We the People

Richard Drayton on Linda Colley’s history of constitution making
In this issue

It is a remarkable feature of Britain's unwritten constitution that the rules of the political game can be changed overnight. Back in 2011 the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats couldn't trust each other to keep their post-election pact for five years. So the new coalition passed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act to make it impossible for David Cameron, then prime minister, to call an election at a time of his own choosing. Later this proved inconvenient to his Tory successor but one, Boris Johnson. After his election victory late in 2019, Johnson published a bill to repeal it. Not all expeditious arrangements affecting our rights are so short-lived. The catch-all Official Secrets Act, the product of a war scare in 1911, remained on the statute book for decades.

Most countries eschew the British model, although Oliver Cromwell's Instrument of Government in 1653 anticipated developments. Linda Colley's 'The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen', reviewed this week by Richard Drayton, explains "why and how written constitutions became central to modern government almost everywhere". Little Corsica got there before the United States and, as viewers of the racy television series The Great will already know, the Empress Catherine II of Russia's Nakaz, or Instruction, proclaimed the equality of men long before the Americans. The Founding Fathers' document, however, has the merit of brevity. Colley makes claims for its study as literature too. As the author of Britons, her earlier account of the forging of this nation's identity from the Anglo-Saxon Union, Colley foresees that if the Scottish National Party achieves independence one of its first acts of self-definition will be to promulgate a written constitution, just as Ireland did in 1922.

Two hundred years ago the Greeks rose in revolt against the Ottoman empire. In his review of the recent literature Mark Mazower salutes the event as perhaps the earliest triumph of nationalism, defined by Lord Acton as "the idea that nations would not be governed by foreigners". Reviving the liberties of ancient Greece appealed to British romantics, but by then Lord Elgin had made off with the Parthenon marbles. In Loot Barnaby Phillips recalls how the British also carried off the "Benin Bronzes" from a punitive expedition in the Niger Delta in 1897. It seems problematic to hand them over to Nigeria where thefts have denuded the local art collection. President Macron of France, however, has a cunning plan to build in Benin City a satellite of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, on the model of the Louvre Abu Dhabi.

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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How the writing of constitutions was crucial to modern nation building

RICHARD DRAYTON

The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen
Warfare, constitutions, and the making of the modern world
LINDA COLLEY
St2pp. Profile. £25.

To reverse Clausewitz, constitutions were the continuation of war by other means. They were, Linda Colley proposes in The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen, a “political technology” taken up, like artillery techniques, everywhere, because through them claims to territory, and projects for political futures, could be prosecuted against internal competitors or external threat. Constitutions became, moreover, as much symbols of political modernity as its instruments. They were objects of collective desire as emblems of the right to sovereignty and nationality in a world of nation states.

Colley offers a global history of politics from the mid-eighteenth to the early twentieth centuries. She seeks to explain why and how written constitutions became central to modern government almost everywhere. Part of the book’s brilliance is its identification of this phenomenon of the convergence of styles of regime and political community. Colley traces its trajectory from Pasquale Paoli’s Corsica to reforming monarchies in the era of Catherine the Great, through the revolutionary constitutions of the United States, Sweden, France, Haiti, and of Spain and Latin America, to reactive and defensive hybridizations in Picardie, Norway, Tahiti, Hawaii, Tunisia and Japan, through to Ottoman Turkey, Republican China, the USSR, Ireland and India, with late echoes in post-apartheid South Africa and elsewhere.

The key driver of this phenomenon, Colley argues, was the violent integration of the world, in which the gun and the printing press were entangled. Wars, revolutions, the aggressive expansion of European powers, including Napoleon within Europe, and the United States, and the attempts by non-western political actors to defend, resist, or regain forms of sovereignty, forced and enabled a homogenization of forms of government around the constitutional norm. The writing of constitutions was a key expression of this congeries of empire and nation building which compelled the convergence of culture, economy and politics. To this extent, her book is a contribution to the large question of global standardization, an equivalent, on a grander canvas, to Vanessa Ogle’s The Global Transformation of Time (2015).

