Three centuries of diversity

Paul Mendez on The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing
In this issue

This week the TLS celebrates Black and Asian British writing. Two of our reviewers, however, have their reservations about the enterprise. Paul Mendez argues in his cover feature that The Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing (edited by Sushella Nasta and Mark U. Stein) feels like “a missed opportunity to celebrate Black and Asian British scholarship”, given the preponderance of white experts and the paucity of Black academics who contributed to it. Mendez also believes that the category RAVE is becoming redundant. Black and South Asian Britons have their own identities.

Pat Rogers’s doubts are more fundamental. He begins his assessment of The Writings of Phillis Wheatley (edited by Vincent Carretta) with the bald statement that “identity politics have long beset literary study”. Rogers is not the only writer to worry about shoehorning “an individual into the right squad”. In a recent TLS essay (October 11, 2021) the black historian and writer Colin Grant also lamented modish attitudes to literary work by ethnic minority writers.

What is a British writer anyway? The poet Phillis Wheatley, author of one of the first books published by a Black person in the UK, was enslaved in West Africa, educated in British Boston and died an American Patriot, despite the attitudes of the Founding Fathers to race. These reservations notwithstanding, there is still much to celebrate about the wealth of Black and Asian literary talent. The contribution of Salmon Rushdie, V. S. Naipaul, George Lamming, Caryl Phillips, Kazuo Ishiguro, Monica Ali, Bernardine Evaristo and many, many more are immense.

Upper-class traitors continue to interest us because we want to know why they rejected their membership of the establishment club. Outsiders receive less attention. Ian Buruma looks at The Happy Traitor, the biography of George Blake, who was sentenced to forty-two years in prison for spying for the Soviet Union. John le Carre disliked Kim Philby because he was “born inside the fortress”, but he sympathized with the Dutch-born Blake who had “gone to great lengths to gain acceptance”. The reviewer and the author Simon Kuper have Dutch heritage too.

Nicola Shulman looks at the life of another outsider seeking acceptance in The Secret Life of Dorothy Soames, written by Soames’s daughter Justine Cowan. The author found out that her hyper-critical mother had been brutalized by her upbringing as a ward of the famous Foundling Hospital where “the children were made to feel apologetic for being alive”. Acceptance and rejection come in many forms.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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The long story of Black and Asian British literature

The Cambridge Companion to British Black and Asian Literature appeared in 2016. Why publish a Cambridge History of Black and Asian British Writing a few years later?

Well, for one thing, the editor of the Companion’s editor, Deirdre Osborne, was constrained to the years 1945-2010. The new collection of essays reaches well back into the eighteenth century to survey the content, context and impact of Black and Asian British writing. Edited by Sushelia Nasta (of Queen Mary University of London and the founding editor of Wasafiri) and Mark U. Stein (of the University of Münster), it “drags out of over forty international experts” – white experts, for the most part. Only two out of forty-two contributors are of African heritage, one of whom, Delia Jarrett-Macauley, is restricted to co-authorship with Nasta. Jarrett-Macadanley wrote The Life of Una Marson, 1905-65, about the Jamaican founding editor of the BBC’s Caribbean Voices; yet she is not allowed to stand alone.

While there are twelve contributors of Asian origin (and I feel grubby for having to count), the marginalization of Black academia this book seems to represent is troubling. There isn’t a dearth of Black academics and scholars of colour in Britain. White contributors from Germany, Denmark, Austria, Australia and Belgium are all too be applauded for the quality of their scholarship (even if one has Andrew Adamson’s adjacent pages being blacked out in Panama), but what is their cultural memory and experience of living with or actually being Black or Asian people?

J. Dillon Brown, a white American writing about the years following the Second World War in London, tells us he finds it “disheartening” that the experience of disillusionment seems to remain unchanged across the three generations of Black British writing since Windrush. I sighed at the understatement and condescension.

Reading through this History, I longed to hear about Black British writing from the likes of Bernardine Evaristo, Hazel Carby, Anthony Joseph, Anthony Appiah, Suzanne Scafe, Paul Gilroy, Joan Anim-Addo and Kehinde Andrews. Not all of these experts in the field are professors, true; Anim-Addo, who co-authored with Osborne the MA in Black British Literature at Goldsmiths, University of London, the only degree of its kind in the UK, retired last summer after the academic career of twenty-six years that she began and ended in Britain. A solo black female literary professor. In the age of Black Lives Matter, however, this History cannot help but feel like a missed opportunity to celebrate Black and Asian British scholarship – work that is “for us, by us”, examined and contextualized by us.

Back in 2015 when Nasta and Stein began work on this anthology, the world was quite a different place – Britain couldn’t possibly be leaving the EU, and Barack Obama was the sitting forty-fourth President of the United States of America. Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, was still married to her first husband. Only three years earlier, an apparently post-racial Great Britain had appeared to the world in full multi-cultural regalia at its home Olympics. Neither Nasta nor Stein – based respectively in England and Germany – could have expected the result of the EU referendum of 2016 to initiate such a drastic reorientation of the way Britain sees itself in the world, in relation to Europe and to its immigrants, particularly those from countries belonging to its former empire. The “hostile environment” explicitly introduced during Theresa May’s time as Home Secretary was, by then, busy husking out Caribbean-born British taxpayers for not being able to prove their citizenship status, after the Home Office destroyed their landing cards of the 1960s and 70s. The police murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis on May 25, 2020 triggered a revolution, empowering activists to tear down statues of slaveowners and launching a worldwide campaign to identify and dismantle structural racism. There was also a hope that those who donated to Black Lives Matter, marched with placards up and down the country, and posted black squares on their Instagram accounts would feel a new or renewed interest in Black British history, not least as witnessed by Black British authors. This History, then, has ended up being timely.

The development of Black British literature falls into several distinct periods, defined by the changing political circumstances. The first of those periods begins in the late eighteenth century, when the writings of slaves and freedmen were published to plead the case against prejudice. One of the first books published by a Black person in the UK was the American slave Phillis Wheatley’s Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral (1773). Both that volume (discussed opposite) and James Albert Ukawwaw Gronisiosau’s God-Fearing Narrative of the Most Remarkable Particulars (1772) – Britain’s first slave narrative – were dedicated to the evangelical Calvinist Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon. They opened the door for other, more radical writers. “The fact that people of African descent wrote”, Vincent Carretta notes here, “was almost as significant as what they wrote”. Oladoh Egunwaju, as an educated former slave with impressive rhetorical and writing skills, was a white abolitionist’s dream. He was certainly the highest-profile person of African descent living in Georgian London, becoming the first Black person ever to be appointed to a position in British government, albeit to organize the repatriation of London’s Black poor to Sierra Leone (during a period Recolonized in S. J. Martin’s brilliant novel Incomparable World, 1996).

Equiano quickly saw this exercise for what it was, and allowed himself to be dismissed. His Interesting Narrative – published in 1789 and sponsored by every}

Left to right, sitting: Venu Chitale, M. J. Tambimuthu, T. S. Eliot, Una Marson, Mulk Raj Anand, Christopher Pemberton, Narayana Menon; standing: George Orwell, Nancy Parratt, William Empson, at the BBC, December 1942

one up to and including the Prince of Wales, the future George IV (up pops the Countess once more) - combined tawdry autobiography, slave narrative and polemic in a key contribution to the abolition of transatlantic slavery in 1807. The History of Mary Prince, a Slave, As Related by herself (1831), the first autobiography published by a Black British woman, had a similar impact on emancipation in the British-controlled Caribbean in 1833.

Asian British writing, meanwhile, began in earnest with the writings of the Indian author and businessman Sake Dean Mahomet: Travels (1794) and Sham-pooping (1822). Mona Narain slightly awkwardly compares Mahomet’s writings with those of the Black British colonial Ignatius Sancho, “to demonstrate similarities between the Asian and Black experience in eighteenth-century Britain”. Mahomet “used the trope of the exotic... as an entrepreneurship strategy to sell his immigrant status in England”, overly addressing “a British reading public”. In Sancho’s posthumous Letters (1782), Britain’s first Black British businessman and voter – a denizen of London’s beau monde, a Mayfair resident who also wrote plays and musical ditties – figures as a prolific and eloquent correspondent. Of hybrid identity, being both a Black citizen moving in higher social circles and a person of African descent who was born slave, he successfully influenced public figures such as David Garrick and Laurence Sterne – bidding the latter “to consider slavery” – to use their fame to effect political change.

This first period of Black and Asian British literature, to my mind, ends in 1919 with the passing of a piece of anti-immigration legislation: the Allens Act, which compelled foreign-born women to register with details of police and gave authorities unilateral powers to deport them. It was renewed annually until it was replaced by the Immigration Act of 1971, and passed most recently during the first half of the twenty-first century, when Britain’s seafarers relocated on the labour of foreign nationals from China, South Asia, West Africa and the Caribbean. Nineteen-nineteen was the year in which, with the women and were the fathers of British children, were deported in the wake of overnight police raids in Liverpool, never to be seen by their families again. As subjects of the Brittlest Brits, South Asian men were registered as aliens in 1919 within the Allens Act, but because they were not white, they were judged on the streets as Black, and persecuted.

The interwar years meant modernism and the first all-male Rugby End Selectors. The League of Coloured Peoples staged Una Marson’s play At What a Price in 1934. Paul Robeson played the lead in C. L. R. James’s play about the Haitian revolution of 1791-1804, Toussaint Louverture (1936), an early treatment of The Black Jacobins (1938), James’s seminal study of the creation of the world’s first Black republic outside Africa. The BBC, with its services directed towards the West Indies, India and Africa, became the centre for British cross-cultural engagement. According to Jarrett-Macauley and Nasta, “alliances formed between Britain-based colonial writers and intellectuals, and the prominent figures of the left- wing British intellectuals”. Elsewhere, racism was thriving, too. In turn, nineteen publishers made Mulk Raj Anand’s social realist novel Untouchable (1935), now a Penguin Classic and with its title – until his friend E. M. Forster agreed to write a preface for it. In 2000, to accompany a review of the seventh volume of the Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, the TLS reprinted a cropped reproduction of a famous photographic image that also figures repeatedly in this History. Marson, the presenter of the radio programme Calling the West Indies; later renamed Caribbean Voices, is seated central to the original image. Panned by the poet Venu Chitale, M. J. Tambimuthu (the founder of Poetry London), T. S. Eliot, George Orwell (who had set up the picture), Orwell’s secretary Nancy Parratt, Mulk Raj Anand, William Empson, and the BBC producers...
Christopher Pemberton and Naryana Menon. (The TLS captioned the cropped image “among others, from left to right, George Orwell and William Empson”, even while Marston remained centrally seated. Nasta’s letter, published the following week, seemingly called out the omissions.) In this new Combride book, Zsolt Ferenté notes that Marston, along with other women writers and producers of colour of this period, was the victim of prejudice from white (and Black male) colleagues asked “to answer to a woman’s” and of an active colour bar that “denied [her] accommodation at hotels”. Other Commonwealth factions accused her of bias towards Black speakers, arguing that her broadcasts “thus fell short of the egalitarian aural community they were purported to represent”; the complaints effectively ended her BBC career. Anna Snith defines Marston as “highly unusual as a woman within pan-African circles of the 1950s”, while her “racial identity set her apart within feminist organisations”. Echoing Bachi Emecheta’s auto-biographical novel Second Class Citizen (1974), J. Dillon Brown says she therefore suffered from a “double displacement”; yet her legacy was assured. As the founding editor of Caribbean Voices, Marston was indirectly responsible for launching the careers of other Black authors, such as Sam Selvon, George Lamming, Edgar Mittelhoelzer, E. R. Braithwaite and Andrew Salkey. Which brings us to the next phase of Black and Asian British writing, a period bookended by further interventions by the British government. 

Between the Nationality Act of 1948, which awarded instant British citizenship to any Commonwealth subject, and, eventually, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which Hugh Gaitskell called “crude and brutal anti-colour legislation”, over half-a-million West Indians came to live in the UK. Among them were middle-class, highly educated, artistically ambitious West Indians such as Selvon, Selwyn Selwyn and George Lamming, who travelled on the same boat together (Mpalve-Hingson Misaka, the other Black contributor to this History) and during the term of “on a literary pilgrimage to a country they have hitherto only imagined through books”). Their respective magnum opus, The Lonely Londoners and The Emigrants, as well as Caldwell’s In the Heart of the Pleasures of Exile, are considered classics of the era. In particular, The Lonely Londoners has returned to prominence in the wake of the Windrush scandal, with which the term is forever intertwined. As Nasta and Stein say, “One can tell a lot about a nation by the stories it invents, by what books it chooses to treasure. ... Yet, as Anthony Appiah reminds us in his recent study of contemporary identities, creeds, and colour, The Lies that Bind (2018), one can learn even more about a nation by what it chooses to forget”. (Allegedly, in a speech during the Second World War, Winston Churchill quoted from the Jamaican writer Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die”: “I say, to rise, pout, patriotic feeling. the claim, treated almost as fact by Nasta and Stein, has been greeted with a coiled collateral by authorities on Churchill’s scheme. The Windrush scandal is a contentious narrative in Black and Asian British writing. “In terms of literary production”, Dillon Brown observes, “between 1950 and 1962, Caribbean writers published over seventy novels in the United Kingdom”, giving them “a reasonable claim to prominence”. The second half of this History catches up with the myriad forms Black and Asian British writing have taken to date, from television, young adult and popular fiction, film and music forms as grime, as well as the new infrastructures that have been put in place to support Black and Asian British writing – retailers, led by New Beacon Books, and publishing imprints such as Allison and Busby, Bogle L’Ouverture, Jacaranda and Dialogue Books. (The Black Writers’ Guild was formed last year, too late to be included here.) A footnote unwisely alludes to tokenism when it comes to children’s literature, in the case of white authors “producing representations of Black and Asian children and teenagers”. Another volume published, say, in five years’ time, would incorporate further study into the contributions of queer writers of colour – Kate Houlten notes in her essay that although “increasingly scholarly attention has been paid to Black and Asian cultural production over the last fifteen years, sexuality has not featured predominantly in many studies” - but it would be relevant in this form?

As can be seen from the widespread abandonment of the catch-all term “BAME”, the idea of Black and Asian British Writing as a singular thing is going rapidly out of fashion. While South Asian British gazing was once defined as Black – “Black” being, for a long time, the catch-all term for non-white immigrants - and so were implicated in the waves of resistance that met such complaints, Black people on British soil, this is no longer the case. South Asian Britons have their own identities, religions, art, traditions and cultures. The one that binds Black and Asian British writers into a shared experience of the chasm between the harsh realities of British minority life and, as Allison Donnell has it, the “fictional England” that “every schoolchild growing up in a British colony was immersed with...imagined via Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Dickens”. Post-Windrush writers of South Asian origin, following the Indo-Trinidadian V. S. Naipaul, have used magical realism to examine the interrelationship between race, class, and religion, in the case of Salman Rushdie; given Britain a classic of queer cinema in Hanif Kureishi’s My Beautiful Laundrette; an enduring TV comedy staple in Goodness Gracious Me; and a universal tale of love, family and belonging in Monica Ali’s Brick Lane.

The Indian-born Farrukh Dhondy, meanwhile, was a prominent figure of the London-based Southall Black Sisters was founded in 1979 and remains an all-Asian women’s group. Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem “It Dread Inna Ingan” (1978) captured Bristol’s Black and Asian descent, and remained unified in outrage at the arrest and sentencing of George Lingo, who had been wrongly accused of robbing a betting shop. Johnson recited the poem through a megaphone as he led a march on the Tyne Police Station. As Thatcherism flooded every corner of British life, radical new collectives emerged in resistance to the anti-immigrant hostilities that many of them ever felt no need to the New Cross Massacre of January 1981 and the subsequent nationwide protests. Black theatre groups, such as Talawa, and the Theatre of Black Women, who produced Jackie Kay’s early plays! were among those who took advantage of Ken Livingstone’s progressive Greater London Council policies (before Margaret Thatcher abolished the GLC). Novels by Andrea Levy, Caryn Phillips, Fred D’Aguilar and others resurrected the forgotten voices from the past.

Britain needs to come to terms with its colonial and immigration histories as part of its mainstream narrative, including the teaching of Black and South Asian histories in state schools. The continued lumping together of the two diasporas keeps them othered from the white majority, while the public discussion around race remains restricted to questions of identity; who is African by Johnson’s words from 1978: “African / Asian / West Indian / am ‘black’ / Stan / firm / Inna / Ingan / Inna / mi dia / yah / for noh / mat / weh / say / over / we, / are / to / stay”.

Paul Mendes’s novel Rainbow Milk was published last year. 

Poet without precedent

The ‘first international celebrity of African descent’

PAT ROGERS

THE WRITINGS OF PHILLIS WHEATELY

VINCENT CARRETTA, EDITOR


I

DENTITY POLITICS HAVE LONG BEEN LIT DEBATE. All too readily, we fall back on any old descriptor that we happen upon within some familiar category. It’s natural that this lazy habit does not go down well with authors themselves, who often reject the label that has been pinned on them, as when Kathleen Jamie complains about her “tribal” sticker. But we still go on describing X as the pre-eminent working-class novelist, Y as the master of the Irish short story, or Z as the outstanding woman practitioner of confessional poetry. Along with race, class and gender, we enlist other determinants - age, generation, region, nation, continent, religion and political affiliation - to sho a particular individual into the right squad. Not that the terms aren’t necessarily inaccurate; rather, they draw too much attention to specific attributes at the expense of wider quality, and replace the essentials of creativity with what are often contingent factors. 

What chance then for Phillis Wheatley ever to get a fair hearing? Her claims to immortality have always been based on considerations that can’t alto explain the popularity of the poems as we encounter them on the page. Indeed, the tags that are attached to her name in reference books go only a limited distance to define the nature of her achievement. In Britain, for example, Vincent Carretta reminds us more than once that she was “the first person of sub-Saharan ancestry to publish a book, and consequently the first inter-racial celebrity of African descent”. At one point he has made before in his distinguished contributions to the literature of transatlantic writers, including Olaudah Equiano, and amplified in his “biography of a genius in bondage”, Phillis Wheatley (2011). Does it matter that Wheatley was a Black African? That she came as a child and a slave to a society overwhelmingly white in composition? That she was female in a patriarchal world? That her new home was a colonial possession, only just freeing itself from the political, economic and cultural dominance of Britain? These things unquestionably do matter, in each case; but it’s quite another thing to suppose that they can account for her entire literary identity. She could not help the fact that she had to write in standard English and ape classical diction - but that was the case.

The girl arrived in Boston from West Africa in 1761, aged about seven or eight, frail enough to be looked on as a “refuse slave”, one of the “small Negroes” under the care of the “maignant way of hard labour, and so offered as “cheap for Cash”. She couldn’t supply a single lady or little her new owners paid for her, nor what her family had called her before she was dragged away from her homeland, but one of their immediate acts was to supply her with a name and, after the ship on which she had crossed the ocean. They were John Wheatley and his wife Susanna, a middle-aged couple engaged in transatlantic trade and well-established in the city as Congregationalists. One reason
the half-naked child was chosen instead of a more robust specimen might be out of some tenderness that the Wheatleys felt after losing their own much-loved girl before her eighth birthday. Certainly Susanna treated her servant with exceptional kindness - almost, but not of course quite, like a daughter. Two generations on, a descendant reported that she once sent her carriage to bring Phillips home in inclement weather, lest the cold and damp should affect the girl's delicate health. When Susanna died in 1774, Phillips wrote to one of her few black female friends that "I was a poor little outcast & a stranger when she took me in".

