sell Bowen’s Court, her beloved yet ruinously expensive ancestral home, the classic Anglo-Irish “big house” built by Henry Cole Bowen in 1777 near Kolderry in County Cork. Bowen’s Court was where she lived when not in England, habitually entertaining some of the twentieth century’s most celebrated writers, including Virginia Woolf, Carson McColloers and Iris Murdoch. The local businessman to whom Bowen sold the house had it demolished shortly afterwards.

Well before the abrupt destruction of this mausoleum of family history, to which she was the last heir, Bowen was packing her fiction with haunted houses, tortured memories and lost children. They creep like a fine mist into her short stories, reaching an apotheos- is in her writing of the 1940s, when she was living and working in Blitz-torn London. The prewar “Attractive Modern Homes” is permeated by a primit- ive force, horrifying and spectral, lurking in a brand-new housing estate built on the site of ancient wood- land. Its influence is so pernicious and isolating that a previously contented housewife at last perceives the void at the heart of her marriage. In “Green Holly” a bored and bitchy wartime intelligence unit is billeted at Christmas to a country house in which a long-ago murder took place, inhabited for centuries by a miserable ghost who reflects: “It is the haunted world after all; this is a phrase that could apply to much of Bowen’s fiction. “Green Holly” refashions the care- free country house party that served as the back- drop to many of her stories of the 1930s to become part of the grim apparition of the war effort. The parties were only ever superficially blithe. Doubt and dark malevolence, prefiguring her superb clutch of wartime fiction, are especially present in “The Apple Tree” and “The Cat Jumper” (“Both 1934”). In an atmosphere of forced group conviviality is shrivelled by the long-lasting effects of a singular horror: suicide in the former, and domestic violence leading to murder in the latter.

Bowen is one of the finest interpreters of war’s peculiar paradoxes, that mixture of dislocation and exhilaration. In her personal life, a long, companion- able marriage to Alec Cameron (the couple had no children) was punctuated by tolerated affairs. The most prolonged of these, which survived his own marriage and geographical separation and which continued until her death, was with Charles Ritchie, a Canadian diplomat seven years her junior, whom Bowen met in London in 1941. “Would I ever have fallen for her if it hadn’t been for her books?” mused Ritchie. Her Love in a Levant (1927), Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie Letters and diaries 1941-1973, 2008, edited by Victoria Glendinning with Judith Robertson.) Yet the relationship became essentially unfruitful, as “creatures of the night, whose coming together was of nature possible in no other day.” The line comes from The Heat of the Day (1949), Bowen’s novel of spies, sensual love and war-exhausted London, which she began in 1944 and dedicated to Ritchie. Her stories of this period, mean- while, are highly charged and almost schizophrenic in content and tone. This is not surprising given the tensions of those years. It also reflects Bowen’s dual existence as she used the cover of writer to under- take espionage work for the Ministry of Information throughout 1940-41, when she darts out of England and neutral Ireland. (Patricia Laurence devotes an interesting chapter to this subject in A Literary Life, despite much evidence having been destroyed, deliberately or as a matter of course.)

Bowen ceased to write to this time in her post- script to The Demon Lover and Other Stories (1945), in which she explains how, in these “between-time stories”, “the past discharges its load of feeling into the thoroughly impersonal and metaphysical present. The indi- vidual is all but smothered in an atmosphere of confusion and upheaval, where every positive has its reliably sinister nature.” The “Demon Lover”, set in a bombarded London one listless August day, has a married woman visiting her boarded-up home in a deserted square, where she confronts a fatal promise extracted from her during an earlier war. Inanimate objects have taken on the suffering and disappointment of the war years and all is

Elizabeth Bowen
weirdly ask: “in her once familiar street, as in any unused channel, an unfamiliar queeriness had sifted up ... dead air came to meet her as she went in”. The disquieting “Pink May” could be a complementary cautionary tale to that of “The Demon Lover”. A woman, some way past youth, practising infidelity under that guise of war work, has her life unravelled by the “ghost” - or is it her guilty conscience? - that “haunts” her rented flat. Lives are reconfigured as citiscapes alter; the Rider Haggard-influenced “Mysterious Kör” lays bare the emotions of three interconnec-
ted people under a full moon. Forsaken London “looked like the moon’s capital - shallow, cratered, extinct”. The lovers at the centre of the tale, envisag-
ing a parallel, deserted city called Kör, are illuminated unfavourably by the reality of moonlight: for them “love had been the moon”. 

Re-reading this and other war-set stories in the wake of the long months of lockdown and separa-
tions of 2020 is uncanny; the suspension and para-
theses of these lives overlap our own. Bonding the two greatest stories of the war years, “Ivy Grippled the Steps” and “The Happy Autumn Fields”, both use the confused present as a conduit to an uneasy and ideal-
ized past. Gavin, a prototype to L. P. Hartley’s “van-
quished” Leo Colston in The Go-Between (1953), returns in 1944 to the now run-down seaside town where as a child he had spent holidays just before the outbreak of the First World War. Emotionally repressed, he revisits an abandoned house smoth-
ered by a ghostly, absent love. The man who presents, loses himself in an idyllic dream of “The Happy Autumn Fields” of another age, and swaps places with a Victo-
rian, Sarah, who shares her acute fear of change. “Everything pulverizes so easily because it is rot-
dry”, Mary laments. “All we can do is imitate love or sorrow.” Bonden’s supernatural states of being are ultimately grounded in reality.

Catherine Taylor edited The Book of Sheffield, 2019, and is former Deputy Director of English PEN

**LETTERS**

**Doubts and shocks**

Retracing the steps in a fraught ménage à trois

**PATRICIA CRAIG**

**THE SHADOWY THIRD**

Love, letters and Elizabeth Bowen

**JULIA PARRY**


**Humphry House was not the only sexual partner Elizabeth Bowen had outside her marriage, but he was the first. The relationship between the novelist and the academic, with all its complications and shifts in intensity, lasted until Humphry's death in 1930. In 1935, when she was settled, settled into friendship and occasionally untravelled is now brought to high relief in The Shadowy Third. The implications for literary history are considerable. The letters of the correspondence, boxed up by House's widow Madeline and consigned to an attic, was eventually inherited by the House's granddaughter Julia Parry, and the whole of its intriguing and illuminating contents has set her imagination and her scholar's instinct going. Some of these letters have already received an airing in public. Victoria Glendinning's Life of Elizabeth Bowen (1987) takes account of their existence, and includes some excerpts. But Glendinning was prohibited from naming Bowen's correspondent. Madeline House had given the biographer a choice: come out in the open about Humphry's affair with Elizabeth, and forgo access to the letters; or keep Humphry's identity under wraps, and quote some letter extracts. Glendinning chose the latter option. Humphry House is mentioned only in cursive, as an Oxford friend of Maurice Bowra’s.

What Madeline House didn’t know at the time was that Humphry’s letters to Elizabeth had also sur-
vived. They were later returned to the House family and added to the box in the attic - those that escaped a small bonfire in Madeline’s garden, that is. Julia Parry is therefore in a position to chart the whole course of the affair, write all its intricacies and inter-
specifications. She acknowledges her good fortune in having both sides of the correspondence at her dis-
posal, along with supplementary letters to and from her grandmother.