While Europe and its offshore are central, this is not a top-down history, or a simple story of the diffusion of European norms. What Colley offers, reflecting the highest ambitions of global history, is an examination of a system of dynamic interactions of endogenous and exogenous influences, anchored in each locality. She builds her argument out of a system of vividly painted vignettes of a series of episodes of political innovation, each reflecting her close engagement with sources, historiographies, the visual culture and world views local to its part of the world. As a piece of historical thinking, argument and writing, it is magisterial by every criterion, the most impressive outcome, thus far, of what has already been a career of great creativity. It is a measure, equally, of how the discipline of history has changed over the past twenty years.

The Linda Colley who took exile from Thatcher’s Britain in the 1980s could not have conceived of a book of this kind. She was a historian of early eighteenth-century Britain, author of a study published in 1982 of the politics of the Tory opposition in the age of Walpole. In the abundant latitude of Yale, however, she began to conceive a broader agenda for British history. Via an intellectual biography of Lewis Namier, she forged an argument, expressed in Britons (1992), about how war, religion, capitalism, monarchy and gender formed modern British national identity. She became a key figure in a new extroverted kind of British history which sought imperial engagement, seeking out how phenomena in London or Edinburgh were related to those in Calcutta, Philadelphia or Botany Bay. Captives (2002), her third major work, for example, explored a terrain of political emotion which connected Britains to its experiences of power and captivity in Stuart Morocco, mid-eighteenth-century colonial America, and early nineteenth-century India. An offshoot of this thinking about captivity as a key experience in imperial expansion was The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh (2007), a kind of world history via biography, and the beginning perhaps, of Colley’s definitive migration beyond the boundary of British history.

It is a commonplace that historians are creatures of their time - that, as Benedetto Croce put it, all history is contemporary history. But it is equally true that historians are products of particular conjunctures in the discipline of history. The roots of The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen lie in a period of seismic change in the early 2000s in both the intellectual horizons of history and its professional organization. The sign of this shift was the rise of the field of global history. Ambitious history departments, at least from the 1960s, had had a few historians of Asia, Africa and Latin America. But most posts had been in national history, with European history in second place, in particular Britain (Yale at one point having five British historians in post), France, Germany and Russia. International history had woven together the national histories of the parts of the world which appeared to be important, Paul Kennedy’s Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (1987) as a classic example. Since around 2000, though, universities sought to have departments which better represented the world - Harvard and Yale got their first historians of India, Cambridge got its first Ottomanist, King’s London its first Chinese and Middle East historians. Most critically, historians of Britain and Europe began for the first time to address the possibility that extra-European history, and even “minor” places, mattered to understanding their own parts of the world. And some historians turned in particular to phenomena which operated above, below and across the traditional frontiers of national history. C. A. Bayly’s Birth of the Modern World (2004), perhaps the book with which Colley’s portrayal of global politics is in most full implicit conversation, was both a symbol and key propagator of this turn, with its vision of multicentric but convergent global processes of change.

The global turn, which unfolded around Colley at Yale, at the LSE from 1998, and at Princeton, which she joined in 2003, not only meant a discipline...
As Borges joked, it is impossible to make a 1:1 map of the world: forms of abstraction, simplification and abridgement are intrinsic to the analytic enterprise.

Sean O’Brien’s tenth volume of poems, It Says Here, was published last year. He is currently editing This Is the Life: The selected poems of Alistair Elliot.

The weight of the discipline fell heavily on the nation, where the archives were denoent, the patriotic energies dwindled, and the rewards for storytellers most abundant.

A more penetrating kind of criticism might come from medieval European, even some global historians, about the structural teleology of Colley’s argument. Early modern historians are drawn in two directions, some more to explaining the continuities between the ancient and medieval and the post-1750 world, others to providing the eighteenth-century origins of contemporary events. Colley is very much the second persuasion.