The main service that the Wheatleys did was to encourage her evident bent for learning, and strongly urge towards religion. By the time that she was baptized at eighteen, she had written a considerable amount of poetry, some of it already in print. The local Congregational churches had more than once welcomed George Whitefield, the most electrifying preacher in the growing Methodist movement, who may have stayed with the Wheatleys on the last of his missionary tours. He moved further up the Massachusetts coast to Newburyport, where he died in September 1770. Within two weeks Phillips, still a teenager, had produced an elegy on "that Celebrated divine, and eminent servant of Jesus Christ," the late Reverend and Pious George Whitefield, "Chaplain to the Right Honourable the Countess of Huntingdon". Embellished on the title-page with a quotation from 2 Samuel 22:4 and a patriotic tribute of Whitefield in his coffin, the poem was published as the work of "Phillis, a Servant Girl of 17 years of Age, belonging to Mr. J. Wheatley of Boston: - And has been but 3 years in this Country". In the elegy quickly appeared in Whitefield's home country, Phillips was now embarked on her rise to international fame. She was already a practised exponent of elegy, but the poetic surprise is that the poem is her readiness to address her fellow Blacks, "Take him, ye Africans, he belongs to you", not to mention her boldness in addressing Lady Huntington on the loss of her spiritual adviser. writing to the Countess of the New World. From now on, Phillips would commit an audacious act with virtually no precedent in identifying the Countess as her chosen patron. That was not the usual kind of project her race would be encouraged to do. Subsequently she pursued her quarry with laudable assiduity. Not only did she dedicate her volume of poems to Lady Huntington, but when Phillips came to England at the summer of 1773 her two respectful letters brought her an invitation to a personal meeting. Regrettably this could not be arranged before she had to curtail her brief visit. The collection was with lines addressed to Macenans, referred to as a male friend. Carretta suggests this is just a cover for the real patron, and that Phillips used masculine terms since she had "no classical models of female patrons available to her" (largely true), and anyway "as an aristocratic widow, Huntington had virtually the authority and power of a man" (a less convincing explanation).

The six-week trip to Britain was made for more than one motive. It was to prepare the launch for her book by a London publisher, after Bostonian booksellers found reasons not to take it on - even though it was garnished with the endorsement of major figures from her adopted homeland, notably Thomas Hutchinson, the already besieged governor of Massachusetts. This group naturally included slave-owners, as well as opponents of the system. Among the most prominent figures in New England culture, like the poet-cleric Mather Byles, his cousin Samuel Mather (son of cotton) and the famous signatory of the Declaration of Independence, John Hancock, who signed his name, the only mere "Mr.", in John Wheatley, sufficiently identified as "her Master". Phillips also hoped the change of scene would do something to repair her prevailing ill-health. Her most pressing reason was to meet up with local abolitionists, especially Granville Sharp, the man who had initiated the court case ending with Lord Mansfield's ruling that slaves could not be returned in captivity from British soil. Phillips was determined to take advantage of this seeming loophole, and she obtained her freedom only weeks after she got back to America.

During her sojourn in London, Phillips faced a whirlwind of novel experiences. As Carretta describes in his biography, she must have been overwhelmed by the sights and sounds of a metropolis thirty times the size of Boston. Equally, Lon- doners doubtless found her a perplexing anomaly, one who had just crossed the Atlantic as "an uncultivated Barbarian from Africa", but was now invited to hobnob with persons of the greatest distinction, not least the secretary of state Lord Dartmouth, and that eminent resident of the capital, "Benjamin Franklin Esq. FR.S". She also met the botanist Daniel Solander, now back from his journey on Cook's first voyage. A year later, many must have thought back to Phillis's descent on the city when they encountered the even more exotic Tahitian, Omali, who had accompanied the explorer on returning from his second voyage, to be shown the sights of the town.

The most productive networking in the course of the trip involved John Thornton, a merchant and Evangelical who supported Lady Huntington's Con- version. He was a friend of William Wilberforce for the summer of 1773 (a cousin), became one of the founders of the Clapham Sect, and like Thornton senior had links with prominent humanitarians. In particular John was a patron of John Newton, who certainly knew of Philips if he did not meet her. In one of her letters to Thornton, there is a reference to "the enchant'd Sting", a satirical phrase that turns up six years later in the Olney Hymns. We may wonder what the ex-slave and the ex-slaver would have made of each other, especially in the company of Newton's colleague William Cowper, who went on to write "The Negro's Complaint". Certainly, the poems of Wheatley are pervaded by the language of eighteenth-century hynmology, most obviously the work of Isaac Watts.

When Phillips reached Boston and became a freed woman in late 1773, she was preluded to the War of Inde- pendence that had already begun. Some of her work had always had a political cast - she had, for instance, written premature thanks to "the King's Most Excel- lent Majesty" in 1768, when the repeal of the Stamp Act raised the colonists hopes of reconciliation for a time. She actually composed lines, now lost, on the Boston Tea Party, which the publishers under- standably omitted from her collection. When hostil- ities started in earnest, her sympathies turned de- cisively towards the Patriot side. During the siege of the British forces in Boston, lasting for some months in 1775 and 1776, she took refuge in Rhode Island. From there she sent the commander of the besieged army, George Washington, a letter together with some fulsome panegyric verses, ending with the adoration, "Exceed, great chief, with virtue on thy side". She even saw in his future "A crown, a mansion, and a throne". She meant heavenly rewards, not the mansion that would later be built on Pennsylvania Avenue. Strangely, Washington got around to replying to his encampment, to thank her and apologize for a few weeks' delay caused by "a variety of important occurrences". Soon Thomas Paine reprinted the poem in a maga- zine. By this date Wheatley's name had become familiar to people round the world, including Vol- taire and John Wesley.

Her output slowed in the few remaining years left to her. This may have been due in part to her health, but also to her marriage in 1778 with an improvident "free black" gentleman who dabbled in medicine and law. Her proposed second volume, to be dedi- cated to Franklin, never appeared. She died, aged no more than thirty-one, in December 1784, widely mourned in the public prints. Her work had natu- rally attracted admiration by reason of its forfear claims for the equal merits of the "Ethiopians" for whom she explicitly spoke. It involved a reclamation exercise, comparable to the resurrection of the term "queen" in our own time. How much do we know what she was then? Competent and versatile across genres, cer- tainly, as a conventional writer in the best sense, that is one who exploits the potentialities of the modes and idioms he or she inhabits.

This edition, prepared by the outstanding scholar in the field, supersedes previous collections from Julian D. Mason (1966; 1989), John C. Shields (1988) and Carretta himself (Penguin, 2000). It is the fullest in scope, with abundant bibliographical detail, and it takes advantage of the steady growth in secondary literature. Two minor flaws concern excess repetition and verbal glossing. Several passages in the introduction are reiterated word-for-word in the annotation, while there is a great deal of cutting and pasting from the Penguin edition and from the editor's 2011 biography. The notes are patchy on classi- cal allusions and very sparse on the pastoral di- c tion that Phillips regularly employs - modern readers need help on misleading words such as "resent" (take revenge on), "natural" (genital), "generative" or "compliant" (obliging). A dozen or more Miltonian and uses of epic formulas pass unremarked: the pompous "circumfusis", beloved by both Milton and Pope, lacks any explanation. Among allusions overlooked is the line "While living lightning flashes from her eyes", surely a conscious echo of Belinda in The Rape of the Lock. Much more remains for students of Wheatley to fill in along these lines. They will, however, be doing this on the foundation laid by the most generally informative and revealing edition that has ever appeared.

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Pat Rogers is the author of The Poet and the Publisher: The Case of Alexander Pope, Esq., of Twickenham versus Edmund Curll, Bookseller in Grub Street, which will be published in May

Phillis Wheatley by Meredith Bergmann, Boston, 2003

MARCH 19, 2021

TLS 5
Guy Davenport

I was delighted to see Harry Straw-

sensuous drawing attention to

Davenport said, Orientalism and facts

Reading Robert Irwin’s review of Edward Brennan’s Life of Edward Said, and particularly Irwin’s con-

sideration of Said’s Orientalism (March 12), I recall most

vividly the muscular comments of Hazhur Teimourian

about Said when discussing Ibn Warraq’s Defending

the West: A critique of Edward Said’s (Orientalism)

(2007). In his review in the Tablet, Teimourian referred to

“Said’s astonishing main claim that ... every European ...

was consequently a racist, an imperialist and almost
totally ethnocentric”. Teimourian points out that this

means (and I paraphrase here) that members of any

one culture have no right to research the habits and

circumstances of another to satisfy their curiosity. And

here are Teimourian’s prophetic words: “in case the

fruit of their knowledge is one day used by a tyrant

against those other peoples”. I recalled Teimourian’s

marvellously germane words for two reasons. Firstly,

because of his defence in acknowledging the inherent

right of scholars to comment and take a different view.

Secondly, for those last words which go to the heart of

an informed debate in both the public and private sector, not

only in the universities, but increasingly in politics from

history and beyond, to allow in my view the most

important rule of natural justice to apply, namely, “audi

alteram partem.”


Conan Coulson, Croydon

In his review of Timothy Brennan’s Places of Mind: A

Life of Edward Said, for Lawrence, Irwin writes that Said

was “usually cavalier with facts” and that in Orientalism

and Culture and Imperialism, Said “made so many

actual factual mistakes”. Irwin goes on to make known

the “huge mistake” that “he got the names wrong”. The

reader is then told that he “turned up many more”. Irwin

proceeds to give one example from “among many”. The

problem is not so much that the determiners “many” and

“huge number”, which appear in four consecutive

sentences at the outset of a paragraph, are

followed by only one pedantic example; but that the

overstressed determiners seek to lay too much positiv-

ist emphasis (without meaningful examples) with a

tendency to discredit Said’s work - which, admittedly,

is not without flaws. By making these statements, how-

ever, Irwin, without his realizing it, seems to be sub-

stantiating Said’s model for the way in which Euro-

peans view Orientals. In Orientalism, Said, who was a

Palestinian, stated that to Europeans “want of accu-

racy, which easily degenerates into untruthfulness, is

in fact the main characteristic of the Oriental mind”. The

absence of rationalism, philosophy or analysis in

Irwin’s attacks on Said’s attitude towards facts may be

seen as an example of Said’s formula in operation. It

is not enough to cite Said’s view on how “a naive insist-

ence on ‘the facts’ reveals a contemptuous disposal of

opinion and interpretation”. That person may sometimes

show idealist leanings does not mean that they are averse to facts. The idealist philosopher Bene-

detto Croce thought that history will always to some extent be seen falsely. “Error is not a ‘fact’”, he wrote,

“it is a ‘spirit’. It is possible that Said was showing his idealist side in the cited paragraph. The point is that

it is more beneficial – and indeed equitable – to try to understand Said’s words through philosophical and

intellectual terms and ideas, not simplistically dissmiss-

able ones.

Irwin’s review is stipped with words such as “fail-

ures”, “mistakes” and “errors”, all of which he associ-

ates with Said without proportional qualification. This

tendentious reading and understanding of Said is

Elisally misleading. Said’s work, for all its importance,

is filled with facts, and if the word “many” will be used

about errors, let “exceedingly many” be used about

facts. Among the most important of those facts is one

which Said courageously broached: Orientalism had a

political role. For all that, “error is valuable and good”, as R. G. Collingwood famously observed.

Samir Saad

Amman, Jordan

Mrs Cameron - not least when she helped coordinate Christmas dances for the young in St Andrew’s Church, Leeds - was a skilled writer but we did know how strict she could be if we failed to meet her high standards of etiquette and decorum.

At a Christmas dance in 1963, dressed in an oversized dinner suit and squarly patent leather shoes, I was making a complete hash of a dance with my partner. As I was stumbling around the floor, I could see that Mrs Cameron was becoming increasingly impatient. When we passed to where she was standing, she blew up. Dressed in silks and beaded dress with beads, she stammered some “stop”, so we stopped and she made it clear I had to show respect for my dance partner. I thought I was doing just that.

Bruce Ross-Smith

Headdington

An early atheist

In her review of Godless Fictions in the Eighteenth Century by James Bryant Reeves (February 12), Albin Shell writes that the author “tells us that for some reasons he was described ashe-

ists in England before the 1780s”. It may be helpful to enquire into the life of the Reverend Sir James Stonehouse (1716-85). Stonehouse studied at St John’s College, Oxford (1732), where as an undergraduate he wrote a pamphlet against religion, which was to become a classic edition. (Unlike Shelley, he was not sent down for this.) He came to Northam

pton in 1743 and underwent a profound religious conversion. Stonehouse was the major force behind the establishment of Northampton

ian Infirmary (opened 1744), now the Northampton General Hospital. He was ordained in 1749, later becoming Rector of Cheverell Parva in Wiltshire. From “A Friendly Let-

ter to a Patient” (1743) to the end of his life, he wrote extensively on reli-

gious matters.

Andrew N. Williams

Northampton General Hospital

Heterogeny

Nathaniel Hawthorne did not coin the term “heterogeny” in 1868 (N. J. Stanghellini in A History of Crap Brook: the West by Andy A. Wolsomon, February 12). Haw-

thorne died in 1865, and his use of the term in notebooks goes back to 1859. Heterogeny” in his biological term was used before 1868.

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The Whitsun Weddings

I was interested to read Andrew Michael Hurley’s reflections on teaching Larkin’s The Whitsun Wed-

dings (May 26). He was teaching it to some A-level students in a very multi-ethnic part of London. It is an excellent set text, accessible and thought-provoking: I was impressed by their engagement from the first. Then Hurley made the slightest mistake of showing them A. N. Wil-

son’s The Book of Return to Larkindale: once they were more biographically informed, some students were a bit less sympathetic to the book. In Hurley’s observations, there is nothing clearly offensive in the poems (though one student found “Essential Beauty” misogynis-

tic). Hurley was correct in saying that it was a critique of misogynistic ad-

vertising). This raises a fascinating point about Larkin: his poetry is an original, sometimes radical, voice. In some of his very best poems (“Deceptions”, “Faith Healing”), he empathizes with female passivity, even in sexual terms. It seems that when he was not writing poetry he increasingly wanted to make up for this, and show that he was one of the jocks, even one of the bigots.

Theo Hobson

London NW10

Proscribed words

Simon Everett’s letter about using the term “Jewish people” rather than “Jews” and “enrolled people” rather than “slaves” when teaching his students is a model of old-

fashioned, and admirable, liberal sensitivity (Letters, March 5). Ever-

ett finishes his letter in a similarly tolerant vein by suggesting that it might be “difficult to achieve a con-

scientious” on the better words so used in such cases. But what strikes me about this is that a teacher should use language he judges to be resonant of, if not approved of, by those most of us would approve, but that his thoughtfulness is the gentle begin-

ning of a journey to a less gentle compulsion by those less liberal than he. How long before “slave” and “Jew” are added to correct society’s proscription list? I suspect that they might already be on it.

David Harris

Poole, Dorset

Elizabeth Bowen

Patricia Craig (February 26) describes how she, Elizabeth Bowen lived from 1925 to 1935 and again from 1960 to 1965, as in Oxfordshire. Partially true. When Bowen moved to Old Headington in 1925 she was an Oxfordshire district but in 1929 became part of Oxford. As someone who spent his teens in Headington the 1960s, I have vivid memories of Bowen’s

CHARLEROI, BELGIUM
A people’s history and the horror of war:
Howard Zinn meets Apocalypse Now. Political autobiography. March 1972, about to graduate from NYU. A journey: two days and nights in the New York subway. Love it or leave it. A decision: become a Great Academic Marxist; blow up the Williamsburg Bridge; go into exile. Vietnam Veterans with placards, for and against the war. Seven placard-men at the seven gates of Thebes, brandishing their shields.

A decision. Political or personal? Or pure Zen?
Mind or no-mind? Kill for peace! Dylan, Hendrix, or the Fugs. The two Suzukis, or Dogen. Monk and Coltrane! The relation between Hegel’s logic of thinking as such and his logic of practice, which does not exist. The screech of the subway stops. A fork where three roads cross, the realm of shadows, what is to be done? A Chinese menu? Stab it! Stab it with your fork!

But what I, myself, decide is not the point. The point is the question of ‘what a decision is and what making a decision means.’ The answer is ‘never stop asking.’ Ask yourself. Ask FDR, JFK, LBJ, or a Vietnam War veteran of your choice. Ask Nixon, Kissinger—Trump! Never mind Trump! Biden just ‘decided’ to unite the country! A decision. Foe is friend! Ye great decision-makers, have you ever asked yourselves what a decision is and what making a decision means? That is the question. *The Empty Shield* asks it. Repeatedly, repetitiously, abysally, and, possibly, once and for all.
Making it look easy

The crisp, measured essays of Vivian Gornick

CLAIRE LOWDON

TAKING A LONG LOOK

Essays on culture, literature, and feminism in our time

VIVIAN GORNICK


I n 1920, when Vivian Gornick’s mother was eighteen years old, she regularly received letters from an unhappily married older colleague called Mr Levinson. “Often he ended by telling my mother that he was now going down to the corner to mail this letter so that she would read it at eight in the morning before they met an hour later at work.” Back then, there were five mail deliveries a day in New York.

Reading Vivian Gornick often feels like watching someone paint: you’re not sure, at first, what it’s going to be, but you’re happy to follow her brushstrokes as the picture emerges. In “On letter writing”, the essay that gives us this glimpse of her mother as a desired young woman, Gornick teases out a surprising, delicate meditation contrasting the letter with the telephone call. Rather than crudely arguing that one is superior to the other, or fretting about the pace of change, Gornick places each mode of expression in its own shifting temporal context.

It’s a decision now to write a letter whereas when I was a girl it was a way of life. It’s a decision to pick up the phone as well - I must deliver on the promise made with ease and regularity.

Given the alternative between making a call and writing a letter I’d have to conclude that I prefer the call because that is what I opt for nine times out of ten. But I don’t prefer it. It is simply what I do. It is what everyone does: the habitual response of the world I find myself in, that which does not require an active will.

This is Gornick’s USP: her ability to stand back and look at the world in which she finds herself, and then set it down calmly on paper. Luckily for us, she’s been doing so for more than half a century. Gornick is now eighty-five, which means you can dip into Essays in Feminism (1978) and eavesdrop on a Women’s Lib group in the heart of second-wave feminism. Or you can pick up her exquisite memoir, Fierce Attachments (1987): watch her walk the streets of her beloved Manhattan with her difficult, ageing mother, while recalling her childhood in a crowded Bronx tenement - “a building full of women ... Shrewd, volatile, unlettered, they performed on a Dreiserian scale”. Gornick’s mother was devoted to the twin gods of Communism and Romantic Love; after her husband’s sudden early death, she took up mourning professionally. “Widowhood provided Mama with a higher form of being.” “On letter writing”, meanwhile, appeared in an essay collection, Approaching Eye Level, in 1996. Already the essay is a window onto a vanished world: that brief period when the phone had displaced the letter, but email (the current path of least resistance) was yet to come. Yet it doesn’t feel dated, because Gornick is so temporally nimble. Her great subject is the way meaning changes over time. A letter in 1918 is not the same as a letter in 1950 or 1996. This is also true of Communism, feminism, marriage, love ...

The End of The Novel of Love (1997; reissued last year by Picador) is an elegant collection of critical essays arguing that romantic love as a literary metaphor for success and self-understanding is no longer valid. The essays themselves each focus on a single writer, many of them lesser-known figures such as Kate Chopin and Grace Paley. Gornick’s metric is simple yet exacting: a writer should respond to the world in which they find themselves. “In great novels”, she says, “we always feel that the writer, at the time of the writing, knows as much as anyone around can know, and is striving to make sense of what is perceived somewhere in the nervous endings if not yet in clarified consciousness. When a novel gives us less than many of us know – and is content with what is being given – we have middlebrow writing. Such writing – however intelligent its author, however excellent its prose – is closer to the sentimental than to the real.

Gornick thinks deeply about each text in its own time. She never crassly dismisses the past, but fits each work into its own context, then links those contexts up so that we might see where we have come from, and maybe even where we’re going.