The Bowen/House affair began in Oxford in 1933. She is formidable, a distinguished novelist and a mar-
rried woman, he a young scholar lately removed from his post as chaplain at Wadham College following a crisis of faith. They write to one another copiously and often, and their intimacies and reaurnances are emotively reiterated. Some details, previously known only in outline, emerge. Humphry is in the throngs of an on-off relationship with a young woman, Madeline Church (not yet his wife). The role of “the shadowy third” (the title borrowed from an early Bowen story) fits between the participants in the ensuing imbroglio, before settling first on Madeline, and then on Elizabeth. There are fascinating glimpses here of fluctuating attitudes and partial write-offs. Elizabeth, too, begins with, might seem to have all the advantages: social position, confidence, an increa-
singly glowing reputation, an ancestral home. But she was also sexually inexperienced - indeed, still a vir-
gin after ten years of marriage, and no longer competent with this state of affairs. “However great the strength ... of the bond that united Elizabeth and Alan [her husband, Alan Cameron],” Glendinning reports, “it was not precisely of a local one.” This is not to over-
state the case, Humphry, who liked women (while harbouring a few sexist reservations in line with the mores of the day) and was highly sexed by all accounts, too matter-of-hand. I am not sure if you say about my overwhelming love for you makes me feel dishonest ... My dear, I am too selfish, idle and ‘literary’ to be capable of love like that.” You feel she is being unkindly disposed without any occasion she tells him abruptly to “stop worrying about your heart and try to have a better brain”. Madeline, for her part, has much to put up with from a child: “My colleagues think of nobody but themselves. I try to make my life as a domestic job as far as possible. I feel I manage in hard, and I want to have a decent allusion to her domestic role. Her agitated response to domestic upsets - everything from burnt sausages to a roof blown off in a gale - is indeed alien to Elizabeth’s perspective, but with such sensitivity.

Some early extracurricular encounters between the three - at Humphry’s instigation - are detailed, with Elizabeth’s “overbearing” and interfering tendencies well described. In the summer of 1934, Humphry and his children have to travel from Bath to Dunstanville, but they do not preclude lapes into aspiration and affront. Elizabeth is not only when she refers to Madeline’s “queer little claustrophobic house, full of the little anxious wife, and the somber little blonde babies”, and sums up the whole menage as “some-
thing between a doll’s house and a rabbit hutch”. Madeline feels slighted to receive from Elizabeth the gift of a tea set, interpreting the gift as a sardonic allusion to her domestic role. Her agitated response to domestic upsets - everything from burnt sausages to a roof blown off in a gale - is indeed alien to Elizabeth’s perspective, but with such sensitivity.

In her essay “Out of a Book” (1946), Bowen expresses the view that “no body who mattered was capable of being a man who mattered in novels and stories, that is: but she goes on to admit to an attraction, in her own life, to the “dark horse”. If it is hard to ascribe a kind of dark horse magnetism to one who has to say that she was a “woman of genius”, Max, in Bowen’s novel The House in Paris (1935), fits the bill - and Max, as nearly every Bowen commen-
tator has pointed out, is the Humphry character in the transfixed trio at the heart of that distinctive and compelling work of fiction. (Is it too much, I wonder, to see a bit of interplay between Humphry’s surname and the book’s title?) The previously unpublished letters included in The Shadowy Third, then, do not by any means “tell all”, but they do reveal quite a lot about both correspondents, whose tone veers between affectation and hectoring. They will be an immense resource for Bowen scholars. (None of the letters appears in its entirety, but whether the omis-
sions are geared to cut tedium or avoid undue disclosure is impossible to say.) Parry is an intrepid navig
ner with an aesthetic and literary bent (the odd heart-felt outburst aside). She marshals her facts and impressions with energy and asiduity. She revises the novels of Elizabeth Bowen and cherishes the familiar notion that loyalty is to her grandmother Madeline, whom she reiterates as a person of sterling character and intellectual capable-
ness (Madeline helped to complete her husband’s work on the letters of Charles Dickens after Humphry’s premature death in 1935). The forty-six letters are burnt.

Patricia Craig’s books include shortlisted the biographical study of Elizabeth Bowen (1986).

Her Kilkie and Other Essays will be published next month of going-ons enacted in each locality, and on the locality itself.

You are conscious throughout of a delicate (and sometimes blatant) rivalry between the two women, Elizabeth and Madeline. Humphry, contradictory as ever, would like them to “get on”, but then resents it when they do. When Elizabeth has Madeline and her infant daughter to stay with the Camerons in Oxford, Humphry huffs and puffs: “Aren’t you being a little ungenerous?”, Elizabeth chides him. Unnecessary exaggerations on both sides between the three...

Patricia Craig’s books include shortlisted the biographical study of Elizabeth Bowen (1986).

Her Kilkie and Other Essays will be published next month
The sexual is contextual
Why consent is only ever part of the exchange

MIA LEVITIN
TOMORROW SEX WILL BE GOOD AGAIN
Women and desire in the age of consent
KATHERINE ANGEL
160pp. Verso. £10.99

AFFIRMATIVE CONSENT, in which permission is to be ascertained for every step of sexual intimacy — either verbally or through non-verbal cues — became the standard on American campuses during Barack Obama’s presidency. Although “yes means yes” has been criticized by some as “unsexy” or infantilizing, Katherine Angel considers it an improvement on the previous rallying cry of “no means no”, promoted on campuses from the 1990s. While it was an important step in debunking the idea that persistence in the face of resistance is part of seduction, “no means no” still “framed women’s role in sex primarily as one of refusal”. But as Angel argues in Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again, consent has come to carry too heavy a load. An agreement to sex is only what makes it legal; it “should not be conflated with sexual desire, enjoyment or enthusiasm”.

As in her previous book, Daddy Issues (2019), Angel uses snippets of contemporary culture to illustrate her arguments. The book begins with her comments on a videoed discussion between the porn star Janice Griffith and Chester C, a fan who wanted the opportunity to shoot a scene with her. Watching Girl X hesitate on camera (will she? won’t she?), Angel narrates the questions that often go through women’s heads in a first encounter, among which are “Will I be pursued, haunted by my own actions?” and “Has saying yes precluded my ability to say no?” Indications of desire are still used against women, Angel emphasizes — brought up in rape trials, for example — so it is “no wonder Girl X has mixed feelings, is paralysed by uncertainty”.

From here Angel considers “confidence culture” (which suggests that with enough confidence and self-assured women can achieve anything) and its knock-on effects on consent. “In this era of post-feminism, the utterly reasonable claim that women should be afforded sexual freedom — that they should be able to declare their desire loudly, to be perverse and lustful and up-for-it — slides into the more dubious insistence that women are and must be so.” The problem with an over-emphasis on consent, she points out, is that it shifts the responisibility for societal imbalances of power onto individuls. Consent only works as a standard if one feels one has the right to refuse. As the breadth of stories shared during the #MeToo movement showed, women agree to sex they would rather not have for reasons besides outright coercion. To add a further layer of complexity, just because sex is consensual and enthusiastic does not mean it is not an abuse of power (take the Clinton-Lewinsky affair).

By putting the onus on women to know and express their desires ahead of time, consent culture underestimates the mutability of desire, a subject that Angel explored in Unmastered: A book on desire, most difficult to tell (2012). Furthermore, it risks casting vulnerability in a negative light. “Part of the joys of sex might precisely be in discovering new, different ways to be touched: in being vulnerable to the unknown”, Angel says. Eroticism stems from the indeterminacy inherent in sex: “we never know what is going to happen in any given sexual experience, or how we will feel about it — regardless of what we have done or liked before”. It is only in surrender (which, she asserts, depends neither on gender nor submission) that we might glimpse the transcendent potential of sex.