As a result, there is no investigation here, beyond a brief mention of Magi of the role of Roman, papal and ecclesiastical constitutional precedents, the whole lineage of charters, edicts, bulls and legal codes that underpinned the modern European idea of the written national constitution. Thus when Colley describes Paoli projecting a “General Diet” as a parliament for Corsica, and later the Diet at the centre of France’s 1869 constitution, she does not interrogate the profound roots of this language of representative sovereignty in medieval imperial doctrine. How that deep current shaped political innovation in Venice, Genoa, Lübeck, Bremen, Amsterdam, Lübeck, was an implicit assumption which later crowned itself as Enlightened, is unexamined. That Catherine the Great wrote a kind of constitution was a dramatic modern event, as Colley proposes, but it was also a classic imperial intervention, in the line of Justinian. Napoleon’s Ghibelline roots (through the family tradition that linked him to Ugo Buonaparte, supporter of the empire against the pope in the twentieth century) are similarly unaddressed, as are the imperial origins of the republican project, or the way claims to local sovereignty via stadtricht in the towns of medieval Germany opened the road which led to constitution wrangling in Philadelphia in 1787.

When Colley notes that conservatives in the German lands and Britain from the 1780s mocked “paper constitutions”, she does not investigate what they considered more meaningful. But ideas of constitutions written not on parchment but in the character of land and people was a revolutionary and not just a reactionary proposition, rooted in both cases in older doctrine. In the Dictionary of 1755, Johnson offered “form of government” only as the fifth and sixth meanings of “constitution”, and there he quotes the civil lawyer John Aylyff’s explanation of these as “law made or ordained by some King or Emperor”. Before these he lists “corporeal frame”, “temper of body with respect to health and disease” and “temper of mind”: the constitution of the body, the embodied mind in its natural context, preceded the body politic. Many, before and long after John- son, sought this entanglement of land and people with government. For Montesquieu, a just political constitution was imagined to arise from a local relationship of law to people who shared land, climate and casts of mind. This organic idea of constitu- tions, which had its counterpart in Whig England and its myths of the “ancient constitution”, sustained insolvency in Jefferson’s Republic and among the creole patriots of Spanish America.

Following the implications of organic constitutionalism may offer a different perspective on global politics and written constitutions which makes visible the ancient in the modern. In India, Chris Bayly argued in his strangely forgotten Origins of National- ity in South Asia (1998), “humoral patriotism”, an idea of an equilibrium between government, environment and human bodies, underpinned Indian appropriations of Western liberal ideologies. The gun and printing press, nationalism and revolution- ary politics, while starkly modern, were also sometimes servants of older sentimental currents. When nationalists across nineteenth-century Europe demanded political futures based on shared experi- ences of ethnicity, territory and culture, they did not imagine these communities out of thin air. Constitution-writing, from this perspective, becomes an epi- phenomenon of the enduring force of political terri- toriality around the world, modern effects of olden- cultural constellations. Victor Lieberman’s Strange Parallels (2009), with its comparative history of poli- tics across a thousand years of Eurasian history, provides one guide to thinking from that direction. Colley’s story might then become merely how the steam-powered West with its printing press came, in a very recent age, to have the power to compel or seduce the rest of the world to dress its politics in Europe’s clothing.

But are constitutions just about politics? Colley’s liberal analytical lens focuses on the representative apparatus and the propagation of constitutional norms. She largely neglects, though, the political economic dimension of constitutions. One is reminded that throughout her oeuvre, Colley has generally only been interested in economy and society as the ground of politics. Gender, and how women become enfranchised citizens, are promi- nently discussed here, and there is some glancing attention to race, again though only as question of political inclusion or exclusion. Colley leaves class, however, largely unexamined. But all constitutions are surely expressions of particular social class
arrangements? Written constitutions, in particular, as they encoded the rights of property over land and, in slave societies, people, sought to make unequal regimes of social power permanent. She does mention property qualifications as an issue, but the central question of property, the basis of all liberal constitutions, is not addressed. Nor is the role of the expansion of capitalism, and with it doctrines of rights derived from and owed to property, as a driver in the global dispersion of constitutions. From this angle of view, the gun, ship and printing press were only the tools for the expansion of capitalist social regimes, not the real movers of change.

Written constitutions in our age have been the weakness of class war of the Rich and the Right. At the end of her problem, a historian more exercised by wealth inequality might have noted the radical rupture which takes place in the early twentieth century, and which points still to possible futures, when constitutions such as the Bolshevik experiment in the USSR, or even liberal ones such as Cuba’s in 1940, sought to entrench the right of every citizen to employment, housing, education and land. Or, she might have pursued how in the early twenty-first century, the “New Constitutionalism” has sought to embed neo-liberal ideas about the natural primacy of the market and the rights of capital into national and international law.