The title of her new collection, then, is a perfect fit. Taking a Long Look is a retrospective, with essays on literature, culture and feminism from the 1970s to the present day. They are arranged in reverse-chronological order, so that the last essay - “Towards a Definition of the Female Sensibility” - is the earliest. In it, Gornick reviews books by Joan Didion, Anne Roiphe, Lois Gould and Margarett Drabble, and finds all of them wanting. She is persuasive and tough, but she takes longer to make her case than she does in more recent work. Gornick’s later style is crisper, marked by an authority that comes from having read and re-read a vast amount. She makes it look easy, but it isn’t. You can write a perfectly decent essay focusing only on the book or writer under review. Gornick repeatedly goes further, looks longer, risks more. For example, a piece from 2004, on the writer Lore Segal, begins with this bold summary of the American immigrant novel:

Only rarely do these novels have a life beyond the one given them on publication day. Even when well written, they are, all too often, claustrophobically enclosed by a tale of survival beyond which America remains an abstraction ... Yet the genre is a resilient one. To read an immigrant novel of, say, 1910, one conceives in social realism and sentiment, as contrasted with one written fifty years later, in the wake of Modernism and the Holocaust, is to see how stubbornly it has kept itself alive - and every now and then has produced a piece of work that burns the bounds of its own conventions.

A significant pleasure is the pithy, chatty biographical detail Gornick provides for her subjects. On Alfred Kazin - “Until the very end [he] was haunted by the conviction that someplace a marvellous party was going on to which he had not been invited” - Many of her subjects are writers and thinkers you’d have heard of but will be glad to learn more about, especially when the guide is so entertaining.

There are two “New York Stories” from the early 2000s in the retrospective, neither as tightly memorable as the life-writing in Fierce Attachments. In general, in this category, I’d rather re-read Gornick’s contemporary Dorothy Gallagher’s two wonderful books of memoir-essays, Strangers in the House (2006) and How I Came Into My Inheritance (2001). The two women share some biographical details: New Yorkers of Jewish, Communist, Ukrainian origin, writing out the city, disillusionment in love, living alone, learning to write. Gallagher’s New York is rendered more vividly. She is also much funnier.

In the critical essays, the broad gaze does entail a privileging of content over form. Gornick illustrates her essays with ample quotation, but she rarely takes a close look at sentences. In her own prose, description of the physical world is serviceable but seldom inspired. There are some unfortunate repetitions – “rag doll” is used a lot for limp female forms, and too often (we’re talking double figures) something leaves Gornick with “the taste of iron” in her mouth.

I didn’t know Gornick’s work before reading for this review. Encountering it has left me enlivened and educated. My desk is covered in reading lists. When Zadie Smith or Martin Amis or Jonathan Franzen publishes a new collection of essays, it’s big news - yet there’s comparatively less fanfare for someone who has made a career their life’s work. “I berate myself tremendously for not having written all that I think I should have written, and not having written more important books”, Gornick told The New Yorker last year. I can’t agree. Her wide-ranging oeuvre is one of sustained attention, a daily practice, accretive, full of precious, hard-won insights.

Alfred Kazin: “The value of a critic can be defined by the extent to which he remembers that he is a reader and by his cleverness and passion in applying that remembrance to the service of his readers”. By that standard, Vivian Gornick deserves to be much more widely read.
A story not heard

How a daughter tried to ignore a mother’s tragic memoir

Nicola Shulman

THE SECRET LIFE OF DOROTHY SOAMES
A foundling’s story
JUSTINE COWAN

THERE ARE TWO WAYS of keeping a secret: don’t tell, or don’t listen. In the case of so-called “secret lives” — long, arduous deceptions like the second family in Aylesbury, the other job that brings in money and makes the phone ring at odd times of day — secrecy becomes a shared responsibility, reliant on the people around you not really wanting to know. The strangest thing about The Secret Life of Dorothy Soames is that it wants to be the tale of a story not told, but it’s really an egregious example of a story not heard.

Justine Cowan, who has written it, grew up in a lovely house in a prosperous district of San Francisco, where she lived with her sister and her two parents. Her father was a “real gentleman,” a “brilliant and honourable” lawyer in the mould of Atticus Finch: “a man whose vote was not for sale,” and who was accordingly beloved. For as long as she can remember, Cowan had hated her mother, Eileen. Eileen was given to mysterious rages and fault-finding, always on the alert for a crunch from the eggshells that, her daughter felt, sprang up liberally in her wake. Justine grew to loathe her life of privilege, which seemed to her of a piece with her mother’s social aspirations, her “blind idolatry of wealth and status”, her relentless good taste and checklist of social shibboleths, the aggravating way she harped on her “posh” upbringing in an upper-class British family. She kept her British accent and tried to inflict it on her daughter. “It’s not bad d-d-er,” she would mock, drawing out the “d”, her face rumbled with disdain. “Say it again, but properly this time.” As Cowan grew to maturity, she realized that the further she was from her mother, the better she felt. A lawyer, like her father, she took posts in distant states. Then she instituted a rule of taking telephone calls from home only on Sundays. Back in California, Eileen began to lose the language she’d been so picky about. After a while, she died.

Five years later, Cowan found herself inexplicably drawn to finding out more about her mother. She’d known Eileen was illegitimate, but had felt that the atmosphere at home did not encourage enquires. “My mother had a secret”, she writes. “She guarded it fiercely, keeping it under lock and key.” Now, with her mother dead and safely beyond any feelings of gratification that might ensue from this sudden interest, Cowan set herself to uncovering the truth. She found that, as a lawyer, she possessed the skills for it: “Digging for gold amongst dusty files and combing through volumes in search of empirical evidence was second nature to me.”

Be that as it may, she could have saved herself the detective work if she had not decided to ignore the fact that, for years, her mother had been making frantic efforts to share her secret with a daughter thousands of miles away who never answered the phone. Resorts to the postal service, Eileen then wrote to Justine saying she wanted to tell her “about (my) life as a foundling”. Cowan registered the word as unusual, “but it soon slipped my mind as I tucked my mother’s letter under a stack of unopened mail”. Next through Cowan’s distant letter-box came Eileen’s memoir of her childhood, unambiguously entitled “Coram Girl”. Cowan put it away unread. Clearly, the thing under lock and key isn’t Eileen’s secret: it’s her daughter Justine, who has retreated behind a bolted door with her fingers in her ears. “I didn’t want to know her secrets”, she writes. “I feared that knowing the truth would give her a power over me that I couldn’t bear.” What does she mean? That any intelligence requiring sympathy for Eileen would collapse the framework of her own emotional life. If her mother had a tragic past, she would win at what Cowan saw as the one game left to her — to be top in the victimhood rank- ings. Her noble father was not beyond exercising the same rights when Cowan asked him why he’d never protected her and always sided with his wife, she hissed, “I had it worse”.

As things were, fragments of her mother’s story did have to be extracted from the archives of the Foundling Hospital in London, where her mother had indeed been raised under the name Dorothy Soames. The sad correspondence Cowan obtained told her how Eileen came to be there. She had been born, between the wars, to a young woman called Lena Weston, who lived with her brother on his farm in Shropshire, and a man she met in a café in a local market town. When her pregnancy became apparent, her brother kicked her out; and her sole remaining option was to apply for the child to be taken in by the Foundling, or Coram Hospital in London, established for “The Maintenance and Education of Exposed and Deserted children” in 1739. The process was long and fraught with insult, as each mother had to prove herself against the standing presumption that she was a woman of bad character. The conditions of success were equally harsh: the mother must resign all rights to her child and agree never to contact her again.

From here, Eileen/Dorothy’s memoir took over. The Hospital placed its baby charges with foster parents, paid to raise them out of infancy and then, at five, to return them to the Institution. Dorothy’s foster parents weren’t so great, but they were a lot better than what followed. She had the misfortune to be a ward at a time which, as a much later director of the hospital admitted to Eileen, “seems to have been the nadir of the Foundling Hospital”. It drew its female staff from the eternal spinsters of the First World War: lonely, angry women who perhaps saw and resented, even in these most wretched of little girls, the chance for future love and marriage that for them would never come again. This may also explain the persistent emphasis on placing them in domestic service, where such prospects would be limited, at a time when demand for domestic servants was on the wane. “I suspect”, Eileen wrote in her elegant and beautifully constructed narrative, “that the staff was chosen selectively, able to turn us into the unquestioning, obedient servants we were destined to become. It is clear to me now that the entire system was designed to prevent opportunities for us to deviate from our destinies.”

The regime was brutal, and seems more so to Cowan who, as a girl brought up in 1960s California, has no real concept of British institutional life in which to locate it. The daily routine of “Get up. Get dressed. Line Up. Brush. March. Pray. Eat. Poop. March” would be familiar to any pupil of an elite boarding preparatory school in those years, as would the spit, the random punishment and the singing-out of individual children for extra savagery. You sometimes wish Cowan had taken a crash course in school report writing, as so she could know that the inspection of morning stools and the scarcely named “crocodile formation” where children walk in twos, were not, as she believes, barbarisms unique to the Foundling Hospital. This matters because her failure to discriminate detracts from those things that were, such as the way all instruction was devised to make the children feel apologetic for being alive. Such as the enforced silence, the stony crossings of playtime to discourage friendship and alliances. And then, there was no going home. To deprive a child who has no home of the means to find a friend is a refinement of cruelty.

This is a double story: Eileen’s and her daughter’s. As Cowan feels her way along it, she makes an impressive attempt to record her own responses, even in unambiguous. To understand all is not, here, quite to forgive all, but you sense she is relieved, in the end, to be able to feel some compassion for her herself and to learn it was not unkindness that made her unfounded. And there is also the matter of the Foundling Hospital, operating at its supposed “nadir” — or did it just get caught doing business as usual? It’s a museum now, closed like many others. There’s some material, some secondary material to make one think it has been anything other than a lucky break for the children it received. When it reopens, one wonders if the giftshop will be stocking this book.
Unbearable lightness
Essays that trade in image rather than argument

BECCA ROTHFELD

LET ME TELL YOU WHAT I MEAN
JOAN DIDION

I have always struggled to articulate why Joan Didion, patron saint of female essayists, leaves me cold. No one could deny that she is a crisp stylist, or that she is dry and droolly hilarious, or that her prose is somehow remote and vivid at once. As Hilton Als puts it in his deft introduction to her new collection of essays, her non-fiction has “the metaphorical power of great fiction”. She writes, for instance, that inside a Las Vegas hotel it is “perpetually cold and carpeted and no perceptible time of day or night”; that sitters in Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs have “skin like marble, faces like masques”. Each sentence paints a concise yet telling portrait. “Style is character”, runs the oft-quoted Didion adage. Not much unites the twelve pieces in Let Me Tell You What I Mean, which treat everything from underground newspapers to a reunion for Second World War veterans, except their glossy style - and the fact that they have all gone previously uncollected. Originally published over the span of Didion’s prolific career, the first in 1968 and the last in 2000, they appear chronologically but could be rearranged into thematic clusters: a somewhat self-important cluster about the art of writing; a cluster of canny essays in reportage, clawing at the smooth façades of power, and including a quietly scathing profile of Nancy Reagan and an unexpectedly sympathetic homage to Martha Stewart; and a miscellany, including a moving reminiscence about a dead friend and an excellent meditation on Ernest Hemingway.

Didion is, by her own admission, not much of a philosopher. “I am not an intellectual, which is not to say that when I hear the word ‘intellectual’ I reach for my gun, but only to say that I do not think in abstracts”, she confesses in a short piece titled “Why I Write”. Its informal sequel is “Telling Stories”, an essay about what Didion is, namely a keen observer. The piece can be tediously personal - Didion reproduces rejections she received from various magazines for a full five pages - but it also sheds light on her method and, ultimately, on her strengths. It treats her formative years at Vogue, where she wrote captions for photographs and learnt that “less was more, smooth was better, and absolute precision essential”.

By far the most successful essays in Let Me Tell You What I Mean are, in effect, captions that serve to invoke their attendant pictures. Didion is not an analytic but a visual writer, trading in image and insinuation more than argument. Her withering register works best when she is attacking naive mythologies, as in her profile of Nancy Reagan, who has “the beginning actress’s habit of investing even the most casual lines with a good deal of [her] dramatic emphasis”. Of William Randolph Hearst’s famously extravagant mansion, she writes that it is “exactly the castle a child would build, if a child had $220 million and could spend $40 million of it on a castle”.

Didion’s studious aloofness is less suited to moral instruction, and she flounders when she attempts to dispense advice or muster sympathy for those who lack poise or composure. In “Getting Serenity”, she scorns gambling addicts for their reliance on the bromides of self-help, rebuking them for speaking as if they hail from “some subverbal swamp”. But they are more concerned to battle their illness than they are to compose captions that would satisfy the exacting staff of Vogue, and it is not their responsibility to offer eloquent accounts of themselves to a judgemental journalist. In “On Being Unchosen by the College of One’s Choice”, she displays similar callousness, scolding teenage hopefuls for placing too much stock in acceptance without any thought for the real, material advantages that certain name-brands confer.

But whether Didion is at her sharp best or her haughty worst, her touch is light - not superficial so much as glassy, free of density and effusion. She reports that the main thing she learnt at Vogue - to value prose that was clean and bracing - was a “tonic, particularly to someone who had labored for years under the delusion that to set two sentences side by side was to risk having the result compared widely and unfavorably to The Golden Bowl”. One reason Didion leaves me cold, I suppose, is that I continue to prefer something heavier, which is to say that I still labour under this delusion.
Our man on the Twitter

How not to be a foreign correspondent

LOUIS AMIS

UNPRESIDENTED

Politics, pandemics and the race that Trumped all others

JON SOPEL

368pp. BBC Books. £20.

What is the point, really, in 2021, of a British journalist in the United States? With no language barrier to straddle, and all the cultural cross-pollination of the internet — including access to the work of the US’s own, better-funded and more knowledgeable journalists — what are these interlopers to add to the picture? Perhaps they are simply in the task of narrowly and focused investigations. When Jon Sopel, the BBC’s North America Editor since 2014, was called on for the first time by the Biden administration’s press secretary, he challenged her on the whereabouts of the White House’s bust of Winston Churchill.

As a reporter-at-large, however, a foreign correspondent who has some advantages in such a forum, he observes with “fresh” and more impartial eyes. There is also something more tangible (and a little less clichéd), which is that foreign reporters can wear the mantle of the presumed neutral outsider: it is something the information-gathering process itself, in a way that domestic journalists, in a country mired in hyper-partisanship and paranoia, no longer can. No news organization has the kind of credibility inside the US, and especially its hinterland, that the BBC has. This constitutes an opportunity to make an original contribution, however marginal, to the host society’s understanding of itself — to the benefit of audiences everywhere.

On the evidence of his latest book, Unpresidented: Politics, pandemics and the race that Trumped all others, Sopel has missed that opportunity. The author is primarily a broadcaster, as well as a member of the White House press pool, that bubble within the DC bubble. During the Trump years, this has been a difficult, even traumatizing work. But it is hard to accept how little attention the book, which is presented as an “election diary”, pays to the views, voices and lives of the voters who have decided the election in question. Throughout, Sopel shares his assumptions about the thoughts and feelings of such groupings as “the African American community”, “the Hispanic population” and, above all, white, middle-class Americans. But actual, ordinary Americans appear in individuated form only on about fifteen of these pages. We find “one man” and “a woman” with kids, whose views they deliver around one remark each. Meanwhile, Sopel attends dinner parties given by five different US and foreign ambassadors — events he describes in considerable detail.

Sopel no doubt sees lingering in the vestiges of power as his main service to the public, but it is not as though he breaks any news there. His two high-profile interviews are with former officials who each left office more than a year previously. It seems that, for journalists like Sopel, news isn’t really something you just turn up at: it is something that “comes” or “drops”, when your “phone lights up”. “A new factoid has emerged which is getting a lot of traction”, he writes in a typical moment. News becomes something you go out to perform — “by doing a live”, or a “stand-up”, or a “two-way”. At best, this involves speeding into an unfamiliar district; finding, as quickly as possible, the type of person you were expecting to find there (e.g. “for a piece we want to do on disaffected Trump voters”); and then speeding away in possession of soundbites.

Sopel’s excursions into history are equally brief and rare, as are his discussions of policy. After mid-March 2020, around a quarter of all the diary entries refer to tweets sent by Donald Trump: “You have to give it to Trump — when it comes to inventing on Twitter, boy, can he deliver”. Apparently, the point of a British journalist in the US is to relay viral controversies, and embrace and enable the reality TV/official govt. game (“All I can say is that Season 2 is nothing like as much fun as Season 1”). There is no sense in this book of what Trump means for the country, besides his being a boorish loudmouth who wears a big f-ck in the media. If a reporter’s “diary” is to contain some little trace of real life, it could at least include some of the self-evaluation that all pundits of US politics should have been carrying out since 2016. Jon Sopel newsletters readers might be out of luck with this.

But a media that doesn’t listen with interest and empathy to ordinary citizens cannot hold or win back their trust, or understand what is coming next. 

LADY Hubbard is the author of the novels The Talented Ribbins, 2017, and The Rib King, published earlier this year. She lives in New Orleans.

TBIography & Memoirs

Three Mothers is a biography of the primary caregivers and first teachers of three of the most important Black male figures of the US Civil Rights Era. It is also a confrontation with shame.

In presenting the stories of Alberta King, Louise Little and Berdis Baldwin, Anna Malika Tubbs emphasizes how little attention has been paid to these lives. She sees the lack of interest as part of a more general and persistent disregard for mothers, itself a manifestation of the racial and gender violence that had such a deep impact on each woman.

The broader implications of this disregard are in some ways most apparent in the case of Louise Little, because her confrontation with violence was so direct, its consequences so unequivocal. Louise was born to a Black mother in Grenada in 1897, and because of her “nearly white” complexion, was rumoured to have been the product of rape by a white man. After emigrating to Montreal at the age of twenty, Louise became an influential member of Marcus Garvey’s United Negro Improvement Association, serving as a reporter for the UNIA journal, the Negro World. It was through her work with the organization that she met the Georgia-born Earl Little. When the two married in 1919, she moved to the US Midwest and committed herself to the life of a field organizer in a country that was not only foreign but hostile. In 1931, after numerous confrontations with white supremacists who resented their Garveyite message of Black pride and self-determination, Earl was killed by a bullet in suspect circumstances. Louise, aged thirty-four, became the sole support of eight children.

Tubbs constructs a vivid portrait of Louise’s struggle to maintain her family, as well as her determination to ensure that her children knew their worth in a society intent on its denial:

When the Little came home from school, Louise would reteach them what they had been taught by their white teachers. She made sure they knew how Black people were standing up for their rights not only in the United States but also around the world. Louise was always ready to serve, she was confident with twenty children. In part on her history of “maladjustment”, “paranoia” and “claims that she has been discriminated against.” Despite her children’s efforts to secure release, she was confined for twenty years.

Malcolm X’s autobiography begins with a description of Louise, alone, confronting members of the KKK while pregnant with him, yet the influence of Garveyism is still evident in the book. The book is a dissertation on the pattern of disregard that plays out in many biographical accounts of all three sons’ early development. As Tubbs observes, when “Malcolm X was assassinated, when Martin Luther King Jr., was killed shortly after, and even when James Baldwin died from stomach cancer years later ... their fathers were mentioned, while their mothers were largely erased”.

The implications of this absence are felt throughout Three Mothers. Tubbs frequently acknowledges that details about particular passages in the women’s lives cannot be known because they were not deemed worthy of record. In an attempt to better understand her subjects’ choices, or lack thereof, Tubbs’s focus often shifts on reflections on the impact of longing and sexism on the lives of Black women more broadly. Alberta King’s upbringing in Atlanta, Georgia, for example, is fleshed out by descriptions of the pressures brought to bear on the Black elite and the work of organizations such as the National Association of Colored Women, “made up of prominent women whose motto was ‘Lifting as We Climb’. As a young girl from a well-educated family, Alberta would have been too all aware of the need to always be polished and well-spoken in order to combat demeaning representations of her people”. These wide-angle shots are important if we are to fully appreciate the significance of individual experiences. But at times the shifts in focus are distracting, the women’s specific identities lost in generalizations that threaten to replicate the pattern of erasure Tubbs’s attempt to reject.