“Tomorrow sex will be good again” was Foucault’s sardonic synopsis, in The History of Sexuality, of the position of the progressives of his era, who held that speaking out about sex would automatically lead to liberation. Armed now with the tools of consent and sex research, “we are, we are again, in a moment in which we are to be tomorrow. Sex will be good again”, writes Angel. In her view, neither offers the emancipatory potential that their proponents would have us believe, as both underplay the contextual and emergent nature of desire. To draw conclusions about arousal from physiological responses in lab conditions is, she says, “spurious scientism”.

Humans are notoriously bad at self-knowledge and self-expression — a reality that “must be folded into the ethics of sex rather than swept aside as an inconvenience”. Sex is not an object to be bartered but an unfolding, a conversation. It is, also, by definition experimental: “we don’t simply discover on our own what we like, once and for all, and then apply it with partners. “Working out what we want is a life’s work, and it has to be done over and over and over”, Angel concludes. The pleasure may lie in it “never being done.”

HAVE YOU NO SHAME?
Sex in the Indian Subcontinent

MADHAVI MENON
THE GOOD GIRLS
An ordinary killing
SONIA FALEIRO

SEX IS A PROBLEM. Not necessarily in and of itself, but because it can never exist in and of itself. Sex is always tied up with a host of issues — gender, family, caste, class, race, desire, expectations, honour; the list is potentially endless. In a post-colonial India that is still in thrall to a colonial morality, sex is also — perhaps primarily — about shame. Indeed, the question “Have you no shame?” has a richer life in the Indian subcontinent than elsewhere in the world. When translated, it inevitably means: having no shame = having sex (outside marriage), and having shame = not having sex (outside marriage). The great gift of Sonia Faleiro’s book is that it focuses on this notion of sex as shame.

In The Good Girls, misogyny is at the root of sexual shame, and Faleiro does not shy away from stating that with chilling precision. Setting the scene in the Shakyas household that form the core of this tale, Faleiro notes matter-of-factly: “The women mostly stayed in. They cooked for the men, ate after the men and sat lower than them. If the men settled on the charpoy, the wives made do on the floor”. The ‘killing’ referred to in the book’s subtitle is “ordinary” because it is the natural extension of a life neither valued nor supported. Women live to serve men, and when they die, men find other women to serve them. The End.

Despite committing suicide, then, the two girls in the book are “killed” in the sense of succumbing to their lot in life. Based on a famous case in Uttar Pradesh in 2014, the story of the deaths of these two girls — cousins — is shocking only because it is a consequence of stresses that every woman in the subcontinent faces, albeit to differing degrees. The Padma and Lalli of this book could have been, and have been, any number of women here who would rather die than face up to the consequences of having sex outside marriage.

As Faleiro makes clear, this preference for self-inflicted death is because, very often, the consequence of pre-marital sex for a woman is death at the hands of her family. As the rampant numbers of “honour killings” testify, a woman’s sexuality is tied, in twisted and convoluted knots, to the honour of her family. If a woman loses her “shame”, then so does the family. In order to prevent the latter from happening, the woman must die. Padma and Lalli were only adhering to the script with which they had grown up, doing to themselves what would otherwise have been done to them.

Ah, the shamefulness of sex. Women must know nothing about sex until they get married, they must have no desire before or outside marriage, and when they are married, then they must have sex only in order to produce sons. Even worse, this patriarchal script is one that is often trotted out by women themselves. Consider this powerful passage from the book:

Some members of the Shakyas believe that the family was to blame for the deaths. This was at least according to Lalita, who was married to the Shaka’s cousin Yogendra Singh. First, they had allowed the girls to use phones. Then, she said, they had failed to provide them toilets.

“If the girls had a toilet at home they would have had no reason to go out”, she said. “If they did, family members could challenge them — what for are you going out?”. Her father-in-law Neku Lal had built three toilets, she said, and she never went anywhere. The account resonates even more forcefully because of the way Faleiro writes — a quiet, sober tone generates both suspense and horror. Women must not be allowed any freedom whatsoever because their lives and their desires belong to their families and clans and castes. Education, technology, clothes, all need to be censed in case women start getting “ideas”. Shameless ones.

Faleiro’s tale is accentuated by a large number of political, administrative, sociological and legal details that weight the tragicomic. If Faleiro and Lalli, were the descriptions contain realism that these details enhance rather than detract from the sense of urgency is testimony to the author’s skill as a writer and reporter. The Good Girls is at once shocking and mundane, quiet and unduly, understated and savage. The current political dispensation in India, with its active patronage of patriarchal privilege, will not like this book. And that is one of its many strengths.
Poems from Britain’s Deep South
Bringing buried testaments out into the open

STEPHANIE SY-QUIA

Cannibal
Safiya Sinclair

LETTERS TO AMERICA
FRED D'AGUIAR

Shakespeare’s Caliban has long been employed as a symbol of the Americas’ relationship to Europe. Writers from the Uruguayan José Enrique Rodó, through to the Cuban Roberto Fernández Retamar, the Barbadian Kamau Brathwaite, and the Martinican Aimé Césaire have established The Tempest’s banished son as an embodiment of the self-perceptions imposed by the colonizer, of the indigenes made monstrous by the white gaze. Caliban’s name is also, famously, anagram of the Spanish canibal, whence comes the English “cannibal”, and a corruption of cabal (the Carib people of the West Indies whom Columbuss thought ate human flesh). Caliban, therefore, is a Caribbean.

This etymological nexus is the starting point for Safiya Sinclair’s debut Cannibal, which was originally published in the US in 2016, garnering a glut of awards before it was picked up by a UK publisher just last year. Its exploration of race-making and racism (here Caliban is used to explore Jamaica, “sized in the image of no one”, in contrast to the US) feels eerily, precisely prescient for our present moment. Sinclair muses on statues (that of Sacajawea, “crouched”, a “Creature of unbelonging” behind the pioneers), interrogates the legacies of historical figures such as Meriwether Lewis, William Clark and Thomas Jefferson (“Where Thomas Jefferson learnt to be little a thing. How to own it”), and asks what it means when slave quarters are uncovered (“buried rooms choked, sounds / bricked off”) beneath student accommodation at the University of Virginia. It is noteworthy that the book dates from a time before Charlottesville was a byword for a rallying fair right, before the incensed discussion of monuments around the world, before the discovery of Sally Hemings’ room at Monticello: “Some- where, the ghost arm of history / still throttling me.”

This taste of old blood on the wind.

In many ways it feels as if Cannibal has paved the way for itself, heralding and preparing the ground for the moment of its own arrival in the UK, where we are finally beginning to have more sophisticated discussions about Britain’s colonial legacies. Britain is playing catch-up to the US with the discourse on race - Cannibal’s publication pattern is an excellent example.

But a poet writing about Jamaica is necessarily also a writer about Britain. Atxa Hirsch has dubbed the Caribbean “Britain’s Deep South”: a faraway place to which Britain had the caminess to outsource its racialized violences, keeping racism out of sight and out of mind. Both Sinclair and Fred D’Aguiar tie Britain, via the Caribbean islands, to the US to form one contiguous story. D’Aguiar’s book offers a more capacious delineation of the America to which its title’s letters are addressed: these poems’ settings range from Blackheath in London (“Carnival was only 2 and the 50s / Passed on its signs, No blacks, / No Irish”) to Guyana (“one of everything village”) and to Paradise, CA (“They count our dead, / Got no fucking warning”). They speak from the recent past, citing the devastating Californian forest fires of 2019 and imploring them to “do for others” (Trump) “what you did for us”: Do that and we forgive your trespass As our original trespass Indigenous forest These indigenous hills This indigenous valley

The mention of indigenous dispossession, delivered under the thinness of early Gary Snyder’s, is what the Australians might call an acknowledge ment of country (albeit a vague one). Both D’Aguiar and Sinclair seek to widen this act of recognition, from the indigenous to the enslaved and from the old world to the new – to bring the buried testaments and stopped histories out into the open and let them breathe again, with a livewire eloquence. “All life”, D’Aguiar writes in “Kicking Oyster”, “flicks with a purpose and I mean to serve my term / As befits the flesh that must toll for the kingdom of the righteous dead.”