From another perspective, despite its global range of reference, _The Gun, the Ship, and the Pen_ is very much a book about Britain now. All global histories have a tacit anchorage, a perspective from which comparison and connection are constituted – in this sense, all global history is national history. This sprawling argument about constitutions is anchored in Colley’s passionate engagement with British politics, the _fil rouge_ of all her writing. Britons, for example, was the fruit of Colley’s first exile, a clear intervention into discussion of the meaning of postcolonial Britain, which prefigured her role in the later 1990s as the de facto court historian of New Labour until she became disenchanted with Blair’s wars. I read this book as the expression of her second post-2002 exile, another, more saturnine, letter home from the United States. The animosity of Britain with no written constitution, but which paradoxically was a crucial engine driving the proliferation of constitution writing elsewhere, is its backbone. Faced with Britain’s political immobility, Colley writes, its intellectuals were forced to turn to “non-institutional histories”. De te fabula narrabit one thinks. This time around Colley offers no spark of optimism for a new Britain emerging. Brexit, the unmentioned elephant in the room, which excluded Britain from its participation in a nascient transnational polity, is perhaps at the root of this. Britain is left, she writes, only with patrician histories of an imagined constitution, without the clarity of civic identity of a formal document.

It is this pessimistic mood which perhaps explains why Colley, despite her global gaze, does not address transnational constitution-making, of which the European Union is the most striking contemporary example in process. Colley offers us global constitutions always in national context: neither the Pan-American ambitions of Simón Bolívar nor the Pan-African federal projects which were entangled with the politics of Liberia and Sierra Leone are explored. By contrast, across the channel, Thomas Piketty’s _Capital and Ideology_ (2020) makes the case for a new “social federalism” which would bring the Global North and South into a new commonwealth. Such utopianism may seem wild in our age, but if the history of constitutions tells us anything, it is that surprising political forces can erupt from ideas like this. For Colley, such ambitious constitutional interventions are unlikely without the stimulus of war. But inequality, famine, pestilence and the climate crisis may well provide equivalent levers of change. The history of revolution, with its constitutional consequences, may not be quite as over as she assumes. The imagined community of the global, of which the rise of global history is an expression, is still young, and its impact on national politics is still to come.
Polish antisemitism and the Soviets

In his review of Francine Hirsch's Soviet Judgement at Nuremberg (January 22), David Reynolds reminds us of the Soviet Union's efforts at the Nuremberg trials to assert its position as both the war victor and major victim - while fending off any inquiry into what should be regarded as its own crimes: the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939, and the massacre of Polish officers in Katyn. For the latter, the Soviets blamed the Germans, and as Professor Reynolds notes, the issue “ended up as a draw”. But before it did, it remained unworthy of further investigation, it kept the Soviets anxious. “There was some sense of guilt on the Allies’ side about the postwar fate of Poland, ‘betrayed at Yalta’, and it would be in Russia’s interest to do all they could to make Poland less sympathetic in Western eyes. How Polish antisemitism.”

In June 1946, while the Katyn issue surfaced in Nuremberg, there occurred several incidents of anti-Semitic violence in south eastern Poland, the area under strict control by Soviet security apparatus. Most of them failed to achieve the plausible desired effect but one, in Kielce, did succeed. The scenario was old and oft practiced. A nine-year-old boy disappeared, rumour spread that a Jew had captured him for ritual murder, and soon a house that sheltered Jewish survivors of the war (the word Holocaust came much later) was attacked by an armed mob. The entire area was immediately cordoned off by a security detachment; neither local police nor members of the clergy were allowed to enter. Forty-five of the Jewish residents were murdered, more wounded. Within days of the pogrom, a military-style trial, with no defence lawyers, found all the accused guilty: nine were immediately executed by firing squad.