As a group, the three mothers had many things in common, but they were also, clearly, very different women. In bringing together these stories — of Louise’s passionate pursuit of sanitary conditions for immigrant struggling to survive in the Midwest; of Alberta, the product of the precarious Black southern middle class; and of Berdis, a poetic and sensitive woman who chose to raise her children in Harlem — Tubbs sees a powerful opportunity to reflect on the complexity of the Black experience in the US and the pervasive yet diverse impacts of racism and sexism. As Tubbs observes, “We can’t ignore history. We can’t ignore our history.” Tubbs is quick to point out the unique implications of the Black women’s education and the fact that they were not solely engaged in domestic work.

Evaluating the book in terms of its potential to empower Black mothers and Black girls, Tubbs might be optimistic. The book is a reminder of how deeply the unique strategies Black mothers devise in order to survive prejudice can contribute to the work and world views of their equally unique children. 

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Class and the Cold War
Spies in search of a cause

IAN BURUMA
THE HAPPY TRAITOR
Spies, lies and exile in Russia: The extraordinary story of George Blake
SIMON KUPER

KIM AND JIM
Philly and Angleton: Friends and enemies in the Cold War
MICHAEL HOLZMAN
342pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £20.

The “Cambridge Spies” are a bit like the Bloomsbury Group. They never cease to fascinate a large audience of classes, especially in England, and for many of the same reasons. A love of gossip keeps the cult alive of Bloomsbury and the Cambridge Five (Burgess, Maclean, Philby, Blunt and Cairncross), and gossip has a lot to do with class: who belongs, who doesn’t, who does what to whom, and who harbours the guilty secrets. It surely is not for nothing that the double agents we remember (and still gossip about) went to public schools. The ones who didn’t, such as George Blake, have received far less attention.

Concealment is an essential part of the cult. Who can belong, and who will be blackballed, is a vital question in clubland, almost always dealt with in the greatest secrecy. The reason upper-class traitors are still of such interest is that we want to understand why they did it. They were never blackballed, after all. So why did these men who were valued, if sometimes eccentric, members of the club, betray their fellows?

A common answer is that they may have seemed to be bona fide members, but were in fact misfits, because they were gay, or secret Communists, or hated their fathers. The late George Blake (the died last year), the subject of Simon Kuper’s absorbing book, was not only not upper-class, but rather foreign to boot. His mother was Dutch, and his father, although a British citizen, was a Jew from Constanti-
nople, named Albert Behar. George, nicknamed “Freck” as a child, later Anglicized his family name, Blake was treated harshly after his exposure as a Soviet agent in 1963. Unlike the more chubbable “Kim” Philby, he was not offered immunity in exchange for a confession. He was convicted under the Officials Act and sentenced to forty-two years in prison. Even Harold Macmillan found this a “savage sentence”. Luckily for Blake, he escaped from Wormwood Scrubs in 1966.

Kuper quotes Chapman Pincher on why Blake was treated so severely: “Officers of both MI5 and MI6 … have told me that he was ‘a real outsider, greatly disliked by his colleagues’”, and that this was the reason why there were no internal moves to save him from prosecution”. John le Carré, that great connoisseur of British class consciousness, dis-
liked Philby precisely because he was “born inside the fortress” and undermined it from within, while he sympathized with Blake who had been “in the wastes of foreign and ethnic disadvantage” and “guilty of length” not “acceptance”. Le Carré himself always felt like a misfit in the club. The son of a commoner, he liked to say that he spent his lifetime “pretending to be a gentleman”.

When asked why they became communists, the Cambridge spies invariably brought up their anti-
socialism in the 1930s. When they were students, the communists seemed to be the only serious oppo-
nents of the fascist scourge then sweeping across Europe. Anthony Blunt, looking back at his career much later, summed it up more cynically as “cow-
boys and Indians”. Michael Holzman, in his book on Philby and his friend and later enemy, the CIA counter-intelligence chief James Jesus Angleton, comes up with a slightly different angle, one that explains the behaviour of many activists, whether they become double agents or not.

Class is far from absent in US society, but it is more fluid than in Britain. The Angletons jumped up in one generation from being nobodies in rural Illinois to the polygot opulence of life in an Italian palazzo. But “Jim” was a mistfit, too, dreaming of poetry, moving to and fro from Italy to the US, and looking for “some sort of myth” to give sense to his life. He dabbled in the fascist fancies of Ezra Pound’s poems as he studied literary theory at Yale. Then, in the course of the Second World War, he found his myth, in London, as the American prot-
ege of Kim Philby. He now had a cause to fight for. He said that once he met Philby, “the world of intelligence that had once interested me consumed me.”

It was the Cold War that really consumed him, however, which is why he took Philby’s betrayal of British and American secrets so personally. He had learnt all he knew from his English “friend” and would spend the rest of his life trying to repair the damage which he saw as “Kim’s work”. Angleton is usually portrayed as a drunken paranoid, whose obsessive searching for “moles” was more destruc-
tive than the secrets exposed. One fresh aspect of Holzman’s rather dense and plodding book is a more positive assessment of the man. He believes that Angleton had good reason to be obsessive and his zeal did more good than bad.

What was George Blake’s myth? As was true of all people of his generation, of all classes, his life was shaped by the war, during which he discovered his adventurous spirit as a young member of the Dutch resistance. Later, when he served as an officer for the SIS in the Korean war, he had a conversion. He was supposed to be fighting for the rather brutal South Korean government, but he saw this Western ally as a bunch of fascists. Their leftist opponent in the South seemed to him like the wartime Dutch resistance. And after being captured by the North Koreans, he went the whole hog. If he was going to die, he thought, it would have to be for a cause he could believe in. Communism was his new faith.

Blake, in Kuper’s telling, did not become a Soviet spy for the thrill of it, or because of the Nazi menace, which no longer existed, and certainly not for the money, but as a true believer. He always was the believing type. Kuper makes much of Blake’s maternal Calvinist roots. Even living in Moscow, where he taught Soviet agents his craft, Blake still decorated his flat with Russian Orthodox icons. “Communism”, he once said, “is the same as Christian-" Even living in Moscow, where he taught Soviet agents his craft, Blake decorated his flat with Russian Orthodox icons.

Kuper spoke to Blake at length in an attempt to figure him out. He concludes that Blake’s Dutch upbringing was more important than his feelings about Britain, which were affectionate but rather detached. Oddly for a double agent, Blake found it hard to lie. Philby did not confess to his investiga-
tors at MI5 when he was suspected in 1951. Blake, in a similar situation, found he could not hide his commitment to the Communist cause.

Kuper thinks that the Calvinist insistence of pro-
fessing one’s belief explains Blake’s confession. A Dutch-educated friend of Kuper’s told him about protestant resistance fighters who would spill the beans to the Gestapo “because their faith would not allow them to lie.” I wonder. Having one’s fingernails ripped out made me think it had more to do with something else. Christianity certainly illustrates the common phenomenon of believers who can change from one faith to another without losing any of their zeal.

One thing all the British spies had in common, once they were forced to settle in Moscow, was a refusal to repudiate their faith in the Soviet Union. It would have destroyed “the myth” that held their lives together. And yet, as Blake makes clear to Kuper, they were all disillusioned by the dreary, decrepit, oppressive country they had dedicated their lives to. Some managed this better than others. Philby never learnt to speak Russian, drank heavily, and combed late copies of The Times for the cricket scores. Maclean assimilated into Soviet society more successfully. Blake seems to have adapted best of all. A fluent speaker of Russian, a man without a country but with profound beliefs, he was relatively content with his Russian wife and his dacha. Despite Simon Kuper’s best efforts to draw him out, he still comes across as a bit of an earnest bore.

The Cambridge Five are more colourful. Blake doesn’t quite make it into the Bloomsbury/Cam-
bridge cult. In An Englishman Abroad, the wonderful biography written by Alan Bennett and directed by John Schlesinger, Guy Burgess (Alan Bates), the most flamboyant of the lot, is asked what he misses most about England. “The gossip”, he replies, “I miss the gossip.”
Unlikely coup
A tale often told - not always accurately
RODERICK BAILEY
THE LOCKHART PLOT
Love, betrayal, assassination and counter-
revolution in Lenin's Russia
JONATHAN SCHNEER

On a warm Moscow evening in August 1918, twenty-eight-year-old Fanny Kaplan, an embittered and hard-bitten revolutionary who felt that Bolshevism had betrayed the socialist cause, gunned down Lenin as he left a factory meet-
ing. One bullet went through his neck and a lung. Another lodged in his shoulder. The Bolshevik leader survived, though the wounds possibly con-
tributed to the strokes that eventually killed him six years later.

What died almost instantly was a conspiracy among French, British American agents and diplomats, in collaboration with anti-Bolshevik Rus-
sians, to overthrow the fledgling communist regime and re-harness Russia to the Allied side in the First World War.

The plot, in essence, went something like this: coordinated with British landings in Russia's northern ports, Latvian soldiers and Russian counter-
revolutionaries aided by a 40,000-strong legion of Czech ex-prisoners of war would move quickly against the Bolshevists, liquidating their leaders and installing a new government ready to return to fight-
germany.

The planning was as amaturish as it was ambitious. As Jonathan Schneer recounts in his new narrative The Lockhart Plot, the Cheka - the early incar-
nation of the Soviet secret police - was well informed about what was afoot, and very well placed to crush it. One trump card was that its care-
fully placed agents included the very Latvian offi-
cers whom the conspirators considered key to a successful coup. Other advantages included the planners' over-confidence that bribery and force would be enough to deliver. Precipitated by Fanny Kaplan's failed attempt on Lenin's life, which, as likely as not, had nothing to do with the plot, the Cheka efficiently extinguished the conspiracy with a rapid roundup of its principal protagonists. One of them, the British naval attaché in Petrograd, died in a shoot-out in the Embassy.

The Lockhart Plot - so-called for the role the British agent Captain Robert Lockhart played in it - is a story that journalists, propagandists, historians and one-time participants have told and retold for a century. Schneer's technique is to tell it through the experiences of a wide cast of contemporary characters concerned intimately with what took place. Principal among these is Lockhart, a File-
berg adventurer of undoubted talents undermined by vanity and a touch of self-importance, as Schneer deftly plays off the situation demanded. We also get a selection of Lockhart's British and American co-conspirators as well as his Russian lover, Moura von Bencken-dorff. A refreshing blend of character and story, as the perspectives with those of senior Bolsheviks charged with countering subversion.

It is a pity that the French - decisive architects of the plot - are so little in Schneer's telling of it. To the extent that one wonders what future researchers might find in French archives, apparently untouched by him, to add to the tale.

Certainly some details of the plot remain impossible to unpack, as Schneer acknowledges. For example: the timing to which Western governments encour-
aged those who did the plotting and the extent to which the Cheka controlled Moura von Bencken-
dorff. As is often the way with histories of under-
ground work, available records of the time are thin. So long as relevant Russian archives stay closed to outsiders, many are likely to stay that way.

For decades this has left space for lurid conspiracy theo-
risers, which, in turn, goes some way to explaining why the episode has for so long attracted so much attention.

Schneer's solution to the enduring problem of missing facts is to present his audience with a range of possible interpretations of each opaque turn of the tale. While the novelty that he claims for this approach may make some historians of the same events bristle, a more serious effect of his com-
manding concern for thoroughness is the impression left on the reader of the distinct unlikeliness of the plot ever succeeding.

This is a problem purely because it is so at odds with the author's closing comments and the book's breathtaking jacket-blurb. Lockhart "nearly achieved world-shaking results", Schneer tells us. "One of the great "what if?" of Twentieth-century history", declares the publisher. "At stake: the fate of the Russian Revolution", offers a back-cover quotation from Marc Mulholland. But it is hard to credit the plot to such paltry, and with the author's own words, it was prepared so haplessly and with such little feel-
ing for the Bolsheviks' popular appeal, at a time - summer 1918 - when Western enthusiasm for con-
fronting communism was high, and Russia looked back into the war was waning fast. We are left, then, with a well-researched and well-written reminder of the pitfalls and bear-traps that governments can encounter when attempting, clandestinely, to inter-
fere in other countries' affairs. A lingering sense of regret that this is not the main message that the book seeks to put across.

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History of violence
The Communist terror apparatus
KIERAN WILLIAMS
SECURITY EMPIRE
The secret police in communist Eastern Europe
MOLLY PUCCI
382pp. Yale University Press. £45.

The secret police were vital components of communist regimes yet are surprisingly dif-
cult to write about. In many ways they were anything but secret, engaging as they did in a kind of public relations campaign to mythologize their exploits and create the illusion of omnipresence. They themselves controlled the information needed to assess their own performance and - particularly in the regimes' final days - they routinely shredded files to deprive the authorities of any evidence of what they had been up to. They were chaff, detailing the bureaucratic minutiae of institutions that could just as easily be ministries of agriculture or industry. In short, there is a very real danger that studies of the secret police will be dull.

To avoid this, we need to find ways to work with the services' materials but not let them drive the narrative. In My Life as a Spy (2018), the anthropolo-
gist Katherine Verdery powerfully deconstructed the file amassed on her by Romania's Securitate, but single case studies leave us wondering how repres-
sentative they are of operations in general. Molly Pucci's Security Empire overcomes this problem by using groundbreaking archival research to compare the postwar origins of the communist security services in Poland, Czechoslovakia and East Germany. Like Verdery, Pucci bases her on the human beings who worked within the whirling kaleidoscope of directorates, asking not only how violence impacted society but also how it impacted those who carried it out. For the smaller-scale (male and women) who joined, it is a matter of "who they were and who they became while in the service".

Contextual differences aside, the three countries faced a common challenge: figuring out who could be trusted to make society more orderly, and how those officers could themselves be made more orderly. In the early days, joining a secret police or becoming an infrigner was often the result of harshness of the Stalinist purges and professional opportunism. Pucci graphically reports the wildness of the first security officers, such as one in Poland who was found fabricating reports, sleeping and drinking on the job, and requi-
sitioning the apartment of someone he was supposed to arrest. With warrants and alcohol easily hard to hand, random shootings, revenge killings and looting quickly followed. Over the next decade, the services underwent a process of professionalization, as it was understood at the time, they shifted to plans and quotas, built up internal networks in factories and factories, and discouraged protest or dissent through "phytophylactic" methods such as pulling someone aside for a cautionary chat, perhaps with the help of a manager's wife. In the wake of the war, the secret police became intimately bound to the command economy.

By the mid-1950s, the aims and methods of the three countries' secret services had converged under the tutelage of Soviet "advisers" who periodically disrupted local conditions to keep everyone on their toes, battling, as they did, against intellectuals, and faction against faction. East European officers had always used force, especially in those parts of Poland that were essentially war zones under the Nazis, but Pucci instructed them in what he calls "a standardized system of violence based on battle-tested methods of interrogations, torture, and psychological pressure". At the same time, East European communists adopted each other on, with Hungary's show trial of its foreign minister László Rajk in 1949 providing a template that could be applied across the bloc. The system of surveillance and punishment by which the regimes disciplined their unruly societies was in fact diffuse and cannot be simply traced to Moscow.

As the Soviet bloc underwent abrupt course changes in the late 1940s and 1950s, the secret police were arrested and brutalized after 1949 by ruthless new recruits, some of whom would in turn be scapegoated for the excesses of Stalinism during Nikita Krushchev's Thaw, while others would serve until quiet retirement decades later.

If such switchbacks of fate seemed bewildering at the time, they also make for overwhelming reading. Fortunately, Molly Pucci's conclusion provides an astute perspective on the longer-term legacy of the secret police in their countries. In the years after the wars end, Pucci notes, the secret police required time, perhaps years, to achieve their goals. Even when the services were acting with the full backing of the state, their work was not enough to break the back of the state, but rather to set the stage for a cascade of reforms. Instead, they go looking for other targets to justify the expense and expense of their organization. As many communists learned, it can be very hard to switch off terror once it has been set in motion.
WHAT IS AVAXHOME?
AVAXHOME - the biggest Internet portal, providing you various content: brand new books, trending movies, fresh magazines, hot games, recent software, latest music releases.

Unlimited satisfaction one low price
Cheap constant access to piping hot media
Protect your downloads from Big brother
Safer, than torrent-trackers

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All languages
Brand new content
One site

AVXLIVE ICU
AvaxHome - Your End Place

We have everything for all of your needs. Just open https://avxlive.icu
Greetings and warnings from the north

The relationship of people to the land in the Arctic - and how it is under threat

Nancy Campbell

In what was due to be the final week of Arctic Culture and Climate at the British Museum, a news item appeared in the Barents Observer, the global significance of which was almost lost amid coverage of the pandemic. A Russian icebreaker had made the first transit of the Northern Sea Route between China and Yamal in February, confirming that there was no multi-year ice left on these waters. The ice, which historically cut off the circumpolar regions of Greenland, Canada, Alaska, Russia and parts of Scandinavia from European shipping, and imperilled explorers who sought passage through these seas, forms not a barrier but a bridge for indigenous peoples, who have made warm and hospitable homelands out of this ecosystem for over 30,000 years. The sea ice represents nourishment, shelter and connection for the 4 million people who inhabit the Arctic today.

Some of these contemporary polar voices could be heard in Arctic, which its lead curators, Jago Cooper and Amber Lincoln, described as a “collaboration” with hunters, herders, scholars, political advisers, seamstresses and storytellers in the north. While commercial shipping may benefit from the loss of sea ice, the museum has partnered with organizations addressing the human consequences, such as the Inuit Circumpolar Council, and the Erosion and Site Expansion Coalition in Shishmaref, Alaska, where unprecedented storms are eroding coastlines and destroying homes. Thresholds are important in the circumpolar north; the doorway, rarely locked, is the place to shout a greeting or a warning. Arriving at the Sainsbury Gallery from the museum’s rotunda, that microcosm of the globe, visitors found themselves in a small circular gallery reminiscent of other architectures - the snow iglu of the Inuit or the reindeer-hide chum of the Nenets. The floor was covered in a map, with the North Pole at the centre, not at the “remote” edge where those from elsewhere too often perceive it to be.

I visited in November, the day before the museum closed for lockdown, and the map was obscured by the footwear of warmly-dressed visitors. Their bodies were mirrored in the vitrines by those of mannequins that modelled clothing from the Sami, Inuit, Chukchi and other ethnic groups of the circumpolar north. A heavy cloak of reindeer skin decorated with iron and copper plates, imbued with spirits for assistance and protection; this, and a reindeer-skin drum belonged to a shaman of the Evenk of Central Siberia (the term is from Evenkii samdun, “one who knows”). From the ancestral homelands of the Gwich’in in the taiga forests of North America, comes a caribou-hide summer outfit, fringed with porcupine quills. A pair of snow goggles from Russia, a band of reindeer skin to cover the eyes, with a narrow incision to see through. These were worn on long journeys in the hope that they would be enough to prevent the sun’s glare from damaging the retina and causing snow blindness.