On the border
An elder guardian of literature in the US

ANDRÉ NAFFIS-SAHELY

Every Day We Get More Illegal
Juan Felipe Herrera

Juan Felipe Herrera’s most recent collection, Every Day We Get More Illegal, makes its subject immediately explicit: it is dedicated to, among others, “all the migrants, immigrants and refugees suffering from the border installations within the United States, at the border crossing and throughout Latin America”. Indeed, the poems collected here are unmistakably set in the charming yet apocalyptic desert landscapes of the US-Mexico border, where “there are men lying face down forever and women / dragging under the fences and children swimming with / torn faces all the way to the Tucson leathery and peeling”, and where trigger-happy vigilantes patrol in the shadow of the new wall with “skull dust on their palms” (“Roll Under the Waves”).

This borderland, Herrera reminds his readers, is “a stolen land” that is “forgot too”, and through-out the book he interweaves family anecdotes with imagined scenarios that bear an excruciating resem- blance to everyday experiences for many Latinx immigrants to the US. “Interview w/ a Border Machine” places the reader in the unenviable position of sitting opposite a US immigration officer: “can you please state your name / Xochitl Tzom pantli / what kind of name is that / it was given to me by an indinan woman / black hair long black shawl – it / means Skull Back Flower / well let’s get to business here why / are you here in the first place”. Elsewhere, “border fever 1057 degrees” revisits Christmas Eve 2018, when two Guatemalan children,Felipe Gómez Alonso and Jakelin Caal Maquin, succumbed to severe dehydration and died while being detained by US Customs and Border Protection in El Paso, Texas. The poem begins with a heartless yet appropriate question, “why do you cry”, and continues: “those are not screams you hear across this cage / it is a symphony - the border guard says”. The reader is reminded of how President Trump’s aides showed him pictures of happy children playing video games to portray the effects of his administration’s policies in a more positive light. The son of migrant farm workers from Mexico, Herrera was born in Fowler, in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, California’s breadbasket, and his work – a blend of Beat-era bebop, document, theatre, and song – was indelibly shaped by the Chi- cano Movement in Los Angeles during the 1960s and the avant-garde arts scene of the Bay Area in the 1970s. While most of the poems in Every Day We Get More Illegal are written in English, the book is peppered with lyrics in Spanish, like “Fumito visibles”, which is presented alongside its English version, “Every Day We Get More Visible Ones”. The book’s final poem, “come with me”, however, deserves special attention. Reinforcing the collection’s emphasis on the bilingualism of Chicano culture, every line appears first in English, then in a Spanish translation by Lauro Flores, a professor of Chicano literature. In this poem, the languages overlap on the page, neither marked out as dominant, and the formatting is pleasingly devoid of foreignizing italics, demolishing the barrier between the two tongues, symbolizing the author’s desire for a borderless world. By far the longest poem at twenty pages, “come with me” is also arguably the collection’s strongest: “come with me / I will be writing / you conmigo: escrib- iére”, Herrera begins, “with one letter the story of our lives / con una letra historia de nuestras vidas”, going on to elegize the sacrifice made by immigrant parents who “journeyed all their lives on wagons on foot and trains / leaning toward the fickle moon of paradise”. The poem becomes an elegy as the poet assumes a burden of whispering “their unwritten words” in “lost languages.”

Herrera’s eagerly anticipated new collection, his first in five years, reaffirms his status as one of the elder guardians of literature in the US. Every Day We Get More Illegal is best read alongside Herrera’s Selected Poems, the PEN award-winning 187 Reasons Mexicanos Can't Cross the Border: Documentos 1971-2007 (2007), which cemented his reputation before he was named US Poet Laureate in 2018.
China’s green colonialism

The climate crisis brings out superpower rivalry

KATE BROWN

CHINA GOES GREEN

Coercive environmentalism for a troubled planet

YIFEI LI AND JUDITH SHAPIRO

240pp. Polity. £15.99

THE NEW MAP

Energy, climate, and the clash of nations

DANIEL YERGIN

512pp. Allen Lane. £25.

TWO NEW BOOKS reflect on how the cartographies of power are being redrawn in the twenty-first century. As Yifei Li and Judith Shapiro demonstrate in China Goes Green, the emergent map is being dominated by an increasingly confident China, which is using an environmental platform to help to justify authoritarian rule at home and abroad. Meanwhile, Daniel Yergin delineates his own structures in The New Map by following the contours of geoophysical power - oil, gas, coal and solar.

Li and Shapiro seek to make an intervention. Many people, they write, are seduced by China’s ambition to lead the world in sustainable growth. As liberal democracies have appeared to go comatose in addressing the climate crisis, they argue, the flexibility and reach of centralized Chinese authority have come to seem increasingly attractive. The Covid-19 emergency has demonstrated this. China controlled the pandemic in a few months with strict measures and the surveillance of its citizens. Chinese leaders apply a similar no-nonsense approach to the climate. They rule by fiat, disbursing research funding, guiding media, censoring peddlers of bad science, and insuring that those who stand in its way are marginalized or marginalized.

Li and Shapiro are tough on China in a manner reminiscent of certain Cold War reportage: almost everything Chinese leaders do is deemed authoritarian. But China did not invent the models for economic development that are feared for ecological disaster. China’s “green” programmes bear the marks of many colonial projects of yore, including dam building, the enclosure of commons and the transplantation of ethnic minorities in borderlands as a “civilizational” force (see the Han Chinese in Xinjiang). And, like the colonial powers of previous centuries, China is exporting its bad environmentalism abroad in the cause of development, selling it as soft power.

China’s $60 billion Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) mimics many features of the postwar Marshall Plan. American planners billed the plan as aid, while Priyapat Marshland seen out of a train window, Ukraine, 2017

building markets and military power in Europe. The Chinese “belt” is a reconstruction of the old Silk Road with offshoots girding the globe. It involves maritime routes linking South Asia, Africa and the Middle East. In exchange for allegiance, China funds education and poverty reduction while promising not to impose “universal values” and “regime change”.

Li and Shapiro judge the BRI to be an authoritarian China’s counterbalance to a West-centric world. The project has metastasized to incorporate one-fourth of the global economy (53 countries), plus the Arctic and the Moon. They point out that Chinese planners actually use the so-called “Green Silk Road” to drop off dirty technologies, especially coal plants, which the World Bank will not fund. The “greenwashing” of the BRI, they argue, is a highly effective means of China to spread into global markets in the guise of promoting sustainable growth. In fact, BRI projects are set to bulldoze through dozens of critical habitats. One is Europe’s last swamp, the Priyapat Marshes, situated in Poland, Ukraine and Belarus. A planned shipping canal, the E40 - billed as far more environmentally friendly than a road - will run through these marshes, destroying important habitat for migrating birds. It might also churn up radioactive contaminants from Chernobyl.