There were voices doubting the official version of the tragedy, among them that of the US ambassador to Poland, Arthur Bliss Lane, of foreign policy experts and of a number of prominent Polish anti-communist politicians and intellectuals inside and outside the country. Few would go on the record for fear of accusations of nationalism and antisemitism. But one witness is clearly preserved, in the book of conversations between Aleksander Wat (1900-67) and Czeslaw Milosz (1911-2004, My Century (2003). It is only a fragment of what the two poets, who at the time lived in Poland, said about the Kielce pogrom in the original Polish language version, and rather than in the main text it appears in the translator, Richard Lourie’s, introduction:

"MILOSZ: What do you think about that pogrom? Why did the pogrom happen? I heard from many quarters, the pogrom was launched - launched isn’t the right word, more like provoked - by the Kielce security forces (there wasn’t a policewoman in sight on that day). Spychaj [the head of the Kielce region security system, JBC] was in charge of those forces. It should be remembered that Spychaj had that older brother in the NKVD who hadn’t returned to Poland. This is an obvious conjecture of course but the instructions must have come from the Soviets. In other words, the younger Spychaj was acting on orders.

"MILOSZ: Yes, that’s the same version I heard too. The point was to explain the antisemitism in the international arena.

"WAT: Yes, that was the point. And it stuck.

■ Joanna Rostropowicz
Clark, Princton, NJ

The launch of the ‘Daily Mail’

I am grateful to A. N. Wilson’s recent and extensive review of my History of the British and Irish Press, and for his most flattering description of me (February 26th). As with all such mammoth volumes, the project was a group effort, so all the more gratifying to state that in completing it, I merely stood on the shoulders of its fantas-
tic contributors. I am curious, though, as to the omissions men-
tioned. Wilson casts me as falling in one of the chapters to dis-
cuss Alfred Harmsworth and his launch of the Daily Mail in 1906. But in the chapter noted, the last two pages are dedicated to contextu-
alizing the popular journalism exploits of the Harmsworth broth-
ers, with details of Daily Mail launch costs and expenses. I urge him to purchase the next volume in the series for extensive and thrill-
ful conclusions to the Daily Mail story. It is a serious mistake of merging the Spectator with the New Statesman, mea culpa. That was clearly inaccurate, and likely more an unconscious perfection of wish fulfillment on my part.

■ David Finkelstein
University of Plymouth

Otters and beavers

The review “Born to rewild” (March 12) by Barbara J. King gave the impression that the status of beavers and otters is the same or similar in the UK. This is not the case in several ways. Beavers had been extinct here for well over a century until they were reintroduced by human agency in recent years. Otters, on the other hand, have not been extinct and the term “rewilding” does not apply to them. Their numbers did decrease alarmingly in the past century but, thanks in part to the improving health of rivers, they have re-established themselves with elan, and for many years now have been seen even in some surprising places, like the centre of Winchester.

The reviewer mentions Tarka, Henry Williamson's classic fictional otter, but in the postwar years it was Gavin Maxwell who dazzlingly improved the public relations of otters with books like his Castings for catching them, starting with Ring of Bright Water (1960).

■ Ann Lawson Lucas
Cherry Burton, Beverley

Beowulf’s sword

Hetta Howes rightly points out the staring ambiguities in the Beowulf poet’s representation of Grendel's mother (March 5). As a descendant of Cain, she is human as well as monster: her revenge for the killing of her son is not only justifiable but obligatory according to ancient Danish and Anglo-Saxon texts.

Howes may go still further, though, in describing how Beowulf actually challenges rather than simple perpetuates what she calls “toxic masculinity”. The world of battles, boasting and mead is undeniably a male world, yet Beowulf is at times a curiously inef-
fectual hero. For one thing, his sword always fails him. Grendel cannot be harmed by ordinary weapons, and neither can his mother, though Beowulf is able to dispatch her with her own sword, one made by the biblical giants. In his final, most challenging battle with the dragon, Beowulf’s sword breaks, and he is mortally wounded. Sometimes a sword is a sword, but when Beowulf does not need Freud to point out that a sword is an obvious symbol for another, more essential, masculinity. Beowulf is also childless. The overwhelming ethos of Beowulf is not only elegiac but highly sceptical about the warrior’s role in the epic. It defends Hoethgar’s great hall Heorot from Grendel, but it ultimately burns after a long and difficult fight with the dragon fight. Beowulf is abandoned by all his people, except the loyal Wiglaf, who isn’t even a Geat but a Swede. As Howes suggests, it may be that “toxic masculinity” has been per-
petuated less by Beowulf itself than by the male scholars who have misread it for most of its modern history.