The lighting shifted continuously through the spectrum of polar twilight from indigo to lavender, and tinted a sloping ice-white dais which ran the length of the main gallery and on which were displayed the kayaks, sleds and skidoos that traverse the region’s vast expanses. At the furthest point, or horizon, stood what might be taken for a cairn. The inuksuk is “a voiceless land marker”, an enigmatic stone figure which identifies a place of cultural significance, or a seasonal hunting or fishing area. This “Silent Messenger” was commissioned for the show as a means of connecting London and the Arctic. The artist Pita Inuqit (b. 1947) knows “what kind of an inuksuk it’s going to be” by listening to the stone, whether basalt from his home in Repulse Bay, Nunavut, or (in this case) pale ragnstequarried in Kent. The empathy with materials from the land, seen in the work of Inuqit, is historically evident in artefacts from the sea: walrus ivory and relic whalebone. In a place of sparse materials, all parts of the animal were employed in innovative and sophisticated ways, making everything from kayaks to drums to buckets to boots to fishing lines. A series of four snug rooms, in which installations were constructed with elements of rusted metal and weathered wood, nested off the edge of the main gallery like temporary dwellings on the ice shelf. In one, the dim lighting shone golden through a vast nineteenth-century sail sewn entirely from translucent gut-skin, brittle as a chrysalis. An exquisite Yupik bag over a century old is patched together from salmon skin, with caribou throat fur embroidery, and details of seal-oosaghagi skin. The people who made these valuable and beautiful artefacts believed they had an obligation to use the animal in a respectful manner, making the most of the gift of its life. A reindeer’s foot becomes a spoon, birch bark and reindeer fur combine to form a saddlebag, a small sealskin transforms into a map on which the vast outline of the Bering Strait has been painted. In a self-referential touch that underscores the cycle of materials, in the centre of the yellowed skin a man is standing, harpooning a seal at its breathing hole. A three-masted ship is also visible, making this map a record of Europeans coming to the region in the 1850s and 1860s.

The long history of encounter was introduced with sixteenth-century colour lithographs depicting Martin Frobisher’s violence towards Inuit people (titled “Englishmen in a skirmish with eskimos”) in the pursuit for land and gold for Elizabeth I. More recently, printmaking has emerged as a deeply political medium in the north, in the graphic work of artists such as Annie Pootoogook (1969-2016) whose deadpan and candid representations of contemporary life in Cape Dorset, Nunavut, fire painkillers, domestic violence, supermarkets and TV shows. During the 1950s and 60s, Arctic Peoples in Canada were placed in administrative villages; Pootoogook’s “Interior and Exterior” (2003) recalls her impressions of growing up in a modest pre-fabricated dwelling in the settlement of Kinngait. Conventions like running water and electricity made life easier, but loss of life on the land and generations of colonial rule have caused widespread addiction and depression. Pootoogook responded to this complex legacy by depicting kitchen cabinets and snowmobiles in the luminous rose and blue tones more commonly associated with polar skies and ice. These colours still shine out, in a more idealistic vision of Arctic life, from Bryan Adams’s (b. 1985) monumental lightbox photographs from the series “I am Inuit”, which depict the continuation of traditional activities like tomcod fishing and the preparation of mumtuk, frozen whale skin and blubber. The traditional cycle of seasons is presented in the circumpolar lithograph “Nunavut Qanaruntuk” (“Our beautiful land”, 1990) by Kenjojuash Ashvak, in which tiny

Oh boy! That messed everything up!
The Inupiat Elder Delano Bar says …
‘It’s still summertime in October’

Nancy Campbell’s most recent book is The Library of Ice: Readings from a cold climate, 2018
Reggae culture at its peak

A portrait of a vibrant, troubled Kingston in the 1970s

IAN THOMSON

ROCKERS

The making of reggae’s most iconic film

TED BAFALOKOS

JAMAICAN POPULAR MUSIC would not have flourished in the 1960s and 70s without the presence of Studio One. Situated on Kingston’s Brentford Road, the recording studio was set up in 1963 by Clement “Sir Coxsone” Dodd, the Jamaican jazz enthusiast who took his nickname from the Yorkshire cricketer Alec Coxon. From his soundproofed rooms with their limeoolo doors, Sir Coxson (sometimes spelled “Coxon” or “Coxson”) helped to launch the careers of, among others, Desmond Dekker, Alton Ellis, the organist Jackie Mittoo and the late Toots Hibbert of the Maytals. Studio One was the foundation label of Jamaican reggae.

No film did more to advertise the Studio One sound than _The Harder They Come_. Jamaica’s first (and still finest) home-grown film, it was released in 1972 with the reggae singer Jimmy Cliff in the role of the country boy Ivan Martin, who becomes a Robin Hood-like outlaw among the ganja-yards and urban alleys of downtown Kingston. The film’s director Perry Henzell, a white Jamaican who had been kicked out of the music school in England, was self-confessedly influenced by the gritty “news- reed” school of Italian neo-realism ( _Bicycle Thieves_, _Openness_), which aimed for a documentary immediacy off the street. The soundtrack, assembled by Henzell in under a week, effectively introduced reggae to white college audiences abroad. Without the soundtrack album, it is fair to say, reggae would not have taken hold outside Jamaica in the way it did. Fashionable dinner parties in mid-1970s Britain often had a Studio One musical accompaniment in the Maytals’ “Pressure Drop”, Desmond Dekker’s “007 (Shanty Town)” and other hits from the soundtrack. Henzell’s film paved the way for Bob Marley’s success in Britain soon after.

Theodosor “Ted” Bafaloukos, a New York-based photographer, screenwriter and director, was so impressed by _The Harder They Come_ when he saw it in New York in the 1970s that he decided to make a reggae film of his own. _Rockers_ premiered at the San Francisco Film Festival in 1978. Filmed in Jamaica at a time of murderous gang warfare and political upheaval, Bafaloukos’s film was originally intended to be a documentary, but it soon became a full-length feature that starred a number of well-known reggae singers and musicians, among them the drummer Leroy “Horsemouth” Wallace, Winston Rodney of Burning Spear, Gregory Isaacs, Big Youth and Jacob Miller. In the spirit of neo-realism, no professional actors were used. Made on a budget of $250,000, _Rockers_ showed reggae culture at its peak before DJ-based dancehall music (the digitalized reggae that Jamaicans sometimes call “raggae”) introduced computerized keyboards and pre-set drum machines.

A diehard “reggaeophile”, Bafaloukos first visited Jamaica in 1975 in his capacity as photographer. “Something was going on in Jamaica”, he writes in _Rockers: The making of reggae’s most iconic film_. “I wanted to know. I wanted to go there and see for myself”. The book contains previously unseen photographs taken by Bafaloukos in both Jamaica and New York’s Jamaican quarters. The accompanying text, a hybrid of reportage and memoir, was written by Bafaloukos in 2005. In 2016, at the age of seventy, Bafaloukos died. Fortunately the typescript found its way to the French reggae historian Seb Carayol, who urged publication. From start to finish, _Rockers_ is engaged with its warm good humour and razor-sharp observation. A fine writer, Bafaloukos introduces us to the Kingston melodica-player Augustus Pablo, whose great studio album _King Tubby Meets Rockers Uptown_ (1970) provided Babaloukos with a title for his film. In pages of vivid prose, Bafaloukos describes the petrol-fumed traffic of Kingston and the zinc-fenced shanties downtown, where Rastafarians preached an Afro-centric politics of redemption and the wickedness of the white man.

With its righteous spirituality, 1970s reggae offered hope of deliverance to poor, “downpressed” Jamaicans and encouraged a generation of British-born black West Indians to confront a part of their heritage - Africa - that their parents had often shunned. With his adored Leica camera (“a small black miracle of German engineering”), Bafaloukos photographed revivalist Baptist preachers, Kingston market women, and nattily-dressed youths in their trailers and roadside cafés. He called on Bob Marley at his Kingston home on Hope Road, where a group of hangers-on accused him of being a CIA spy and reduced him to tears of frustration. Steel-helmeted soldiers seem to patrol the police borders lines downtown. Only music had the power to “unite” the Jamaican people, Bafaloukos seems to be saying. The incantatory qualities of the engineer-producer King Tubby’s dub reggae (“The bass, mixing out, is like a lazy jazzy swing”), was made famous by Bafaloukos photographed the little wood shacks and shops selling reggae vinyl along Kingston’s Orange Street, while the city’s torrid, hothouse decay overwhemed. This is an altogether fascinating book.

**Reggae culture at its peak**

A portrait of a vibrant, troubled Kingston in the 1970s

**IAN THOMSON**

**ROCKERS**

The making of reggae’s most iconic film

**TED BAFALOKOS**
Goodbye Kampala
Tales of moving on, in - and from - Uganda

JEROME BOYD MAUNSELL

THE FIRST WOMAN
JENNIFER NANSUBUGA MAKUMBI

KOLOLO HILL
NEEMA SHAH

WE ARE ALL BIRDS OF UGANDA
HAFTA ZAYYAN

THE FIRST Woman - Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi's second novel - opens in Uganda in the 1970s. In the small village of Natterta in Bugere county, on the wall of a shop, there is only one picture of President Idi Amin on display, surveying the sacks of dried beans, rice and flour, the pancakes and samosas on the counter. "Recently, women had stopped cutting it when they came to buy things, because walls had grown ears," Amin has been in power for several years, since the military coup in 1971. Makumbi's main character, Kirabo, is twelve at the outset, and motherless. She doesn't even know her mother's name. In Natterta, she is brought up by her grandparents and, less so, by her young, slightly errant father, Tom, who works for the Coffee Marketing Board in Kampala. Whenever she asks who her mother is, the family denies all knowledge "in that never-mind way of large families". But Kirabo's curiosity grows and grows, as she uncovers ever more of what becomes an intricate web of half-concealed family history. Over time, the little circulation suggestions in the village initially provide much of her information, alongside her visits to the village witch, Nsuta.

Where Makumbi's first novel, Kintu (TLS, Febru-
ary 23, 2018) crossed several centuries in its retell-
ings of Ugandan myth and folklore, reaching back to 1750, the time span in The First Woman is tighter - though a long, wonderful late-middle section emerges from Kirabo's life to the story of her grand-
parents and Nsuta in the 1930s and 1940s, which gives the reader a glimpse of pre-Christian traditions (and polygamy) in rural Uganda. As in Kintu, a supplementary cast list comes in very handy as the relationships proliferate. But the essential point of view remains that of Kirabo, as we follow her through her teenage years into the 1980s. Early on, she falls for a boy, Sio, before she has to leave Natterta for Kampala to live with her father. There she discovers that Tom has two other, younger children. Her stepmother is extremely unwelcom-
ing. "In Kampala, a child belonged in her parents' home. The way she saw things, she could never have a home in that sense." Kirabo is packed off to a girls' boarding school, several hours drive from the capital.

The First Woman feels more joyful and intimate than Kintu; Makumbi revels in the female perspective of this unusual, richly detailed coming-of-age story. In Natterta, Nsuta tells Kirabo about the myths of "the first woman". Women were once "huge, strong, bold, loud, proud, brave, independent. But it was too much for the world and they got rid of it". "We began to persecute our original state out of ourselves." She also warns Kirabo about kwetuma, "when oppressed people turn on each other or on themselves and bite": "the day you catch your man with another woman, you will go for the woman and not him". Makumbi twists the motif of "the first woman" as the novel continues. At board-
ing school, Kirabo learns from Sister Ambrose that "the first woman lawyer, doctor, the first woman minister, the first woman pilot in Uganda were old girls. When she said the school would produce the first woman president of Uganda, everyone laughed". Yet in another twist, the novel's love plots turn on which of two women was the first, and most important, in a man's affections.

Amin's regime creeps in around the edges. By Christmas 1978, even with Kirabo sheltered away at boarding school, political matters encroach more explicitly, with some of her classmates' families going "on the run", and with "the prevalent disappearance and murders of fathers". Sio's father is among the disappeared, though "no one mentioned the word abduction". As the story moves through Uganda's war with Tanzania, and the change of regime after Amin is ousted in 1979, Makumbi keeps it all in the background; we only witness things unravelling as Kirabo does, incompletely. All the same, the massacre of so many Ugandans under Amin, when "houses became deathtraps at night", still haunts these pages.

In Neema Shah's debut novel, Kololo Hill, Amin's expulsion of Ugandan Asians in 1972 is pivotal. The loss of home, on this account, is brutally institution-
ized by political decree. Shah closely depicts a small family unit of Ugandan Asians: the married couple Asha and Pran, Pran's brother Vijay and Jaya, the boys' mother, who came to Uganda from Gujarat. Pran and Vijay work in the family "dukan", or general store. They all live in Kampala, in the enclave of Kololo Hill, where fortune is almost topo-
graphically stratified:

Your place on the hill was directly connected to your wealth, with the richest at the very top. Below them all, the poorest Asians lived in cramped old apartment blocks and crumbling basements, and at the foot of the hill were the cement blocks and corrugated-iron roofs where many of the black Ugandans lived.

As the novel opens, Amin's soldiers are a constant presence in the streets, accompanied by the sound of night-time gunfire.

Jerome Boyd Maunsell is the author of Susan Sontag, 2014, and Portraits from Life: Modernist novelists and autobiography, 2018

novel unfolds. Pran, without a British passport, plans to go to India separately. In 1970s England, the odd uprooted trio, striped of nearly all their possessions in their exodus, try to assimilate, settling in a North London far from the “magnolia trees, the white houses and terracotta rooftops” of their former home. Here they find another divided society, seared by different faultlines of race and wealth. Kololo Hill asks some hard questions about identity, society and belonging, both in the Ugandan and British contexts, and Shah writes in clear and direct prose that is nonetheless full of subtle moral ambiguities.

Another debut, Hafta Zayyan’s We Are All Birds of Uganda, the winning book of the first G dispatched to Canada, Europe, and Australia, is the son of East African Asians: his father came to Leicester from Uganda as a twelve-year-old in the early 1970s. Sameer’s parents have prospered in Britain, running a chain of restaurants called Kampala Nights. His own trajectory has propelled him from grammar school to Cambridge, then into “one of the top law firms in the world”. But his life is marked by an emptiness and social anomic - not quite loneliness - which Zayyan conveys very well, along with his sense of the constraints of family security and his ambivalence towards his Muslim upbringing. For all Sameer’s academic success, his parents do not expect him to help with the family business. But Sameer, offered an attractive position in Singapore by the law firm, is torn, wishing that “his decisions - London or Singapore, Leicester or London, lawyer or businessman - did not have to feel like sacrifices”.

Zayyan alternates chapters about Sameer with an apologetic thread that tells his father’s account of Kirabo’s grandparents’ in The First Woman, takes us into Uganda’s deeper past, helping to reframe the novel’s more contemporary events. Beginning in 1945, Hafta writes letters to his now-dead first wife Amira, on his second wedding night. Like Pran and Vijay in Kololo Hill, he runs a “dukan” in Kampala - in this case a shop and tailoring service. Saeed and Sona. His father came to East Africa from Gujarat in the early 1900s, but Hasan was born in Uganda and has never been to India. His inter-
weaving letters sweep forwards through the 1950s and 1960s, telling of his time as a student and later a teacher in Kampala, and of his life with his wife in the United States. Make them read each other’s letters. In the second half, Sameer decides to visit Kampala, but not to go to Singapore. Guided by Google Maps, he walks to his family’s old house in the capital. We are left with a full circle - a conclusion that is in some ways extremely satisfying, though it does leave many matters somewhat frustratingly unresolved. Sameer, in Kampala, feels almost like a stranger repeating mistakes in “a country to which he doesn’t belong”. Familial and political betrayals and affinities from years ago still resonate, never quite forgotten, in this thematically bold, fresh and thought-provoking novel, which nevertheless provides a glimpse of hope for the future. *
Sow, reap, destroy
A tangled past disturbs the idyll of rural life

ALICE JOLLY

We tend to agree that the aftermath of trauma often cannot adequately be explained by words, but what, then, can the literature of trauma achieve its effects? This question is central to the work of Georgina Harding. Her new novel Harvest concludes a cycle of three books which started with The Gun Room (2016) and was followed by Land of the Living (TLS, November 23, 2018).

All three books focus on the same family, and circle around the same central events, but there is no consistent chronology and they do not need to be read in order. This latest one takes place on a Norfolk farm in the 1970s. Richard runs the place with his widowed mother Claire. His younger brother Jonathan has been working as a war photographer in Vietnam. When Jonathan returns to the farm he brings his Japanese girlfriend with him.

Initially, the girl’s visit seems to reanimate the sleepy life on the farm, andCapacity and the truth of what she herself “had ever been so free” but soon the girl’s presence reopens unhealed wounds. Although this rural life may appear idyllic, “the petals spill and begin to rot even in the bud”. The power of a tangled past is suggested by “the anaemic whiteness of the scenes drawn up endlessly from deep underground”.

Questions are opened up about the boys’ father, Charlie, who is “still present in all of them”. Claire remembers his husband as “a man who did not speak” and is mystified that he could have “sown and not stayed to see his seeds grow”. Charlie was once a prisoner of war and Claire has allowed herself “to blame it on the Jew’s effort, but she admits that there was always “some silent weight in him... ugly and intractable”.

Claire is beautifully drawn in her permanent, peaceful bemusement. Other continents, cultures and characters cannot be imagined by her; gender is a bridge that can never be crossed. As children, her sons would say, “Don’t listen, Mummy, these are boys’ things; think you think more than the boys do.” Even the seasons are gendered: Summer doesn’t birt. It was theirs, the men’s. Claire feels that it is her role to say “trivial kinds of things which required no answer”. Such talk is “a kind of oil a woman offered... that smoothed the days”. She worries that “there is nothing at the end to show for it but only what hadn’t happened, the frictions and breakages that had never occurred”.

As the harvest draws closer, vivid descriptions of landscape illuminate the troubled family dynamics. Claire’s domain is the garden, which she created in the difficult early years of her marriage. “Bounded by the hedges which she herself had planted” she is shielded from “the wide empty space beyond”. But the farm is ruled by the silent and watchful Richard. While Claire tenderly picks her roses, the advance of modern farming techniques come to seem “like a kind of violence”. As a boy, Richard protested about the selling of his father’s herd, but soon he is pulling down the old cart shed and ripping up hedges. “A farmer could not afford to be sentimental about his land.”

Jonathan initially seems to bring light and life to this brooding, silent world but, like his father, he is inhabited by the endless restlessness of those who have laid claim to it. The limits of his own craft also trouble him. He worries that photographs only capture surfaces, “never who we are”. He is both critical of Richard and envious. “There was something so solid, real, about Richard and his work.” To Jonathan, Richard’s world is glorious in its simplicity. “He saw what he saw, a plain world, he didn’t have anything hidden.” But Jonathan has failed to understand something crucial. Richard’s awareness that a “steady man is not always steady”.

Harvest is an old-fashioned novel in the best possible sense - small, intricate, quiet in its dramas, its revelations partial. The reader must evacuate rather than secure, taking them as they fall and seeking for certainty. The rewards are many. The heartbeat of the book continues to echo long after the last page has been turned.

A mother’s lies
A novelist with a keen eye for how things fall apart

KATE MCLAUGHLIN

UNSETTLED GROUND
CLAIRE FULLER

Parents lie. They tell small lies and big lies - sometimes so big that a grown-up child’s entire life can turn out to have been based on a falsehood. Parents also go missing. Some die, some walk away without explanation, and their absences, too, are lies of a kind that have a malevolent influence on their children’s futures. Parental lies, absences and manipulation are Claire Fuller’s specialty. In her first novel, Our Endless Numbered Days (2015), a survivalist father convinces his young daughter that the entire world has been destroyed, except for the patch in the suburban forest in which he forces her to live with him for nine years. In her latest, Unsettled Ground, a mother’s lies keep her children at home until they are in their twenties, fettered by the myths she fed them.

Fuller’s novels are ambitious. Making those nine years in the forest credible was a technical challenge that she brought off with extraordinary vividness. Unsettled Ground takes on other singular existences with equal adroitness. The fifty-one-year-old twins Julius and Jeanie Seeder still live with their mother Dot in a rundown Wiltshire cottage, growing their own vegetables and playing folk music together. Their father Frank was killed in a tractor accident when they were twelve, and they believe the supplier of the tractor, the cottage’s owner Spencer Rawson, to be responsible for his death because the vehicle’s hitch-pins turned out to be faulty. Their mother, understanding, came to an arrangement with Rawson to allow them to live in the cottage rent-free in exchange for not bringing legal action against him. Dot’s death in the first chapter requires all this to be revisited.