Li and Shapiro make an important point. China does invest in renewable energy and industry, but mostly at home to deal with a devastating smog problem. Meanwhile, it simply exports its dirtier operations abroad. In The New Map Daniel Yergin describes one such frontier for Chinese business in the US. In 2015 the Chinese company Yuhang Shangdong (more recently named and shame by China’s Ministry of Environmental Protection for its domestic polluting practices) purchased sugar cane fields in the north of Louisiana and built a chemical processing plant there. Like many other companies, it was drawn to cheap US oil, low taxes and the relaxed attitude on environmental regulations in a region known as “cancer alley”.

Yergin, the US’s most influential energy pundit, stresses that the largest BRI impacts are underground. Pipelines carrying oil and gas from Central Asia feed insatiable Chinese industries. China is, the author argues, using the BRI to extend its borders into the South China Sea. Contractors piling rocks on underwater reefs have built 3,200 artificial islands and China now claims these îles tropicales as sovereignty and uses them for jet runways and missile batteries. The country also finances deep water ports along BRI maritime routes. When countries such as Sri Lanka default on loans, Chinese firms gain control. This debt trap helps China to make good on longstanding strategic claims to the South China Sea (see Isabel Hilton, TLS, April 24, 2020).

Yergin’s The New Map vaults between China, Russia, North America, Europe and the Middle East as he considers how the shifting production of fossil fuels determines who rules which parts of the planet. In the final analysis, Yergin writes, the contest for power lies between the poles of the G2 - China and the US. For most developing countries, Yergin argues, empire-building China is the best offer in town. This became even more apparent during the Trump years, when the US stepped back and China strode in.

But, Yergin points out, the US still has a grip on considerable power in the form of oil and gas. For years, pundits worried about reaching “peak oil”. Then, in 1998, the businessman George P. Mitchell spotted what could be the last big potential in finding massive quantities of oil - sand and chemicals through networks of subterranean pipes to squeeze gas from shale. Soon engineers were using the same technique to pull oil from abandoned fields in Texas, Pennsylvania and the Great Plains. Yergin shows how the US shale revolution tore up the existing map of oil powers. As US shale oil flooded markets, prices fell. Saudi Arabia and Russia tripped up in price wars. Prices dropped yet more, which was good for manufactur-
ers. Business boomed in the US thanks to shale oil. But what kind of business? Yergin applauds the US's manufacturing revival. He counts the jobs oil generates and the stock market revenues. But - and this is the confusing bit - a good part of The New Map lays out the follies and violence of states that have relied on fossil fuels. Yet Yergin does not use the same discernment when considering how the oil economy has taken hold of the American landscape.

Drilling into shale is dirty and hazardous. Because shale wells are quickly depleted, companies need to drill new horizontal underground networks, leaving a trail of ecological disturbances in their wake. Yergin fails to comment on the relaxed US regulatory environment that displaces the cost of clean-up operations on to the public. He doesn't wonder about the wisdom of siphoning off massive quantities of fresh water from drought-prone plains in order to fuel it, and he passes over briefly to dismiss fracking-induced earthquakes, methane emissions, or chemical toxins leaching into air and drinking water. Considering legal challenges to fracking, he mentions only one, federal criminal suit involving the death of twenty-eight migratory birds. He overlooks jury awards in the millions of dollars to people who have suffered health problems from fracking activity.

In the autumn of 2018 the US quietly surpassed Saudi Arabia to become the world's largest exporter of crude oil. Between 2009 and 2010 oil and gas accounted for 40 per cent of cumulative growth in US industrial production and two-thirds of total net industrial investment. During this period the US showed signs of suffering from the "resource curse". States that overly depend on resource extraction are victim to volatile prices. (And in the Covid spring when the oil price dropped to pennies for a barrel, the US stock market dropped like a bronco.) Leaders come to rely on resource receipts over broad-based taxes. They genuflect before corporate executives, servicing oil and other resource interests over those of citizens. The cost of living rises, income inequality widens, and democratic institutions disintegrate. This framework explains a great deal about recent developments in the US. In the past two decades, as the US became the leading oil exporter, the proportion of wealth that the top 10 per cent controlled grew steadily; the bottom earners grew poorer. In 2016 a majority of American voters elected Donald Trump, who used executive control to regulate the regulatory path for shale prospecting, oil refining and subsidiary industries. In the end, Yergin argues, the big winners in the first decades of the twenty-first century have been the oil and gas interests. In 2020, just as thirty years ago, 80 per cent of the world's energy derives from these two resources. Enriched with the shale revolution, the global energy portfolio petrified, and so too did visions of alternatives. Yergin believes that oil and gas will continue to be integral to the post-viral landscape, meaning that China will depend on imports for many decades to come. But he underestimates the country's very tangible domestic green revolution.

While the US pumps out retrograde fossil fuels, China leads the world in producing solar systems that light up not just green cities in Europe but villages in India, South America and Africa. Cheap, portable solar panels, which do not require expensive webs of power lines, make it possible for village children to study at night, for small businesses to launch, and for remote hospitals to carry out basic services; decentralized solar and wind power lead to small-scale autonomy, localized production, and more flexible, resilient micro-economies. The vessels that deliver them may be authoritarian but the people who use them do not have to be.

China may still be a net polluter but the remaining decades of the twenty-first century belong to renewable energy. And that is why China will get the prize.

"The Belt and Road Initiative has metastasized to incorporate one-fourth of the global economy (131 countries), plus the Arctic and the Moon"

CHINA'S GOOD WAR
How World War II is shaping a new nationalism
JEREMY BROWN
288pp. Harvard University Press. £22.95 (US $27.95)

Chinese people do not attack Chinese people", Xi Jinping said in 2018. Xi's point was to imagine a peaceful takeover of Taiwan, but he missed the mark because people in Taiwan increasingly identify as Taiwanese rather than Chinese. Beyond the immediate issue of Taiwan, Xi must have known that he was making a false statement. Chinese people have fought against Chinese people in many occasions during the twentieth century, most obviously during the civil war between Communists and Nationalists, and also during Mao Zedong's war against rural people (the Great Leap Famine of the early 1960s), Mao's war against the Communist Party itself (also known as the Cultural Revolution, 1966-76), and in June 1989, when the People's Liberation Army used tanks and guns to kill unarmed civilians on the streets of Beijing.

The undeniable history of the Chinese Communist Party leading Chinese people to think that Chinese people is not pretty. It undermines the Communist Party's moral justifications for its rule. This is why, as Rana Mitter convincingly argues in China's Good War, the Communist Party has embraced a reassessment of China's role in the Second World War, moving from a pro-Communist, anti-Nationalist story to one that recognizes Nationalist soldiers' and Chiang Kai-shek's significant contributions. Narratives of fourteen years of shared sacrifice against a foreign enemy (beginning with the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ending in August 1945) and earning a seat at the table of global superpowers - literally in Cairo in 1943, when Chiang negotiated as an equal with Churchill and Roosevelt - have all combined to make China's Second World War experience politically useful for a variety of people in the People's Republic, from researchers to leaders to clever critics.

During the Mao years, propaganda depicted Japan and the Nationalist Party as equally nefarious imperialist or reactionary enemies of "the people," while playing up the Communist Party's role as the only legitimate source of resistance against Japan. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing in recent decades, government grants have funded specialized journals and collections of historical materials related to China's war against Japan. The goal of these projects has been to depict China as strong, victorious, moral and just. The result has been to broaden the scope of acceptable commemoration by treating Nationalist soldiers and leaders as brothers in arms.