■ Hannibal Hamlin
The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH

George Blake’s communism

In his review (March 12) of Simon Kuper’s intriguing The Happy Traitor, Ian Buruma notes that for George Blake, “Communism is the same as Christianity, only put on a scientific basis”. Para-
doxically, Blake claimed that this basis came from The Theory and Practice of Communism: An Intro-
duction, originally a red dark covered handbook prepared by R. N. Carew Hunt for the Foreign Office’s Information Research Department. Its intention was to coin- micize civil servants against the virus of communism, but in Blake’s reading “the theory of communism sounded convincing”.

■ R. E. Rawles
University College London
Out of Edo
The ongoing conflict over African artefacts in European hands

ADAM KUPER

LOOT
Britain and the Benin Bronzes
BARNABY PHILLIPS

THE BRITISH MUSEUMS
The Benin Bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution
DAN HICKS

On a state visit to Burkina Faso in November 2017, President Macron tweeted: “African heritage cannot be held prisoner by European museums”. Museum directors were put on notice. In Britain, a spotlight turned on the “Benin Bronzes” looted by a punitive expedition in the Niger Delta in 1897. British officers plundered memorial brass busts from the shrines of dead kings, carried away brass plaques depicting life at court from the palace stores, scooped up intricately carved ivories, wooden sculptures and ceramics, some dating back to the fifteenth century, others perhaps even older, and all the products of craft guilds operating under the patronage of a divine king, the Oba of the Benin Kingdom. (The British called Edo “Benin.”) There is no way of knowing how many objects were seized, but there were certainly several thousand. The British Museum alone holds around 950 of such a large number or so are on display.

These two books cover the pillage of the Edo palace, the dispersal of the spoils, and current controversies about restitution. For Loot, Barnaby Phillips, a journalist specialising in African affairs, interviews a range of experts and interested parties. He delivers a balanced reconstruction of the Benin saga and probes the difficult choices facing European and Nigerian museums. Dan Hicks, curator of World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, makes the case for the prosecution. The British Museums, he says, is “about sovereignty and violence, about how museums were co-opted into the nascent project of proto-fascism through the looting of African sovereignty, and about how museums can resist that racist legacy today.”

Portuguese merchants made contact with Edo in the late fifteenth century. Dutch, Danish and British trading companies moved in as the slave trade expanded, and began to export ivory, wild peppers and palm oil. Benin’s craftsmen were soon tailoring products to European markets, including such very particular items as ivory salt cellars featuring Portuguese knights and sailors. In return, the Oba was supplied with guns and ship anchors of copper and brass bracelets that served as currency or were melted down and recycled by the guilds. Following the Berlin Conference of 1884-5, which divided up spheres of influence between European powers, Britain established a “Protectorate” in the Niger Delta. In late 1896 the British consul reported to London that the Oba had “placed a Juju on (Palm) Kernels, the most profitable product of the country, and the penalty for trading in this produce is death”.

A mission set off to negotiate. It was ambushed. Seven British officials and perhaps 200 African porters were killed or taken prisoner. A few weeks later, in February 1897, a punitive expedition was sent in under the command of Rear Admiral Harry Rawson of the Cape Town squadron of the Royal Navy. The Oba knew what to expect - the British had recently defeated several uncooperative chiefs. He took the precaution of sacrificing hundreds of slaves and captives to his family gods. To no avail: the British easily took the town. Battle-hardened military men were appalled by what they found, though Hicks suggests that they piled on the horror stories for propaganda purposes. In a letter to the First Sea Lord, Rawson wrote: “this place reeks of sacrifices and human blood, bodies in every state of decay, wells full of newly killed, crucified men on the fetish trees (which we have blown up), one sees men reaching everywhere.”