As in her other novels, Fuller explores what founding myths look like from other perspectives. Her understanding of the stories we tell ourselves in order to keep going, of the details we see but refuse to look at, allows her to produce complex, layered fictions that teach readers to be wary. Here, the treacheries of telling upon a novel that makes the texture of poverty and homelessness palpable. If you can’t read and can’t drive and can’t afford a taxi and the volunteer driver from the hospital-visiting charity can’t do afternoons, what do you do when the doctor can only discuss your comatose brother’s case after lunch? If you can’t charge your mobile phone when you’re working as a temporary milkman because everyone’s got their eye on you, how do you phone for help when local louts come round threatening? We watch Jeanie in the village shop deliberating between buying washing-up liquid and toilet paper because she only has enough money for one of them, and plumping for the former because it does for soap, detergent and shampoo and you can always use old newspaper for the latter.

A sculptor by training, Fuller has a keen eye for how things fall apart. Ruinous living is a theme in all her novels: there is the forest cabin in Our Endless Numbered Days, the swimming pavilion in Swimming Lessons (TLS, May 5, 2017), the crumbling old man in Bitter Orange (2018). In Unsettled Ground there is the ramshackle cottage, but even this appears palatial once Jeanie and Julius have been forced to move to a dilapidated caravan. Here are horrors: the workman’s glove left in the sink that looks like a cheesed-out hand, the “four tiny pink creatures” that fall out of a splitting cushion, gobbled up in an instant by the dog. These derelict dwellings are not romanticized. Julius and Jeanie are cold, scarred and uncomfortable. But rumination is also the scene of patching up, as Fuller’s characters deploy their skills of brushing, mending, sewing and painting. The same goes for parental manipulation. In Unsettled Ground, it is only when the big lie is revealed that renovation can commence.

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The man who let the genie out

Richard Burton's radical, 'unciastrated' version of the Thousand and One Nights

RICHARD VAN LEEUWEN

I
n his intricate novel, Kafka on the Shore, Haruki Murakami has his hero Kafka ponder his experiences with the Thousand and One Nights: "Burton's version has all the stories I remember reading as a child, but they're longer, with more episodes and plot twists, and so much more absorbing that it's hard to believe they're the same. They're full of obscure, violent, sexual, basically outrageous scenes. Like the genie in the bottle they have this sort of vital, living sense of play, of freedom, that common sense can't keep bottled up... Slowly, like a movie fadeout, the real world evaporates. I'm alone, inside the world of the story. My favourite feeling in the world. It is hard not to read this brief meditation as a key statement by Murakami about the novel or perhaps even about his work as a whole. It indicates that the Thousand and One Nights permeates his novel as one of the main intertextual sources, and that there is a remarkable difference between the various translations. As his description of Burton's version shows, there is no such thing as an "innocent" translation. Of course, Richard Burton, who was born in Torquay on March 19, 1821, and died in Trieste in 1892, was a controversial figure throughout his life. As a notorious diplomat, explorer, polyglot, etiologist and social critic, he stirred up trouble wherever he appeared; and although his translation of the Nights was well received by a select audience after it appeared in 1885-8, in sixteen volumes, it was from the outset beset by difficulties. It was published in a limited edition “for subscribers only” by the so-called Kama Shastra Society in Benares, to avoid censorship, and it was immediately banned in the United States. Burton was suspected of having plagiarized the version published by John Payne in 1822-4, a decent and elegant translation in Pre-Raphaelite style, probably based on a German translation. But it was above all Burton's uninhibited fixation on sexuality connected with a kind of primitive nobility among “Orients” which shocked sensitive Victorian minds.

In his procedures as a translator, Burton consciously distanced himself from his predecessors, especially the French translation of Antoine Galland, which appeared between 1704 and 1717, and the English translation by Edward Lane, which appeared between 1833 and 1840, which were both heavily bowdlerized and purged of improprieties. He rejected these translations as “anaemic” and inauthentic; they failed to do justice to the red-blooded “temperament” of the Arabs. His “unciastrated” version would restore the work to its authentic rawness. He aimed to achieve this by accentuating and even extending passages of a potentially erotic purport, and imbuing the Nights with an image of the Arab as a “noble savage”. To support this interpretation, he decided to invent an idiom which would represent the language of the Arabs as if English had been their mother tongue. The result is a strange and often bizarre outburst of archaisms, neologisms, barbarisms, and imitations of Arabic syntax, such as “despite the nose of thee” or “jolliest and joyousiest”, combined with highly expressive synonyms. He also added a story of his own, titled “How Abu Hasan Brake Wind”, and a large apparatus of footnotes and appendices, mostly explaining erotic and anthropological details based on his own observations.

Burton's translation of the Nights has often been discarded as indigestible, obscene, racist or plainly bizarre, but it has always had its staunch admirers, too, and it has never failed to leave its imprint on the world of letters. The first significant author who was intrigued by it was James Joyce, whose work contains many references to the Nights. According to his notebooks, Joyce was reading Burton's translation while he was working on Finnegans Wake, and it seems plausible to surmise that he was especially attracted by Burton's suggestion that the English language could contain a completely different language, which shimmered through it and produced a complex, perhaps sometimes even monstrous hybridity. It is attractive to think that Burton paved the way not only for a new sexual freedom explored by Joyce, as a response to Victorian restrictions, but also for his radical linguistic and stylistic experiment. Another author who greatly appreciated Burton's Nights was Jorge Luis Borges, who in his famous essay “The Translators of the Thousand and One Nights” gave his assessment of the rich tradition of translations of the work. Borges here calls the Nights “the work of a thousand authors” – a kind of free-floating, amorphous cluster of writings – defining the accepted

The interior of the tomb of Sir Richard Francis Burton at St Mary Magdalen Roman Catholic Church, in Mortlake, England

conventions of literature. He praises Burton's version because of its “barbaric colour”, which represents the genuine “ecstatic” tone of the Cairo middle classes in medieval times. He situates the translation in the tradition of Coleridge, De Quincey, Tennyson and Poe, as a semi-original work of literature rather than a translation, and sees its intentional subjectivity as an asset: Burton “recreated” the work to suit his literary ambitions. It was part of a conscious effort to immortalize himself and to create his own legend. Borges honours this legend by attributing a story to him apocryphally, titled “The Mirror of Ink”.

The Nights in general, and Burton's translation more specifically, became foundational to Borges's oeuvre, mainly because it represented the dynamics of literary works as the driving force in the history of human civilization, and a portal to a world of mystery and magic. He was less interested in the erotic aspects of the work, but, inevitably, these did not remain unnoticed. Vladimir Nabokov, for instance, refers to Burton's Nights in his sultry novel Ada, or Ardour (an account of a juvenile, incestuous love affair, which Burton would certainly have relished). Burton's Nights figures here as a source of erotic fantasies, together with his translation of The Perfumed Garden, Shyakh Nafzavi's explicit literary guide to Arabic erotic practices from the fifteenth century. Other references to the Nights and to the Orient more generally add to the sensual overtones of Nabokov's story, and these are, in turn, reinforced by the use of eccentric words and wordplay reminiscent of Burton's linguistic hybridity.

If we look at “the other side”, among Arabic literati we find an ardent admirer of Burton in the Lebanese author Ameen Rihani, who lived for most of his life in the US and was one of the prominent figures of Arabic literature in the diaspora. In the 1930s Rihani wrote a number of essays about the Thousand and One Nights in which he criticized the different translations. He was enchanted by Burton to such an extent that, while reading his Nights, he “felt and often enjoyed the companionship of a mountain stream. [Burton's] scenes, innumerable, evanescent, are somewhat disconcerting, but sequentially and slowly, as he proceeds, and disappointingly, and ironically, he prefers the less “pompous”, but also “less faithful” translation by John Payne. Burton has been the subject of numerous biographical studies, focusing on the question of how he transformed himself into a legend, as he intended, according to Borges. His person and work are still admired and despised, and a publication of his translation of the Nights now would probably be as controversial as it was in the 1880s. Even if the legend of him as an explorer and a social critic does fade away, by wriggling himself into the works of such distinguished authors as Joyce, Borges and Nabokov he has certainly secured an invaluable place in literary history. Allusions to his person, his literary merits and his legacy are not confined to these influential authors, of course. John Barth dreamed of rewriting Burton's translation in the same way as Pierre Menard produced an exact copy of Don Quixote in the famous story by Borges. Unfortunately, Barth's work is only a faint echo of Scherherazade's tales.

Still, all these references to Burton show that his reputation is enduring and multifaceted. If a writer like Salman Rushdie has his protagonist Omar Khayyam comment that “he read Burton's Nights in his youth, immediate and passionate. The book's most important information is an erotic text, free of context and logical connections, unrelated to India's colonial past, British colonial discourses, cultural hybridity, sexual mores, cultural heritage and the intentional manipulation of narrative... There is no legend here, no hero, no heroism. The legend is a hero, episomizing an age full of conflicts and contradictions, and it is to his credit that he succeeded in revealing these contradictions in its full intensity.”

According to his notebooks, Joyce was reading Burton's translation while he was working on Finnegans Wake

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**Sword play, sorcery and sexism**

The literary origins of a widely popular game

**CAMILLE RALPHS**

**APPENDIX N.**

The eldritch roots of Dungeons & Dragons

**PETER BEBERGAL, EDITOR**


There was me, that is Eggs (a gnome with priestly pretensions) and Jon Smith (a boy- adventurer, that is Big Baps (a peg-leged and concupiscent bard), But-Ure Gere (a thick-skulled, "dragonborn" monk) and Seamus the Corker (a belligerent wizard), and we were in the middle of a session of the tabletop game Dungeons & Dragons, trying to stay in our invented roles while working through a tricky situation. Our group’s "Dungeon Master" (the one neutral player who creates each scene and ancillary character) responded to our prayer for portents with embattled patience: "Your attempt to seduce the avatar of Death is unlikely to have a positive outcome." In such moments, his omniscience seems more on-the-go than that of your typical suprahuman being. Might he, in fact, be using a set of wobblily pre-ordained blocks to lay the road of happening as it goes along.

The Dungeon Master is certainly more demigod than deity. He plays the fabulous world after an established gallimaufry of Ideas, embellishing it with his own considerations. As for what he draws on, Gary Gygax gave players in the first edition of the Dungeon Masters Guide (1979), "Appendix N": a list of science fiction and fantasy reading that inspired the game. The resource sadly vanished from later reissues. Recently, however, Peter Bebergal has recollected those materials, and a few extra world-recipes from David Moldvay’s "Inspirational Sources" Fantasy. In Appendix N: The Eldritch roots of Dungeons & Dragons.

In an informative but not overstuffed introduction, Bebergal illuminates how each anthropologist worked intensified the game’s conception. Lin Carter’s "How Sargoth Lay Siege to Zaremm" is a minor masterpiece of setting and device for an era of role-playing consciousness. H. P. Lovecraft’s unhelmed overlords spawned a number of D&D-like games (see also Call of Cthulhu); his The Doom that Came to Sarnath" is included here as a nod to "the bizarre: liches and invisible stalkers, Goetic-like demons and intellect devourers, Cerebral Parasites and Thought Eaters". Poul Anderson’s "The Tale of Hawk", set in a Viking hamlet tormented by a divisive and undead king, demonstrates D&D’s confluence of "historical fantasy". When Jon Smith gives us the requisite "countless tombs and burial sites, decedent nobles, foul sorcerers, desert nomads, and of course, necromancers.” From out of the imagination of C. L. Moore, Gygax might not only have found the elusive blend of sword and spiritual madness, but a heroine named Jidel" to his credit, Gygax did state in the handbooks that player characters could be men or women.

Whether these works can be seen as influential in a purely literary sense is another matter. Lovecraft’s egotistical tentacles are undeniably still felt in contemporary horror and science fiction, and his writing’s uniqueness comes in part from its hammi- ness - how it unpretentiously, unstiltishly hauls ghouls from the human subconscious and marches them across a page. Ramsey Campbell’s "Pit of Winds" has something of this: Ryre, an itinerant wordsman, becomes involved in an altercation with a gang of slavers and is thrown into a charnel-smelling cave of monsters described as "winds ... the blotty white of decay; between their bony fingers, skin fluttered lethargically as drowned sails ... but there was no body to that of ... only the frayed rope of flesh thin as a child’s arm". Each non-body turns out to be a thin mouth; one embeds itself in Ryre’s back and lifts him away, making him fly as it drains the life from him. There is a lot of dissolute "dry earthy flagging" and "leathery fluttering sluggish and restless", and for its imagery too is the best story in the book: the "slow palpil emergence" of the men who drag Ryte to his fate reminds him of "worms dropping from a gap".

Other pieces are more pedestrian. Lockdown insomnia may be drawn to Michael Moorcock’s "Dreaming City", which is so sordid that I fell asleep reading it three nights in a row. Margaret St. Clair offers another reality-fantasy blend with "The Man Who Sold Rope to the Gnolos", which sees a salesman visit the senior gnomes ("a little like a Jerusalem artichoke made of India rubber ... [with] small red eyes which are faceted in the same way that gemstones are"). The salesman realizes too late that "the noble gnomes could not safely be addressed to" any of the four physico-characterological types mentioned in the Manual", and he is shortly carried ... down to the cellar to the fattening pens." This story is one of a couple exemplifying the main appeal of modern D&D: even the world’s situations are darkly comical. In David Madison’s "Tower of Darkness", the two adventurers, Marcus and Diana, debate whether they should return to Shazia:

"And my cousin Beatrice’s whereabouts, and we could have made it if you hadn’t spent half the morning nursing your hangover!"

"You picked out that foul wine, as I recall, and you can tell your fat cousin that if it ever wakes up and finds her in bed with me again, I’ll split her skull!" (NB: the second speaker is Diana.) Since slashing, slashing and bagging swag can now be actioned more realistically in digital games, D&D’s keystone slant has lessened, and an average session is now more akin to an improv skit or exercise in novelistic world-building - like a murder mystery party at the foot of Mt Doom. But melodies and plots are still to be had, often acting as in-game McGuffins. As Fred Saberhagen’s "Song of Swords" suggests, a powerful possession often has power over its possessor ("The sword of wisdom lightens loads / But adds unto their risk"), although good luck can win out ("Who holds coimpinns knows good odds"). Unfortunately, "The Song of Swords" is so syntactically and metrically mangled it is hard to read ("Vengeace Dungeons & Dragons, Vol. 1: Men & magic by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson; and Rules Compendium: An essential Dungeons & Dragons compendium (4th Edition) by James Wyatt"

An average session is now like a murder mystery party at the foot of Mt Doom

is his who casts the blade / Yet he will in the end no trieth see"

Frank Brunner’s "Sword of Dragonus", meanwhile, is difficult for another reason. Many of these stories subscribe to the well-worn virgin-whore dichotomy - either a woman is "intense eyes and careless hair ... the same slim pale bodies" or she is "the bitch-sorceress whose head you have lopped" - but this one, a comic strip packed with feathery beads and whose quill craftsmanship, perished by fumetti of blonkong dialogue, contains a mate and mostly naked woman in chains. At the end, having meted out the captor warlock’s "own brand of justice", Dragonus "claimed his reward" ("his fee", in the final pane). No prizes for guessing what that might be.

Bebergal is aware of this sexist legacy. Rather than bowdlerizing Gygax’s miscellany, he invites the Weird Tales editor Ann Vandermeer to contribute an afterword commenting on this and other exclusionary bêtes noires of the early D&D universe. Much of what takes place there is stereotypical western mar- cultane fantasy - all buxoms, gauntlets and patholo- gically ripping sword-arms. The damsels who claim they don’t want a man are always wrong, and anything exotic is approached with a consumerist-orientalist bent or with outright terror. Vandermeer describes all this as "an unfortunate reflection of the limited social horizons of Gygax’s target audience in the mid-80s, with points out the Wards of the Coast, who currently publish all D&D paraphernalia, have "addressed how they will resolve the errors and mistakes of representation in past books and stories". She also argues that these stories were proposed as merely a set of raw stimuli, for use "in settings so far-reaching and eccentric that anything can be Imagined."

What if the gnomes were non-binary? ... And dare we even imagine if the necromancers from Smith’s story, Mmtmmsor and Sodomas, were more than just allies but partners in life as well?

The book’s inside covers map a dungeon in which there are astral portals, ossuaries, secret doors and glaucous bodies of water, and its sections are titled "Key to Upper Level", "Secret Chamber", "Key to Lower Level" and "Key to Secret Passage". These rooms, these stories, predate the Dungeon Masters who call them up and the capricious player character who shuttle through them. But their contents are as changeable as the players’ wills and circum- stances. Early last year, Seamus the Corker loosed a round of magic missiles at a haywire alchemist and, when asked by our DM what shape they ought to take, suggested a "hard Irish border"; more recently, the missiles have resembled such chthonic entities as "Jordan Peterson" and "a dry cough". More than half of the adventurers in our rag-tag posse are women. The horizons we roll over are very much our own. — Camille Ralphs is Poetry and Religion editor of the TLS
Be kind to the land
The cruelty behind industrial agriculture

BARBARA J. KING
ANIMAL, VEGETABLE, JUNK
A history of food, from sustainable to suicidal
MARK BITTMAN

Thanks to the lure of ultra-processed foods, many populations around the world are “three or four generations into a food system that’s killing us”. That system, run by corporations motivated by global profit, is overseen by “mostly immoral and cruel people”. With statements like these, Mark Bittman pulls no punches in making ardent pleas for a shift in how we grow and market food systemically and for loosening Big Food’s grip on how we eat. He takes us from prehistory’s long period of sustainable hunting-and-gathering through to the development of agriculture, where “real food” was grown to feed families. As population sizes grew, farmers increasingly toiled “not for their benefit or that of their communities, but for a global cash economy”. Today, in a mechanized and consolidated farming system, enormous fields planted with monocultures, such as soybeans or corn, underwrite an industrial agriculture that is cruel to animals, including humans.

Bittman, known for thirty cookbooks and a New York Times column about food, tells this multi-millennial tale in a fresh way. He shows sensitivity to the excessive cost of land and food inequality to oppressed populations throughout history. And, in outlining change-making agroecological work he emphasizes the need for diversity in all aspects, from land to labour. “Agroecology”, he writes, “is hands-down our best bet for changing agriculture’s role from a driver of the greatest problems afflicting humankind to a solution.” Agroecology involves kindness to the land through farming without toxic fertilizers and pesticides; multi-cropping and intercropping rather than persisting in monoculture; and helping pollinators to thrive. It is more than a set of agricultural techniques, though, because it aims to bring about “the empowerment of women and long-exploited people, such as BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of colour], land reform, fair distribution of resources and treatment of labor, affordable food, nutrition and diet, and animal welfare.” As Bittman puts it, dryly, this is “a tall order”; then again, “the alternative is catastrophic”.

Bittman reviews evidence for the sustained exploitation of BIPOC people through the nexus of race, money and power. Examples include the sugar industry in the Americas built on the labour of enslaved Africans, from the sixteenth century; the forced collapse of a whole society of free-farming indige- nous peoples worldwide; and the “coercion and manipulation of poor mothers all across the world” by corporations including Nestlé, which falsified the benefits of sugar-laced baby formulas in breast milk in the second half of the twentieth century. Even today, poorer people are disproportionately targeted with unhealthy foods.

The author’s deep concern about food resistance by non-white individuals and groups, is welcome. The Zero Budget Natural Farming initiative in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh replaces marketable fertilizers and pesticides, such as borax and derris, with those made from waste, and promotes soil health and crop diversity. In Detroit, Michigan, through an alliance of activists and businesses, more than a thousand community gardens and farms thrive, thanks to organizations such as the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, now fifteen years old. “The world’s strongest combination of taxes, marketing restrictions, and [food] bans to date” exists in Chile, where ultra-processed foods aren’t sold in schools or advertised to children aged thirteen or younger. Chile levies an 18 per cent tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. In fact, public health experts advocate broadly for taxes on unhealthy foods and these are catching on; the Navajo Nation in the US levies a 2 per cent tax on all junk foods while waiving any tax on fruits and vegetables.