Mitter's most penetrating observations relate to how ordinary people have used contested memories of China's good war to implicitly critique the Communist Party's attacks on Chinese people. Mitter analyses the online phenomenon of Guojun (Nationalist Party fans), who not only argue that the Chiang Kai-shek, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill and Soong Mei-ling (Madame Chiang Kai-shek), at the Cairo Conference, 1943

Nationalist Army was the leading resistance force during the war, but who also want the Nationalists' constitution and founding ideology to rule over mainland China today. Earlier this year, an ardent Guojun from Shandong Province took my class about modern China at Simon Fraser University in Canada. His weekly statements about the superiority of Sun Yat-sen's Three Principles of the People arose from his profound dissatisfaction with censorship and repression in China under Xi Jinping. For Guojun, celebrating Nationalist rule is less absurd than it seems because they imagined alternative world once had a basis in reality in mainland China. And the same Nationalist Party still lingers on in a multiparty democracy in Taiwan.

The story of the property developer Fan Jianchuan, who established the Jianchuan Museum Cluster in Sichuan Province, is one of the most illuminating parts of Mitter's book. On the surface, the Jianchuan Museum Cluster's exhibits about the Second World War adhere to messages about shared sacrifice and national victory. On the contrary, the exhibition offers extensive coverage in Chinese officials press and allowing Fan's private museums to survive in the Xi Jinping era. But Fan's project pushes against boundaries, portraying Mao Zedong and Chiang Kai-shek as being on the same side, musing about the motivations of the hundreds of thousands of Chinese people who collaborated with the Japanese occupiers, and critiquing how Nationalist soldiers were demonized and persecuted during the Cultural Revolution. Looking at recent memories of China's good war is a natural progression for Mitter, whose previous books have focused on the history of the war itself. Mitter shows how conversations about one proud part of China's history are in fact conversations about more recent traumas.

Rosa Mulholland
James H. Murphy
Rosa Mulholland, Feminist, Victorian, Catholic and Patriot.

Published 21 April 2021, 100th anniversary of her death.

www.eerpublishing.com
Green swords, black comedy

ART WRITING

A BALTHUS NOTEBOOK

GUY DAVENPORT


I n a telegram sent to the Tate Gallery in 1968 as it prepared a major retrospective of his work, Balthus provided clear instructions: NO BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS: BALTHUS IS A PAINTER OF WHOM NOTHING IS KNOWN. NOW LET US LOOK AT THE PICTURES.

The message is typical of Balthus’s long-standing antipathy towards critics, journalists, biographers and the like. In 1945, he had declared “I refuse to consider it a crime when people write about art”. An early major book on Balthus (written with the artist’s cooperation) did not include his date of birth. If Balthus were to make an exception to his hostility towards art writing, however, I suspect it would be for someone like the late and well-known American critic, writer and translator Guy Davenport. We get a sense of Davenport’s approach to writing about art in this comment on Picasso:

He stepped over the moment of Cézanne, Monet, Courbet like a giant elegantly striding across a garden whose order and bril- liance were none of his concern. All of his tenderness is like a painters guage at a cow. "What", asks Lucas Zwirner in his excellent afterword to this new edition of Davenport’s A Balthus Note- book (that can an artist make of that?"

The erudite Davenport (who could write his name in Linear B, translated Hamlet and Hec- chy, studied Old English under Tolkien and visited Ezra Pound annually during his incarceration) has no interest in explaining Balthus in a traditional art-historical sense. The “arrogance of insisting” on an artwork’s meaning “closes off curi- osity, paralyzes the adventure of discovery”. The show is crowded: we meet over 150 people in sixty-four chapters ranging in length from a single sentence to several pages and in style from the dizzyingly associative to the densely epigrammatic. Here’s chapter three: "If, as Robert Walser and God is the opposite of Rodin, Balthus is the opposite of Picasso..." It is a “whole village”, writes Zwirner, “in a few thousand words”.

Davenport has compelling things to say about Balthus’s idealism, symbolism and understanding of childhood and death, however, on the "innocence" of Balthus’s paintings of adolescent girls, and makes surprising introductions (especially between textual and visual art) on almost every page. Balthus is “like Kafka” - “a master of gesture and posture”. His treatment of light is “a phenomenon, as thorough, pedantic, and secular as a page of Sartre”. We get comparisons with Beckett, Ionesco and Joyce among others:

Balthus’s paintings are illustrations for a writer we can imagine the style of, but who doesn’t exist. This writer would have Francis Ponge’s metaphysical sense of French meadows, Proust’s sensibilities of girls’ bodies and clothes, Rilke’s ripe- ness of time and fate.

A Balthus Notebook is a welcome reissue that introduces Davenport (who died in 2005) to new readers and redresses the fact that among his "forgotten writings" his "essays on visual art are the most forgotten of all".

Harry Strawson

COMING OUT

A DUTIFUL BOY

A memoir of a gay Muslim’s journey to acceptance

MOHSIN ZAIDI


The sense of freedom and pro- mise Mohsin Zaidi feels on his final day of secondary school is cut short when he and his fellow "strangely black and brown sixteen year-olds" are searched by police before they leave the grounds.

I had something to say about the unfairness of it all but with words with which to say it, Zaidi recalls. The British Pakistani boy from North East London - whose mother used to say that day is of the state’s assumption of his criminality - went on to find the words he was looking for: today, Zaidi is a successful criminal lawyer. To find out all the obstacles he faced along the way, coming out to his Muslim Shia family may have been the most harrowing of all.

Zaidi’s parents emigrated to the UK from Pakistan and worked tire- lessly to raise their three sons. Like many second-generation migrants, Zaidi and his brothers were expected to succeed in modern Brit- ain while retaining strong ties to their faith and culture. This double bind produces excruciating levels of guilt, pain and confusion for the young Zaidi. The burden of his secret guides ten of along with his family’s expectations of their son’s future when he gets into Oxford to study law. There, Zaidi shuttle between playing the popular student and attending his anxieties with alcohol: “Adopting a persona depending on the audience was second nature to me”, he explains. With connecting, a handfull of sup- portive friends and a secure job, he begins to accept and live his authen- tication. The pain of keeping secrets from his family eventually

overcomes his fear of rejection, with moving results.

Zaidi has a talent for distilling the complex ways in which racism and homophobia work through multiple social structures. His teen self, for example, observes that “in [his] cul- ture, it seemed that behaving too white came with a stigma that look- ing too white did not”, pinpointing the colourism (discrimination against dark skin shades) rife in the Asian beauty industry. Systemic racism and Islamophobia are everyday realities Zaidi and his family suf- fer, whether covert - like his father being thought guilty until proven innocent in his workplace - or overt, like their home getting petrol- bombed soon after 9/11. A potent- ially rich question Zaidi could have unpacked further is where and how to read homophobia, as well as discursive ambiguities within the LGBTIQ+ community, intersect. Deeply affecting and often funny, A Dutiful Boy is an honest picture of what it is like to grow up gay and Muslim in twenty-first-century Brit- ain. It sends a powerful message to young people who may be struggling as Mohsin Zaidi did: you are not alone.

Sarah Jilani

CRICKET

THE COMMONWEALTH OF CRICKET

A lifelong love affair with the most subtle and sophisticated game known to mankind

RAMACHANDRA GUHA


Ramachandra Guha’s The Com- monwealth of Cricket: A lifelong love affair with the most subtle and sophisticated game known to mankind is born between its title and subtitle. The former suggests social history, but it is more a memoir of an inurable cricket lover. The book opens as a bildungsroman, in which we meet mentors, role-models and early heroes at the Doon School (the so-called Eton of India in the Himalayan foothills), St Stephen’s college in Delhi, and the Friends’ Union Cricket Club (felic- itously abbreviated throughout) in Guha’s spiritual home, Banga- lore. In all, this tension emerges between Guha’s pride in his cricket- playing abilities and his acknowledge- ment of the gap between respecta- bility and real brilliance; this sense of marginality is reflected in his chapter titles: “Eavesdropping on the superstars”; “Handshakes with Heroes”.