The British set up a makeshift headquarters and hospital in the Oba’s palace. A golf course was laid out. (“The chief drawback”, an officer reported to Golf Magazine, “was the huge quantity of human skulls and bones which littered the course.”) Meanwhile, Ralph Moor, Consul-General of the Niger Coast protectorate, struggled to keep control of the looting. Stacks of elephant tusks and hundreds of brass plaques were set aside to cover the costs of the sortie. Two ivory statues of leopards were reserved for Queen Victoria. Officers then had their pick but, Phillips points out, even lowly seamen came away with valuable bits and pieces. The distribution was briefly interrupted by a fire (accidental, according to Phillips; deliberate, Hicks insists) that consumed most of the palace buildings. Back in England, the authorities deposited brass heads and plaques in the British Museum and auctioned off most of the ivory, which commanded higher prices. Officers sold their booty to London dealers. Among the buyers were the Pitt Rivers, as well as museums of ethnography in Berlin, Leipzig and Vienna.

Phillips excels at tracing the roundabout ways in which objects could find their way into museums. Moor kept for himself an ivory box decorated with an image of two Portuguese men trying to throttle one another beside a tattered parangon; two ivory amulets; and a pair of sixteenth-century ivory masks, both 2cm long, representing a striking woman identified as Idia, the mother of a famous Oba. The extraordinary detailing in Idia’s hairdo and tiara includes miniature carved heads of Portuguese men. The masks were bought by Charles Seligman, professor of ethnology at the London School of Economics. He sold one to the British Museum at a knock-down price. His widow sold the other to Nelson Rockefeller in 1958 for £20,000. The proceeds went to the Royal Anthropological Institute, which put an image of the mask on its Christmas card. William Fagg, curator of African ethnography in the British Museum, described the mask at the time as “the finest and most valuable Benin - or indeed West African antiquity - still in private hands in the world”. It is now in New York’s Metropolitain Museum.

When Nigeria hosted the World Black and African Festival of Art and Culture in 1997, the image of Idia was chosen as its official symbol. The Foreign Office tried to persuade the British Museum to lend its mask for the occasion, but the Museum declined on the grounds that the ivory was cracked and might not withstand the move and exposure to heat. The Nigerian press judged this excuse disingenuous, insulting and ironic. Privately, Phillips is told, museum officials were not confident that the mask would be returned. After all, three bronze plaques sent to Lagos in 1950 by the British Museum had somehow ended up in American collections.

There are around 500 Benin Bronzes in Nigerian museums, most of which were acquired by colonial curators in the 1950s and 60s. In 1980, during a brief oil boom, the Nigerian government bought expensive brass heads at auction, some of which reappeared on the international market. Meanwhile, Nigeria’s museums suffered chronic neglect. Phillips reports that the National Museum in Lagos can only exhibit some 300 objects, while tens of thousands are in storage, “poorly labelled and often chaotically crammed together.” The curator, Mr Adeboye, tells him that the museum averages only about thirty visitors a day, mainly school parties. Security is lax, thefts not uncommon. Nigerian President Obasanjo then presented two gifts for foreign leaders. (A Benin head was taken from the National Museum and given to Queen Elizabeth in 1973.) “We are losing our cultural heritage at such an alarming rate”, warned the Minister of Culture, Walter Onafowora, in 1996, that “we may have no cultural artefacts to bequeath to our progeny.” In 2000, John Picton, an authority on Nigerian antiquities, wrote in the Journal of Museum Ethnography that recent thefts from Nigerian museums and excavations “constitute at least as serious a tragedy as the looting of the art of Benin City by British forces in 1897.”

In his brave essay, all this talk about cultural property problems as so much imperialist, even racist disinformation. He demands that European museums atone for their colonial past, transform themselves into “instruments of compensation” and “take action to make the 2020s a decade of restitution”. What chance is there of that? In November 2020, the French Senate approved the return of twenty-seven artefacts looted by French troops from the palace of Abomey in West Africa in 1892. President Macron is not insisting on a wholesale return of African artefacts, however. The Museum of the Quai Branly in Paris plans a satellite in West Africa on the model of the Louvre Abu Dhabi: it will mount temporary displays of African masterpieces from French collections. European museums might be more generous with loans: their storerooms are overflowing. The “Benin Dialogue Group” of European and Nigerian curators was set up in 2007 after an exhibition of Benin Bronzes toured Europe and the United States but missed out Nigeria. They have discussed a system of rotational loans to the Edo Museum of West African Art that is slated to open in Benin City next year. At the same time, the great metropolitan museums are in a defensive crouch. Not long ago, exhibitions at the Quai Branly and the Metropolitan in New York, examined the importation of local craft guilds to European markets, materials, techniques and forms. Cosmopolitan museums should be out there, playing to their strengths, offering a global perspective. 