Massive change in “industrial agriculture’s marriage to high-yield monoculture” is most urgently needed, but so is change at the individual level “for our own health and sanity, to support others doing good work, and even as an example”. To this end, Bittman offers a chart dividing food into three categories. Desirable foods, those to rely on to whatever extent possible, are vegetables, fruits, whole grains, legumes, nuts, seeds and water. Optional foods, those to eat in limited quantities, include meat, dairy, seafood and eggs. Undesirable foods, to avoid as much as possible, include ultra-processed foods and “industrially produced animal products”. Given that the overwhelming number of cows, pigs, chicks and other farm animals consumed are processed industrially, this is a form of balancing of a weak call for change from the author of VB6: Eat vegan before 6:00 to lose weight and restore your health ... for good (2003).

In Animal, Vegetable, Junk, Bittman writes of “tortured cows” and describes the food system as a chief contributor to the climate crisis. Any mantra urging the world to go vegan would be tone-deaf - asking the world’s poor to cut meat and dairy to satisfy a need for ensuring nutritious alternatives is hardly aligned with food justice - but still, Bittman misses an opportunity. His readers, many of whom have ready resources and the luxury of choice, could be told that avoiding meat and dairy is not merely a good idea, but also utterly necessary. The last word of the book’s subtitle is exact: a continued commitment to eating those foods is “suicidal.”

Short change
Revealing the nature and extent of modern slavery

LUCY POPESCU
THE TRUTH ABOUT MODERN SLAVERY
EMILY KENWAY
CIAO OUSMANE
The hidden exploitation of Italy’s migrant workers
HSIAO-HUNG PAI

When discussing those who make the hazardous journey by sea to Europe, a distinction is often made between “refugees” and “economic migrants”, in which the former category is seen as more deserving of support. And yet many “economic migrants” have been forced to seek a better life abroad because of climate change, political instability, corruption or extreme poverty. On arrival, it is often necessary to accept exploitative conditions in order to survive. This happens under our noses every day.

In The Truth About Modern Slavery, Emily Kenway suggests that we are being misled about the nature of the problem in the UK and abroad because of how “slavery” workers are often labelled. The categorization of traffickers has become “a cover for anti-migrant policies and harder borders”. By focusing on trafficking as “a problem of crime and migration”, some see them as “social parasites” who “we simply need to arrest, deport and eradicate”. The “hostile environment”, created in 2012 by the then home secretary, Theresa May, “not only pushes vulnerable people to the margins but also normalizes and promotes soil health and crop diversity. In Detroit, Michigan, through an alliance of activists and businesses, more than a thousand community gardens and farms thrive, thanks to organizations such as the Detroit Black Community Food Security Network, now fifteen years old. “The world’s strongest combination of taxes, marketing restrictions, and [food] bans to date” exists in Chile, where ultra-processed foods aren’t sold in schools or advertised to children aged thirteen or younger. Chile levies an 18 per cent tax on sugar-sweetened beverages. In fact, public health experts advocate broadly for taxes on unhealthy foods and these are catching on; the Navajo Nation in the US levies a 2 per cent tax on all junk foods while waiving any tax on fruits and vegetables.

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Lucy Popescu is the editor of the anthologies A Country of Refuge, 2016, and A Country to Call Home, 2018, about the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees with suitable accommodation. Some have the audacity to frame workers to squat in outhouses lacking basic facilities or a roof. Mostly, workers squat in camps without amenities, in ruins or in disused buildings. They are further exploited by the mafia-controlled gangs that control the work, take a cut and sometimes run off with the earnings. Workers are often forced to buy residence permits, in return for fake employment contracts. The farmers charge workers high daily rates that cover overheads such as the labor and the tax office. The figures Pai notes are breathtaking: “When Mohammed picked twenty-five crates of olives and earned only £75, his employer would make £207.50.”

The failure of the authorities to deal in a humane way with the plight of these essential workers is scrutinized by Pai, as are corrupt officials who run shelters for their own profit and politicians who peddle racist rhetoric and policies. Matteo Salvini, for example, deputy prime minister and minister of the interior from June 2018 to September 2019, predictably blamed conditions in the camps on those who had the misfortune to live there. Pai empha- sizes the racism of many local people, who refuse to rent rooms to Black workers, and documents violence towards both locals and migrants. “When vehicles hit them, usually in the dark, they would turn off the car lights so that no one could see their number plates”.

Popescu highlights the extent of modern slave- ery and what might be done to fight it. Challenging political rhetoric, Kenway makes a convincing case for the need to separate immigration law enforcement from labour inspection and policing and advocates for a “new way of thinking about law and legal migration pathways”. Pai hopes that “self-organisation and activism among African workers” will help to bring about change and, ultimately, the disruption of “racial capitalism.”
Work-life balance

Applying the ‘project view’ to the life of John Stuart Mill

JOHN STUART MILL AND THE MEANING OF LIFE
ELIHU MILLGRAM

What is the Meaning of Life? The question is rarely posed by analytic philosophers - at least in their professional capacity. Until recently, they have tended to view the question with suspicion, surmising that it is guilty of the twin sins of vagueness and egocentrism. After all, what does “meaning” really mean in this context? For many such philosophers, meaning is something words have, not human lives. The problem of the meaning of life is little more than a category mistake, a pseudoquestion arising when language goes on holiday.

And yet, David Wiggins’s classic paper in analytic ethics, “Truth, Invention and the Meaning of Life” (1976), begins with the claim: “Even now, in an age not given to mysticism, there are still people who ask ‘What is the meaning of life?’” Wiggins chastises his philosophical contemporaries for an attitude that not only breeds suspicion of, but also precludes any real engagement with, the question. Rather than rejecting it as senseless, he proposes an answer of his own, arguing that for a life to be meaningful, it must be unified - the things one values in life must ultimately add up to this life itself. Philosophers after Wiggins have developed this notion of unity in the direction of a particular method of unifying a life: that of making one’s life a project. What came to be known as the “project view” held that what gives our lives meaning are the projects we pursue, and that if one of these projects is large enough and central enough, identifying it will be as close as we can come to finding the meaning of one’s life.

It is this “project view” that Elijah Millgram seeks to contest in his new book John Stuart Mill and the Meaning of Life. Millgram’s book is a contribution to the “analytic meaning of life literature,” and promises a new method of pursuing this enquiry: using biography to shed light on a philosophical theory. Millgram suggests that we can assess the project view by examining in detail a particular human life that instantiates it. If even a “best case” of a project life is flawed in some serious way then we will have reason to think that the project view is wrong about what it is to live a meaningful life. Millgram’s thesis is that the great Victorian philosopher John Stuart Mill lived such a life, and that examining what went wrong with it can show us what is wrong with the project view more generally.

Mill’s life was structured around a particularly unfixed and demanding project from its earliest moments, and his commitment to this project, though it may have wavered at times, remained powerful enough to command almost all his energies until his dying day. Millgram argues that although Mill’s project was itself extremely successful (just about everything the Utilitarians campaigned for, from universal franchise to prison reform and freedom of religion, came to be), Mill’s life-as-a-project went very badly indeed: his life was “a train wreck,” characterized by disappointment, regret and self-sabotage. It was a life so bad, Millgram suggests, that “if this is what it is to have a meaningful life, nobody should want one”. The biographical sections are a kind of reductio ad absurdum, using Mill’s life as a refutation of the project view.

One reason that Mill is such an interesting case for the project view is that he did not choose his project, but had it chosen for him. Mill’s father gave him an unconventional education, training him according to the precepts of associationist psychology, teaching him Greek at three and Latin at seven, and forbidding him social contact with children his own age until his early teens. The sections in which Millgram traces Mill’s early life and career in terms of the theory of associationism are some of the most compelling in the book, and much of the subsequent interpretation occurs within this framework.

“Millgram’s book offers us a more humane way of harvesting the intuitions required for ethical theorizing.”

Jonathan Egid is a writer and teacher of philosophy. He is writing a book about the seventeenth-century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob, and the question of whether or not he existed.
Mill worried later in life about the public perception of him as a “manufactured man”, indoctrinated and drilled by his father’s radical Utilitarian sect to become the terrifyingly accomplished and indefatigable intellectual mouthpiece of the movement. Millgram seems to trust this self-assessment, arguing that Mill was “literally made for this project”, and could not but devote all of his energies to furthering a cause he had neither chosen nor had the power to escape. He allows that Mill affirmed his project in an “epiphany”, a moment of revelation he experienced on reading Jeremy Bentham as a teenager, but notes that just a few years later, in the episode Mill referred to in his autobiography as his “Mental Crisis”, he lost this hard-won faith and fell into a deep and prolonged melancholy. At twenty years old Mill found himself questioning the very basis of his project, and thus of his life:

“It occurred to me to put the question directly to myself, “Suppose that all your objects in life were realized; that all the changes in institutions and opinions which you are looking forward to, could be completely effected at this very instant: would this be a great joy and happiness to you?” And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, “No!” At this my heart sank within me: the whole foundation on which my life was constructed fell down.

Given that Mill spent the remainder of his immensely productive life writing such works as On Liberty (1859), Utilitarianism (1863), and On the Subjection of Women (1869), as well as successfully running for parliament, it seems he must have regained some of his earlier confidence. Millgram here suggests that Mill sought refuge in a series of authority figures (first his father, then his wife Harriet Taylor, and finally his stepdaughter, Helen) who helped provide him with the psychological impetus to continue driving forwards with a project from which he was increasingly estranged. To keep such a conflicted life going is difficult, and Millgram suggests that Mill exaggerated wildly the genius of those figures in order to justify taking instruction from them. Ultimately, Mill’s project life entailed a tragic contradiction: his life demanded Herculean feats of genius and originality, while also requiring that he deny and repress any parts of his life that might fall outside the closely circumscribed boundaries of his project.

Millgram argues that estrangement, submission and the tragedy of a torn personality are “disturbing and almost inevitable feature of project lives”, particularly vivid in Mill’s case, but by no means unique to it. Any such life aims at coherence and unity, but ends up tearing itself apart.

Millgram intends the book to be read as a philosophical argument against the project view, but its major shortcoming is not treating the question of the meaning of life as sufficiently mysterious. Early analytic philosophers were right to observe that it is far from clear what we are talking about when we talk about the “meaning of life”. Yet Millgram does little to unpack the ambiguties of the question, or to explore the meaning of “meaning” as applied to a human life. Moreover, Millgram’s characterization of the project view is presented in such broad terms as to leave open a number of variations - many of which are not addressed, let alone refuted, by the case of Mill’s life. The problem is not so much a lack of charity regarding Mill’s life, but a lack of clarity regarding the concepts.

Nevertheless, the great value of this thought-provoking book is neither strictly biographical nor ethical, but methodological. Readers of contemporary moral philosophy will be familiar with thought experiments (or “intuition pumps”) - scenarios involving runaway trolleys, comatose violinists and teleportation machines - that are intended to elicit our “intuitions” about right and wrong, used to buttress principles, refute arguments, support or falsify ethical theories. It has seemed to many contemporary philosophers nearly impossible to do philosophy, and in particular ethics, without these tools. But Millgram’s book offers us a more humane way of harvesting the intuitions required for ethical theorizing.

By investigating the life of a real human being whose disappointments, ecstasies and aporias were all his own, we are reminded that the true topic of ethics, a human life and how to live it well, is better served by examining a life in its fullness, in all its complexity and apparent contradiction, than the sparse and faceless thought experiments we usually encounter. The reader is encouraged to think through just how much light an ethical theory sheds on such a life, and how the philosophy stands up to the evidence that the particular life provides. If Millgram’s book encourages ethicists to begin working from this starting point, to “philosophize from life”, it may well offer contemporary philosophy a grip on questions that have seemed messy, too resistant to analysis. Or perhaps not. Either way, Elijah Millgram’s book reminds us that it is legitimate to demand that philosophy tell us something about those questions.
Soul-searching
A philosophical attempt to make sense of the self

JUDITH WOLFE

IN SEARCH OF THE SOUL
A philosophical essay
JOHN COTTINGHAM

The poet of “Dover Beach”, hearing the long, withdrawing roar of the Sea of Faith, promises to be true to his love amid the confused and ignorant battles sweeping the naked world left behind by the ebbing of religion. To Matthew Arnold and those who followed him, the strength that endures is the sturdiness of human love, along with poetry’s capacity to draw thought from nature, give form to formless anguish, and span epochs. In the universities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this new humanism because of the soil of a study of the Arts and Humanities untied from theological frameworks. To the sciences’ rapidly advancing investigations of nature, these subjects provided a countervailing defence of culture. But in recent decades, the Humanities have experienced a crisis similar to theology’s before them. To many now, the concept of a human soul – of the human virtues, sentiments, insights and traditions on which the humanities traditionally relied – seems as implausible and unnecessary as the concept of God itself. Arnold’s faith in humanity is experiencing its own Dover Beach moment.

In Search of the Soul is a philosophical ode to this ebbing faith, but it refuses to be ellegiac: its impetus is a quiet confidence that a receding night tide returns at dawn. Although talk of the soul is complicated, John Cottingham is convinced that it is not only legitimate but ultimately unavoidable. His own contribution is to affirm the trustworthiness of the basic human experience of ensouling, and to probe the metaphysical horizons within which it thrives.

Cottingham does not treat “soul” as a simple notion, but as a placeholder for that by virtue of which we are each a self: a subject rather than merely an object. The first chapter chronicles facets of this experience of selfhood or ensouling: the presence of the world and other people as realities we encounter emotionally, rationally and actively; our ineradicable sense of the demands of truth, goodness and love; our lifelong striving for a “better” or “truer” self. Many scientists and philosophers, seeking to pare away unnecessary entities, analyse these experiences as by-products of processes more basic than consciousness, aimed at survival and self-propagation. Cottingham, like Raymond Tallis, regards this analysis as self-referentially incoherent: it denies the fundamental significance of the difference between illusion (even advantageous illusion) and truth which motivates and enables scientific work in the first place.

In Cottingham’s eyes, casting the soul as a ghostly substance independent of the body is a distracting caricature. His second chapter shows the contrasting richness of the philosophical tradition, at least since Aristotle’s hylomorphism, which defines the soul not in parallel to the body, but as the body’s own “form” or “act”. Descartes in particular, of whom Cottingham writes with mastery understanding and crisp verve, poses a much more interesting challenge than the need to overcome his much maligned body-dualism. The Descartes of diaries and letters, testing the limits of his own Meditations, describes the human being as two separate substances, an immaterial mind and a material body, than as a “substantial union” of the two. Unlike the mind in itself (which is the subject of the Meditations), this union eludes introspection: it is not philosophical abstraction, but “the ordinary course of life and conversation, and abstention from meditation … that teaches us how to conceive the union of soul and body”. The nexus of this union is our emotions and sensations: if an angel were to inhabit a body, Descartes claims in a letter, it would not have sensations like a human, but “simply perceive the motions which are caused by external objects” with its unattached mind. For Descartes, in other words, the soul-body unity is a “primitive notion”: the analogue of a chemical rather than a physical composition, which changes the qualities of each element. This change determines both the kind of thing under investigation and the methods by which it is investigated, which can be neither abstract philosophy nor scientific analysis alone.

Cottingham’s response to this challenge is to take a different approach to the relationship between soul and body which dispenses with talk of the soul as a “substance” altogether, and draws on aesthetic experience and metaphor to explain ensouling. His third chapter finds particular relevance in the language of material and function, or object and attribution. Besides the examples discussed in the chapter, this language recalls Roger Scruton’s description of the emergence of a face from paint strokes on canvas, or C. S. Lewis’s complementary observation that no amount of pointing to the lines of a drawing could convince a two-dimensional creature of a qualitative difference between a triangle and a street vanishing in the distance.

Some might object to such language because it redescribes ensouling without explaining it, since it implicitly relies on categories like intention, which are aspects of what we understand as free human agency, not reasons for it. To that objection, Cottingham might respond that such circularity is only to be expected if Descartes’ observation about method is right. But neither the objection nor the response would engage with what makes Cottingham’s language (and Scruton’s and Lewis’s) striking: its revelatory quality. This quality is the result not of explanatory power but of metaphysical suggestion. It arises from the implicit analogy of material nature as a whole, including the material nature of our brains, to a two-dimensional painting or a functional object. Just as we can understand flat figurative paintings only because we inhabit a world of three-dimensional space, the analogies go, so we can see the body as the picture of the soul only because we inhabit a world that has meta-physical depth.

This depth, Cottingham argues in chapters four and five, is best understood through theism. Scruton, at his most religiously daring in the 2010 Gifford Lectures, suggested that to acknowledge the human face as expressive of a soul might be possible, ultimately, only by acknowledging it as a reflection of the face of God. Cottingham is too modest to make such a transcendental argument, but he offers an inference to the best explanation – in other words, he offers theology the best available answer to the question, “given subjecthood, what states of affairs can make sense of it?” That the description of the problem may be seen partly to predetermine its explanation does not invalidate this style of argument. It merely poses the challenge: if you reject the description, try to give a better one. For Cottingham’s part, “God is the pri-mordial subject who enfolds all that exists, without whose events would be no enduring consciousness, and no genuine authoritative value to guide their lives”.

Cottingham’s warm and sinuous text opens these horizons without undue force, seeking consensus and posing questions he is not afraid to let stand. It is animated by an optimism which is infectious, but also conceals difficulties with his account even for those who accept his basic picture. Leaving aside some theological questions raised by the final chapter, human selfhood as Cottingham describes it strives towards an ideal of authenticity which is not only unrealistic but possibly inconsistent, insofar as its goal is both one’s “best self” and one’s “truest self”. But to be good in Cottingham’s sense (which is to respond adequately to the normative claims of values and others) is always to give up being unique in Cot-ttingham’s sense (which is to be true to one’s lastest desires). Neither is it clear that the latter is a coherent aim. Desires have the structural appearance of object-directedness, but nevertheless sometimes arise from causes unrelated to their apparent objects. That there is a difference between orientations of the soul and neural stimulus responses means not that every desire is a revelation of meta-physical depth and connectedness, but that the chal-lenge we face is one of discernment rather than mere illusion. Discernment is never guaranteed: our deceptibility is as indelible a mark of our humanity as our perspicacity.

Ultimately, this would come as no surprise to Cot-tingham. His book, (in the words of its subtitle) is a “philosophical essay”, not in the analytic sense of a demonstration but in Wittgenstein’s of a thesis facing release into life. Only for Cottingham, the question of God is not a distraction, but part of a therapy capable of releasing us from the peculiarly human itch to flay our skin with Occam’s razor.

Judith Wolfe is Professor of Philosophical Theology at the University of St Andrews.

23
Cult clubs and heritage sites

FOOTBALL
ST PAULI
Another football is possible
CARLES VIÑAS AND NATXO PARRA

Despite spending most of its history bouncing between the German second and regional third tiers, the German football club St Pauli has transcended its lack of on-field success to become the embodiment of resistance to the commercialization of modern football. Carles Viñas and Natxo Parra’s excellent book draws out the club’s story, contextualizing it with a brief, but insightful overview of German football. This is coupled with a more detailed social history of both Hamburg and the city’s St Pauli district which, thanks to industrial development in the mid-1800s, evolved into a working-class community and a left-wing stronghold. For most of its existence, St Pauli was overshadowed by its more illustrious neighbour, SV Hamburg. They were even denied a place in the inaugural Bundesliga as it was determined that cities should only have one team each, and that was taken by Hamburg. St Pauli’s most successful spell on the pitch came in the late 1970s with promotion to the Bundesliga. For a club with such a maverick image it is perhaps fitting that one of the most beloved players from that era is Walter Frosch, a compulsive smoker and alcoholic who accused an opponent of yellow cards in one season. The highlight was a 2-0 win against Hamburg - the European Cup Winners’ Cup holders.