Guha’s wilderness years - from a cricketing perspective - are when he rejected the green award for the groves of academe, are charted briefly. But as he takes up family life and an academic career, cricket, largely in the form of writing on the game, resurfaces through a kind of Hegelian synthesis as part of a new cricket-life balance. The book’s middle chapters examine common- wealth cricketers, but the tempo is uneven. One chapter races through favourite players in several Test-playing nations. Another involves looks at "Some Favourite Paki- stani". A third is devoted to Sachin Tendulkar alone. This is perhaps justifiable, as Tendulkar not only “met with complete equanimity the intensely magnified and completely unfavourable expectations of a billion of his countrymen”, but became the first overseas player to be con- tracted by Yorkshire, a county Guha describes, almost in a fit of pique, as “the most insular and tight-fisted community in the universe”. This capricious approach, along with Guha’s propensity for trampling on criticism as liberally as praise, is oddly disarming.

In the final chapters we find the book’s tone tenacious. The fas- culinist evokes into the cynical critic who decry the conflicts of interest and venality that bedevil India’s cricket establishment. Lambert’s recent experience of taking on and then swiftly resigning from a senior role administering the game in India, Guha concludes, is a symptom of the brittleness of an ex-lover, that his crick- eting heroes now involved in run- ning Indian cricket must perforce either be part of the problem or of the solution. He outlines “four cate- gories of cricket superstars”. The first three range from the openly corrupt to those purifying their heads in the sand. The fourth involves those who dare to speak truth to power; the only such figure Guha “finds above himself”, his true hero, the master of spin, Bishan Bedi.

Shomit Dutta

DIARIES

RANDOM COMMENTARY

DOROTHY WHITPELLE


For decades, Dorothy Whipple’s books - eight novels, two vol- umes of autobiography, a novella and a plethora of short stories - lay out of print. Thanks to Persephone Books, however, almost all of Whipple’s work is now available again. The latest of her books to be reissued is Random Commentary, first published in 1966. It is an assembly of “literary oddments”, mostly short essays and reviews from books and journals kept from 1925 onwards, as the original subtitle says.

We first meet Whipple in the mid-1920s. After her first love was killed during the First World War, she marries her employer, Henry Whip- ple, the director of education for Blackburn. She also struggles to establish herself as a writer, failing to sell a story for five years. Modesty regarding her writing abili- ties and gentle wit suffuse these dia- ries. Whipple repeatedly berates herself for not working hard enough. Prospecting, staring out of the window, or poking the fire: “I have time to work, I don’t want to. When I haven’t time, I want to”. Whipple begins new drafts before finishing previous versions. Working on one book, she always wants to be working on another; “shaping and polishing” is her favourite part of the writing process.
her first novel, *Young Anne* (1927), is accepted for publication, the relief is palpable: “I’m not lost any more.” Domestic life, meanwhile, is getting in the way: “I was desperate, thinking of my story and the steak that should go into the oven.” Everyday life plays out against the backdrop of impending war; an author “crushed by the horror of it” is left wondering if she should write at all. Always looking forward and making the best of things, however, Whipple understands that the fact she has time to write makes her better off than many women. A snapshot is provided here, too, of the contemporary publishing world – of David Higham setting up his agency and Michael Joseph founding his imprint, both in 1935. One of the first books Joseph commissioned was Whipple’s first volume of autobiography, *The Other Day* (1936). We also meet the inimitable Miss Head of Hearst Magazines, who must herself be worthy of a screenplay, and who published some of Whipple’s work. There is a humour and kindness to such vignettes in Random Commentary that make it a deeply beguiling account of a writer’s life.

**Ellen Rosister**

**FICTION**

**BLACK SUNDAY**
TOLA ROTIMI ABRAHAM

*Tola Rotimi Abraham has created a landscape of absence in her first novel, *Black Sunday*. Set in Lagos, and spanning two decades, the story is told from the perspective of the twins, Bibike and Ariyike, and their younger brothers, Andrew and Peter. After their mother loses her job and their father gambles away the family savings, the children are left to their elderly grandmother.*

**ITALY**
TOLA ROTIMI ABRAHAM

“The film is a sequel of the first novel masterpiece, explains, “a policeman’s job is only supposed to be easy in a police state”. It is not easy in the fictional US-Mexico border town of Los Robles, where a Mexican provocateur named Vargas (a heavily made-up Charlton Heston) comes up against Quinlan (played by Welles himself, in equally heavy make-up), a corrupt and corpulent cop. Yet there’s also a shifting complexity to Touch of Evil, in terms of both style and its ethical unraveling. Vargas pursues the truth, but at a cost, neglecting his Danish wife (Janet Leigh), who has her own blind spots in turn. In this contribution to the BFI Film Classics series, Richard Deming explores what makes Touch of Evil so intricate and so knowing as a parable of idealism dying many deaths. The production history of the film was complicated, too. What was supposed to be a return to glory for the director of *Citizen Kane* resulted in the studio playing over the editing, repeating the betrayal of *The Magnificent Ambersons*. Touch of Evil exists today in three versions and a portion of the footage is lost; the most recent of those versions, from 1998, is an attempt to reconstruct the film according to the vision Welles outlined in a memoir to Universal. Despite its history, however, Touch of Evil has had a far-reaching influence, says Schrader. Paul Schrader saw a civil service epigraph to the period where noir films pervaded American movies. François Truffaut celebrated and borrowed from its many techniques and innovations, like the famous opening – a wandering longshot from a crane – that follows a car with a live bomb in its trunk as it crosses the border.

Deming ably conveys just how visceral the film is. Murders, betrayals, drugs, racism, fraud and the threat of rape are juxtaposed with black comedy and a strange sameness palatable in its locations: more, off-iffs, a house stuffed with keepswares where a piazzula plays. The film’s international intrigue, and its baroque, ironic points of view on power and nationality, show Welles learning from *The Third Man* and his experience in the role of the insouciant Harry Lime. His sense of irony, Deming argues, is an asset as a filmmaker; and the finest example of this irony at play may be the film’s final line. It is delivered by a Gypsy (showcasing Marlene Dietrich), who resists recapitulating the downfall she - and the film’s viewer - have witnessed: “What does it matter, what you say about people?”. What does it matter, finally?

Shawan Ziad

**Upholstery**
DANIEL LEE
303pp. Cape. £20.

Ordinarily has never been more in vogue, and never seemed more sinister. The chance discovery of a bundle of “sketchbooks” covered’ “Nazi documents in Amsterdam in a chair that had been sent to be re-upholstered sets in train an investigation into the life and career of the chair’s original owner, a junior Nazi official in wartime Prague. When the documents come into the hands of Daniel Lee, a historian at Queen Mary, University of London, he approaches his task like a detective, travelling from Prague to Paris, tracing the subject’s complex family – including an American branch in Philadelphia - and tracking down his surviving relatives in Stuttgart and Switzerland. Although he was wounded in action on the eastern front, Robert Griesinger spent most of his career as one of the Nazi’s premier perpetrators (*Schreibstichakte*), working towards the Führer in a series of desk jobs. His impossibly upper-middle-class background and university education were no less unusual for a senior Nazi than his early political engagement, from which he turned to student fraternity. A mediocre student, he graduated in 1933 with a dulcet scar and a doctorate in law, joined the Gestapo, working for the Gestapo in Württemberg before the war. He served briefly in France, and then in Ukraine before settling to a comfortable administrative job in the Labour Ministry in Prague, far removed from the genocide in the East and the relentless aerial bombardment in the west. Griesinger died by dissection in a Prague hospital in September 1945, having successfully disappeared during the Czech uprising in the city in May. Ultimately, there is little trace of him beyond official records; this is the story of the chase rather than the quarry, told in the first person, not least because it is an entangled history: Lee does not know whether Griesinger was involved in leading up and executing members of his own family in western Ukraine, or whether he was one of the “execution tourists” for the hangman as they took pictures to send back to the Reich. He just knows he was there.