Yet Viñas and Parra’s story is not one of on-field action. It’s about the convergence of social and political factors in the mid-1980s - squatting, punks and anti-militarist and anti-nuclear movement at odds with the local establishment - that transformed a relatively unsuccessful neighbourhood club into one with a cult status. As the authors argue, it is difficult to see such a confluence of factors coming together today to create a club with a similar ethos.

Yet Viñas and Parra acknowledge the complexities of this cult status. To the disaste of some older fans, St Pauli has become a hugely popular brand, with a successful market- ing operation and some 11 million fans worldwide. A steady stream of football tourists are regulars at the Millerntor Stadion as just another landmark to check off their itinerary only compounds that disaste.

Yet this cult club with an overtly anti-racist ethos, a higher percentage of female fans than any other European club and a management model that allows fans to veto new sponsors. These are the characteristics which set the club apart, noted, in a recent article in Die Presse, that ‘another football is possible’.
Rogor Domenegheitti

WAAC
ART, PROPAGANDA AND AERIAL WARFARE IN BRITAIN DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR
REBECCA SEARLE
168pp. Bloomsbury. £8.50.

Rebecca Searle has written a fascinating account of the part that Kenneth Clark’s War Artists’ Advisory Committee (WAAC) played in reflecting and recording the British public’s war experience. The WAAC was set up in 1939, to advise the Ministry of Information on the effective use of artists in making films and paintings to encourage home front workers. Artists were encouraged to paint scenes of war-related activity, and the result was a significant body of work which has seen renewed interest in recent years.

SEARLE

FRENCH CAMPS
UN PAYS DE BARBÉLÉS
DANS LES CAMPS DE RÉFUGEÛS ESPAGNOIS EN FRANCE, 1939
VLADIMIR POZNER
Edited by Alexis Buffet

When Catalonia fell to Franco’s nationalists in January 1939, half a million Spaniards fled north across the Pyrenees to seek refuge in France. Known as La Retirada, this move would be eclipsed just over a year later by the exode, millions of French soldiers flocked south to escape the invading Germans, but it became one of the most shameful and frequently overlooked periods in modern French history. With its determined anti-immigration policy (immigrants were known as ‘undesirables’), the government was faced with an unprecedented dilemma but had little option other than to find an immediate solution. The result was the hurried creation of a series of camps, known as concentration camps - around Perpignan and along the coast. On the beaches, they were marked off by fences of barbed-wire.

There were more welcoming responses. Already, from the beginning of the Spanish Civil War three years earlier, anti-fascist and pre- dominantly communist groups in France had formed the pro-republican Comité franco-espagnol, from which emerged the Comité d’accueil aux intellectuels espagnols. Spearheaded by Renaud de Jouvenel and especially by Louis Aragon and benefiting from public exposure, the last of its kind, Ce Soir, the committee aimed to identify and support all intellectuals (writers, artists, scientists, teachers, etc.) who were threatened. It is estimated that there were nearly 5,000 in the camps, and organize their release.

When the newspapers of the WAAC at Night combine travelogue, historical analysis and memoir. (The book resists categorization even in the way it is organized: sections include “Africa”, “Explore” and “Artists.”) We are given access to the innermost thoughts of the women who motivate Kankimaki via letters, diary entries and biographical accounts. In one striking passage about the Italian artist Lavinia Fontana, Kankimaki writes, “[Lavinia] was a powerful woman. She had to have been strong as a horse, enormously determined, with nerves of steel, not to mention prodigiously talented, industrious, proud, brave. There’s no way she could have produced two hundred paintings if she hadn’t been those things”. At times, Kankimaki provides day-by-day accounts of her travels. In Africa, for example, she describes a safari through landscape she likes to the garden of Eden. “On the lake”, she writes, “we see pelicans and mara- bou storks; on the horizon surges a vast flock of pink flamingos, like a dream, or a mirage. Beaks in the water, they step rhythmically... like ballerinas in a long line.”

AWAKENINGS
THE WOMEN I THINK ABOUT AT NIGHT
Traveling the paths of my heroes
MIA KANKIMÁKI
Translated by Douglas Robinson

The Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama (b.1929), the explorer Mary Kingsley (1862-1900) and the Buddhist nun Alexandra David-Néel (1868-1969) have something in com- mon: each set off on a solo journey seeking solace and adventure. It was these women and others - ten in total - who inspired the Finnish writer Mia Kankimaki in her own intellectual and spiritual awakenings. The title of her memoir reflects the sleepless nights she experi- enced before the release of the book, ruminating on the lives and travels of her heroes. Kankimaki had reached a crossroads in her life: at forty she was childless, partner- less and searching for meaning. At this point, she sold her flat and left her job as an editor and copywriter, choosing to venture to Japan, Kenya, Tanzania and Italy.

Smoothly translated by Douglas Robinson, The Women I Think About at Night combines travelogue, historical analysis and memoir. (The book resists categorization even in the way it is organized: sections include “Africa”, “Explore” and “Artists.”) We are given access to the innermost thoughts of the women who motivate Kankimaki via letters, diary entries and biographical

“No. 71” by Joanna Concejel, from The Lost Soul by Olga Tokarczuk, translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones (48pp. Seven Stories Press. £16.99)
Readers may fear at first that the elements of memoir - both Kankimäki’s and that of the other female explorers - will entail little more than a recounting of their lives. But we soon come to appreciate their insights on subjects such as femininity, mental health and motherhood. At the end, Kankimäki provides “night women’s advice”, in a manner both commanding and humorous: “Paint yourself the way you’d like to be. Be industrious as hell. Work out of passion. If you suffer horrific losses, keep going.”

“Write books, collect rocks, sleep under a table, if need be”, she writes at one point, “do whatever you must in order to do what you want.” Having been “tired and listless”, she comes to embody the evolution of the women she follows: “I collect anecdotes and stories, weave them together into a kind of web, a rhizome of night women”. In this book, Kankimäki achieves a feminist feat, bringing together women from different backgrounds and eras, each of whom “transgressed boundaries and expectations” in her own way.

**ITALIAN FICTION**

**IL TEATRO DEI SOGNI**

**ANDREA DE CARLO**

432pp. La Nave di Teseo. £20.

On New Year’s Day 2020, the sensationalist television journalist Veronica Del Mucaro almost chokes on a pastry. After being saved by the mysterious archaeologist and local nobleman Guiscardo Guidarini, she makes a remarkable discovery: on his undulating estate in Lombardy, Guidarini is hiding an ancient amphitheatre. A race to claim the “pre-Roman” site breaks out between competing local municipalities - heritage is cultural, but also political, and perhaps especially so in Italy. As the media fan the flames, sparking the interest of international businessmen, the conflict is hijacked by national party leaders. What follows is an often satirical tale of intrigue, deception and human folly.

Since he was discovered by Italo Calvino, Andrea de Carlo has written more than twenty novels. This latest work is a searing social commentary that emphasizes deep-rooted problems with which Italy has struggled for decades, including illegal construction and a perceived failure to protect its heritage. The author’s contempt for politicians, the popular media and, at times, the ordinary citizen is unbridled: in the case of Massimo Rozziolo, mayor of the fictional municipality of Cosmarate, no amount of “rebranding” can disguise the foul-mouthed salesman of agricultural machinery who struggles with Roman numerals. Annalisa Sarmani, the vice-mayor and cultural attaché of the rival town Sivero, struggles to enlist the backing of a community whose cultural interests are limited to smaccone, the local cheese. De Carlo places his most withering indictment of contemporary Italy in the mouth of an incredulous British archaeologist: “you suffer from a double curse: that of your country’s bureaucracy and corruption. Then there is your politics, interested solely in self-preservation, and your disconcertingly superficial view of television - you are an awfully country that is bent on harming itself?”

Certainly, under the influence of Silvio Berlusconi and his Mediaset channels, Italy was an early example of a country seized and shaped by a media mogul, but these days British readers may not find the situation at all foreign.

Il teatro dei sogni, however, is far more than a thinly veiled criticism; it is an exploration of human weakness, of the effects of popular rhetoric and alternative versions of the “truth”. Through the brazen methods of the real Del Mucaro, we are warned of the dangers of the “unschupulous extrapolation of conclusions” that has plagued the “post-truth” era. After a slow start, the novel gathers pace, culminating in a powerful denouement.

Esmé O’Keefe

**POETRY**

**A COMMONPLACE**

Apples, bricks and other people’s poems

**JONATHAN DAVIDSON**

100pp. Smith/Doorstop. £9.95.

Is poetry commonplace, like apples and bricks? It is hard to agree that poems “are as common as food and drink”, but, for Jonathan Davidson, poetry is quite ordinary, sort of thing a working-class boy from Didcot who wasn’t very good at exams might become interested in because his mother read him Walter de la Mare...

A Commonplace borrows its form from the commonplace books once used by writers and scholars to compile ideas, quotations or extracts. Davidson presents his own poems alongside sixteen written by his contemporaries. They are arranged in small thematic chasters, and interspersed with a lively commentary: “I care. I care about equal temperament because, as I understand it, the maths doesn’t work but the music does. It is the perfection of imperfection. It isn’t right but again it is”. There are also footnotes, a gazetteer and a bibliography.

Poems are functional, Davidson suggests - able to cool the hot water of grief like the now-demolished towers of Didcot Power Station depicted on the cover, symbolic of the passage of time, the loss of familiar landscapes and receding selfhood. These themes are explored in his poem “Father”: “But they are gone now / new roads, new names, new people. // Dad, stay here for a while, I said, / and I’ll go and find out what / has happened to our lives.”

The other poems Davidson quotes are similarly direct – the elegiac “Sonnet for Dick” by Kit Wright, “a biological, for example, or “With short to Bellast” by Catherine Byron - and he introduces selections as simply being about “people I am not”, “listening to music” or “distracting myself from grief”. There is a pleasing Englishness to the book, which is liberal and humane in its treatment of heritage, industry and community, but it also includes poetry from elsewhere. It closes with a translation, by Michael Hofmann, of Gottfried Benn’s poem “Listen”. That’s all you were, but Zeus and all the immortals, the great souls, the cosmos and all those who were there for you, too, spun and fed through you, that’s all you were, finished as your last evening - good night. Before this, Davidson offers a critique of his own final poem, “Quiet the afternoon after rain”, which he describes as “arch and affected ... pretentious and bombastic”. It is not. His poems are deftly made and moving. And although his voice is one among many here, his plain-speaking style and dry humour set it apart.

Naush Sabah

**DEEFPFAKES**

**DEEFP KAES AND THE INFOCALYPSE**

What you urgently need to know

**NINA SCHICK**


The idea that we might not be able to trust what we see with our own eyes, or hear with our own ears, is disturbing. Yet, as Nina Schick shows us in Deep Fakes and the Infocalypse, it is increasingly becoming our reality. Through the advanced capabilities of artificial intelligence, it is now relatively straightforward to make people say and do things they haven’t said or done. “A deepfake”, Schick explains, “is a type of ‘synthetic media’ ... that is either manipulated or wholly generated by AI.”

As is so common with the Internet, deepfakes began in the world of pornography. Now they are helping to expedite democracy and put people’s lives at risk. Although the difference between deepfakes and the broader issue of the “infocalypse” - the confusion largely caused by state-run disinformation campaigns, of which Russia is the master - could have been explored with more acuity, Schick expertly lays out the history of the latter and the increasing danger posed by the former.

The author describes Russia’s Operation Infektion, which was launched in 1983 when an article in a New York Times outlet called the Patriot “made a bombshell accusation: the deadly AIDS virus had been invented by the US military as a biological weapon, for example, or ‘to kill black and gay men’. The article played on existing social divisions in the US and built on a Russian trope that its enemies were pursuing biological warfare. Operation Infektion persisted over the years as the epidemic worsened and the consequences gained traction.

These Cold War disinformation tactics have enjoyed a revival in recent years. Russian operatives helped to spread the idea that Ukraine was responsible for the Downing of Flight MH17 in 2014, and Russian meddling in the 2016 US election of 2016 has been widely discussed. Over the past year, we have seen China suppressing information from Wuhan about the Covid-19 outbreak, the spreading of disinformation about the virus by President Trump, and Russia’s promotion of the narrative that Covit-19 is a Chinese-made bio weapon and that it is linked to the construction of Chinese 5G networks”. This is the “infocalypse”. Then there was the speech by Belgium’s Prime Minister Sophie Wilmes in which she appeared “to sing off the X [Extinction Rebellion] hymn sheet” when discussing epidemics. In fact, it was a deepfake, created by the Belgian branch of the activist group. “Arguably”, says Schick, the clip “is the best single example of a politically damaging deepfake that exists ‘in the wild’ to date.”

The author looks at how at how the Infocalypse has allowed extremists to misrepresent the Black Lives Matter movement, and at how deepfakes have created a new ‘primary’ of this kind, with deepfakes still in their infancy, Nina Schick’s book feels not just timely but essential.

Charlotte Henry
In next week's
TLS
MARK MAZOWER
Greece, 1821, and the historians

ACROSS
1. Good Italian detective who vies with Beatrix (6)
2. Male in A&E having trouble about Captain Booth’s wife (6)
3. Blind seer wearies, having toured most of Thailand in the 20s (8)
4. Blanche who has designs on Rochester home with grand drive (6)
5. Old female, 51, hung foremost of illustrators, an artist associated with Pooch (5)
6. Ultimately aberrant mistake, first for Tyler Durden? (9)
7. Somehow it is male snob that’s descriptive of playboy Dickie (12)
8. One of Bianca’s authors is not hero, getting in a flap (9)
9. Much Ado About Nothing is my flippantly foremost of his “amuses” (3-2)
10. A nurse hugging by wild Greek girl at orgiastic revel? (6)
11. Knight attracted to Christabel’s energy and alluring charm (8)
12. Old relative loves getting close to elk and bear in Canada (6)
13. Demand of one Fielding hampers right overworked and underpaid clerk (8)

DOWN
1. Race to tuck into mushroom, one a drugged-up queen loves? (6)
2. Naturalist writer and teacher Weasley possibly upset (6)
3. “Be —, seek husband, wife, whether / To pour into one person our aspiration’s cues” (Flight into Reality, Rosemary Rowley) (9)
4. Hire out hotel overlooking river and Stendhal’s Parma residence? (12)
5. I wrote satires and died in 1916, but I won the Nobel prize for literature in 2013 (5)
6. Aussie hooligan in train regularly punches famous Librarian (8)
7. Member goes to Congress to meet mature poet laureate (8)
8. Criminal dealt drug for a nicker, 4, 5 (6)
9. Impulsive old maiden performing in story featuring a thieving wigmaker (8)
10. Rising poverty concerning graduate in Logan McRae’s city (8)
11. ‘First —, horrid King besmeared with blood / Of human sacrifice, and parents’ tears” (Miller) (6)
12. Climbing hill with charge is what stimulated Flaubert (6)
13. Inspiring type of books reviewed by Time (5)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1364

The winner of Crossword 1364 is Jonathan Shaw, of Trowbridge

The sender of the first correct solution opened on April 9, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1368, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF
Anti-classics

Another library in trouble - who could have predicted that? While the National Art Library, a few days ago, recently received a much-needed boost in its funding (see NB, February 5 and 12), it is the National Library of Scotland that now stands on the brink of closure. For “the world’s leading museum of art, design and performance” is undergoing a dreadful “reorganisation” – and that means, among other things, redundancies.

Facing an annual deficit of £10 million, the V&A has declared that its staff are its “main priority” - but that twenty of the NAL’s thirty staff are to be made redundant. Don’t worry, though: the museum’s director, Tristram Hunt, promises that the “visitor experience” is to be “progressively transformed”; the NAL will be opened up to the public later this year.

For “users” and “digital access” will enable it to reach “audiences worldwide.” A special collections Reading Room will be opened to the public, by fewer librarians, somehow - “to provide a space for scholarly and specialist research.” After the NAL’s closure, the public can now read for a year, that is, running an online service only. The “recovery strategy” will be complemented by “a boost for the private sector.”

We love a dose of corporate blather as much as the next Graub Street Diogenes. All the same, forgive us for wondering if - aside from a languard view to save £10 million per year - a good old-fashioned strain of British philistinism is at work here, too. Not on Tristram Hunt’s part, surely. But as part of the background music to these troubling scenes.

The V&A has form in this area, of course. Many readers will recall the Saatchi & Saatchi campaign of the late 1980s that portrayed the V&A as “an ace puppy with quite a nice museum attached”. A clever line, that could be justified as a joke at the same time as it played on a perceived public preference for a slice of cake over a piece of art. It was only in 1985, meanwhile, that it finally occurred to someone to put a qualified librarian in charge. Of the NAL.

The non-philistines have set up an online petition calling for the NAL cuts to be cut; to date, 10,000 people have signed it. They understand the case, they say, after all. Many artists, writers and thinkers will, no doubt, want to see themselves left out yet again, while their counterparts in hackery vie for the laurel in such coveted categories as Data Journalist of the Year (sponsored by Facebook Journalism Project) and Lifestyle Podcast of the Year. Since the Press Awards were due to have been announced at the end of this month in a “virtual ceremony”, we were going to rant about their anti-artistic omission and make a pestilential paragraph of it, involving curmudgeonly terms such as “hackery” and “foetid spirit of self-congratulation”; but then the small matter of the Society of Editors being in denial about racism’s role in the media cropped up, resulting in the awards’ postponement and the resignation of the SoE’s executive director, Ian Murray. Ah well. You can’t win them all.

Over the past few decades, Atlas Press has been building up a mighty library of “Anti-Classics” - works in the Dadaist, surrealist, or Oulipian vein. Following a parade of zany blokes - George Melly, Harry Mathews, Michel Leiris and Louis Aragon among them - it is now the turn of the German artist and writer Unica Zürn (1916-70) for the anti-classical treatment.

Translated by Malcolm Green, The Man of Jasmine & Other Texts (£16) and The House of Illnesses (£16.50) both contain writings from the time of Zürn’s relationship with the artist Hans Bellmer. Having turned out “over one hundred short stories for the newspapers”, “filled”, as Green notes, “with longing for encounters with the strange and marvellous”, she started getting serious and dedicating her work to Herman Melville. The Man of Jasmine himself was a “childhood vision”, the ideal man, whom Zürn saw reborn in the person of her friend Henri Michaux; a short piece called “In Ambush”, meanwhile, brings together the worlds of Captain Ahab and Akira Kurosawa’s film Rashōmon (or the story by Ryūnosuke Akutagawa on which the film is based). Green’s notes are saying nothing following several hospitalizations, however, Zürn committed suicide - and these especially strange and marvellous stories have been published posthumously, in 1971.

Pictured here is a figure from the Atlas facsimile of one of those stories, The House of Illnesses (Das Haus der Krankheiten): a doctor metamorphosed, as he stands over his patient, into a portly “military” in “creaking boots” and “monocle”. “He stamped his left foot on the floor... craned his neck and emitted a high-pitched cock-a-doodle-doo.”

The patient eventually exits the House of Illnesses via the Room of Eyes. Zürn wrote this “gently satirical fantasy” during a fever in 1958, anticipating her first hospitalization by two years. Enquiries about acquiring an anti-classic or two are best directed, for the time being, to editor@atlaspresse.co.uk.

The Golden Bowl, À la Recherche du temps perdu and Concerning the Eccentricities of Cardinal Pirelli: In Brigid Brophy’s view, which she put forth in 1962, these were the three greatest novels of the twenty-first century. See NB, March 5, for more critically respectable business of what, also in Brophy’s view, connects these novels’ authors. All right, we thought. We’ll play your parlour game. Yes, it is absurdly early to be asking such absurd questions; but what are the three greatest novels of the twenty-first century?

Smiling indulgently, a well-placed literary critic said they would play, too. The three greatest novels of the twenty-first century (so far), we have just learnt, are All for Nothing by Walter Kempowski, The Lesser Bohemians by Eimear McBride and The Line of Beauty by Alan Hollinghurst. These authors do not have “mauve roots” in common, as did Brophy’s critical triinity; let us know if you think you can do better.

M. C.
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