Tim Kirk

**FEBRUARY 26, 2021**

TSL 25
I do love a newspaper

The press as a facet of the Victorian success story

A. N. WILSON

THE EDINBURGH HISTORY OF THE BRITISH AND IRISH PRESS

Volume Two: Expansion and evolution, 1840–1914

DAVID FINKELSTEIN, EDITOR


Betty Hidgen, in Our Mutual Friend, says, "I do love a newspaper. You mightn't think it, but Sloppy is a beautiful reader of a newspaper. He does the satchel in different voices". The Press, like Homeric verse, was enjoyed not merely by those who could read, but also by those who could hear - and whereas primitive epic might be performed for doves gathered in courts or mead halls, or for hundreds in amphitheatres, where it was recited semiliterally, the nineteenth-century newspaper was the first form of literature intended for the mass market.

One Samuel Taylor popularized readings from William Howard Russell's Crimean war dispatches in The Times. This developed into his Literary and Amusing Entertainments in Hanley Town Hall. Between October 1857 and April 1858, nine Staffordshire towns were offering penny readings, with probably 60,000–70,000 attending. No literature - not even the Bible - enjoyed such popular audience as newspapers on this scale. Dickens, ever with an eye to the main chance, was the editor of two successful periodicals and published all his novels in serial form, as a branch of journalism.

The story of the British and Irish press during the Victorian era is therefore a vast tapestry of interconnected phenomena, and David Finkelstein, one of the few distinguished scholars of the subject, has drawn on a wide range of colleagues in the field to dwell on the political, economic and technological aspects of the story. Helen S. Williams's chapter on newspapers is central. Earlier, she has written of how the newspapers were the whole Victorian success story. Williams reminds us that at the beginning of the century, Gutenberg would have felt at home in any print shop: only very limited changes had been made to the technology of the process in the first 300 years of printing. The Earl Stanhope Press was the first iron-framed press; this supplanted the wooden-pressed frame and enabled larger sheets to be printed much faster. Then there were cylinder printing machines, which hugely increased the speed of production. The Times (circulation 4,800 used such a device from 1827 on. Fast forward to the end of the century, analysis had Linotype, pioneered in the United States and first used in Britain in 1892. This revolutionized typesetting and enabled production on a scale that for the pioneers of print machinery would have seemed unimaginable.

In parallel with these advances in production, and the steady population growth in nineteenth-century Britain, came the invention, improvement and extension of rail transport. Rail freight took mass-produced newspapers all over the country overnight, while during the day, thousands of publications vied with each other to satisfy the public hunger for something sensational to read on the train. The illustration in this book of a huge, well-stocked WHSmith bookstall on a platform tells its own magnificent story. In Rose Roberts's wonderful essay on image-making, the Illustrated London News is the star of the show, but Roberto takes us on an exhilarating journey of the many phenomena, subsequently taken for granted, that were newly made possible by technology; readers could now view facsimile, as well as having a much clearer idea of what their politicians and royals looked like.

The interrelationship between press and politics is vividly drawn. That late eighteenth-century phenomenon the Glasgow Herald, for example, an embodiment of Adam Smith's Free Trade principles, both reflected and helped to shape the Scottish attitude to trade and Empire in the century after its foundation. Having started as a Tory paper, anti-Republican in the 1820s, anti-Radical in the 1840s (an effigy of its then editor Samuel Hunter was burnt at Glasgow Cross in 1833), it developed into a Liberal Unionist daily, lowering its price from 3d to Id and thereby entering the mass market. Other papers in different parts of our archipelago played very different roles in the complex Victorian story. The Birmingham Post complained in 1888 that Welsh-language newspapers were being "used to preach sedition, and lawlessness and cruelty". In his illuminating chapter on the Welsh vernacular press, Aled Gruffydd Jones quotes a striking poem in which The Times is anathematized ("The clamour of The Times is abroad in the land ... A blast of untruth", reads part of the translation) - Ireland, in an "expression of 'auscultatio'" vernacular papers among the Calvinistic Methodists; these were of course largely radical newspapers.

As newspapers developed, so did the work of crime (in 1885, Arnold Bennett, who wrote novelists of the period was also a prolific journalist, wrote Journalism for Women: A practical guide. Bennett recognized why women had difficulties getting on in the world of journalism: they lacked discipline, they were slipshod, they could not spell, and many of them were ill-adapted to the aggressive atmosphere of a newspaper office. Nevertheless, he urged them not to be dispirited, and not to limit themselves to the "women's press" (whose extent is well described by Kathrin Ledbetter in her chapter of this book). Bennett urged women to write for the "class mags" - Blackwood's, Pall Mall Magazine, Longman's, Cornhill, Macmillan. Joanne Wilkes reminds us in her excellent chapter on reviews and literary journals that, since nearly all nineteenth-century journalism was published anonymously, many women were presumed to be male in fact if not by voice.
In next week’s

TLS

HETTA HOWES

Beowulf is back

TLS CROSSWORD 1365 BY PRAXITELES

ACROSS
1 Gastronomic accessory for which Sayer’s Montague gets prize (6)
5 Thrill at act which one may perform in Davos or Zermatt (4, 4)
9 Apologetic address directed at one such as Eutere about start of ode (2, 1, 5)
10 Miss Golightly’s friend Sally is a real fruit (6)
11 “You’re a dirty little schoolboy. ‘Besides being — immoral!” (Stalky & Co) (10)
13 Bespectacled pirate who’s meek, somewhat (4)
14 Prepare a cane for beating? Encore! (12)
17 At start of Salome rashly takes notice and buys one to go regularly to Covent Garden (6, 6)
20 One’s outstandingly impressive pop singer and femme fatale (4)
21 Giving colour, note, to new actor I cast at end of revival (10)
23 In Germinal impetuous hanger-on (6)
24 A Freudian construct is certain to include exercises and a game (8)
26 “Mr. Woodhouse was safely conveyed in his carriage … to partake of this ___ party.” (Emma) (2, 6)
27 12, say, that’s just about gone (6)

DOWN
2 Mostly burn with anger, an attribute of Pagnol’s father (6)
3 Where you’ll see students rowing about marks? (3)
4 Underworld controller; what a dog! (5)
5 Hooley that could be seen at start of Khovanshchina (5-2)
6 Clipper used to produce a short loose dress (5, 4)
7 Horseman at end of night getting smashed! (3, 8)
8 Economize on character in Shaw’s first play (8)
12 A memorial evening on which to enjoy eating and drinking, unless the chef does (5, 6)
15 Supplies commentary as Atonement’s confused, but not me! (9)
16 What’s done with the remains of Bring Up the Bodies? (8)
18 Author of Rhinoceros, carelessly omitting first two parts right out (7)
19 What you might eat at 12, a type of fish with pith mostly (6)
22 One such as Krapp to fade away (5)
25 Note start of play in theatre (3)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1361

The winner of Crossword 1361 is A. H. Harker, of Oxford.

Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1365, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF
How identity politics failed one particular identity

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