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Elements of water and time
How four poets have imagined the life aquatic

HILARY DAVIES
MESSING ABOUT IN BOATS
MICHAEL HOFMANN
118pp. Oxford University Press. £30 (US $38.95).

Michael Hofmann first had the idea for his Clarendon Lectures collected in this book, he writes, while sitting on “the little sofa-raft in our room in Hamburg”. No doubt erroneously, one imagines the sails of the yachts that inhabit the port’s many marinas to be drifting past his window. Hamburg is a good place to think both about the relationship humans have with the sea and the deep tradition of sea literature that engages with it.

The book opens with a lengthy list of some of the boats, ships, works, authors and artists that might spring to mind when you think of this subject: “Ship of Fools. Death ship. ark. ghost ship. slave ship. clipper. warship … dow, pinnace, trireme, felucca, knarr”. From the riches at his disposal, Hofmann chooses to share close readings of or, more accurately, meditations on, four poems – Rainer Maria Rilke’s “Auszweiser-Schiff, Neapel”, Arthur Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau Ivre”, Eugenio Montale’s “Barche sulla Marna” and Karen Solle’s “The World”. Their linguistic and thematic differences allow Hofmann to cover a broad spectrum in his discussions, which intrigue, illuminate and occasionally perplex the reader. These lectures are a welcome antidote to the skin-reading our age has forced on us.

Hofmann’s choice of a little-known poem from Rilke’s Neue Gedichte Zweiter Teil (New Poems, Part 2, 1900) is refreshing, though we are fourteen pages into the twenty-four-page chapter before we get to it. In the run-up he gives us some background: a note on Rilke’s time in Paris as Auguste Rodin’s amanuensis; an excursus on his only novel, The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge (1910, but ten years in the writing); and reflections on the poet’s notoriously conflicted attitude to the modern world, which Hofmann finds problematic and definitely aesthetic.

It is by way of pointing out that “Auszweiser-Schiff” (“Emigrant-Ship”) is unusual subject matter for Rilke. What strikes Hofmann, and indeed any reader, is that no emigrants are mentioned as individual human beings here at all. In the use of blocks of colour and geometric lines (“the slow-moving orang-boat / carried them past, on out to the huge / grey ship”, in Edward Snow’s translation) à la Paul Klee, Hofmann sees a disturbing depersonalization of their predicament, as they are ferried out towards a massive ship whose hold receives the coal for its voyage, “into its womb, open like death”. In Hofmann’s reading, Rilke edges away from all this unwashed humanity in distaste: he is “right out of sympathy with the scale of what he is describing, the medium of it, and the purpose of it”. It is true that death is everywhere in the poem. And yet the people departing are also “das Erglühende der Früchte”, fruit that glows. There are hints here that the life they are leaving behind is full of richness that they misguidedly go to seek in America. This is an irony Hofmann exploits in a counterfactually anecdote of Rilke milking the American lecture circuit, “retelling the old world and its soft wisdom to the new”.

Rimbaud’s “Le Bateau Ivre” (“The Drunken Ship”) couldn’t be more different from Rilke’s static craft in the harbour of Naples. Hofmann is not the first to be amazed at, and to puzzle over, how Rimbaud – a provincial seventeen-year-old who’d never seen the sea – came to write his extraordinary poem. As with the Rilke, Hofmann takes a step back to give it some context, drawing what one can of psychological autobiography from “Les Poètes de Sept Ans” – “a boy intoxicated with his own encyclopaedia” – with a nod to Lowell’s version of the poem in Imitations, before extemporising on Werner Herzog’s Aguirre, or the Wrath of God (1972), Elizabeth Bishop’s late poem about an Amazon cruise, “Santa- ren” (1978), and all the associations and allusions to be found in this famously pulsating poem. He is happy to follow Gerald Macklin’s quadripartite division of the work (from an article on Beckett’s translation of “Le Bateau Ivre”), with interpellations.

Hofmann is not the first to puzzle over how Rimbaud - a provincial seventeen-year-old who’d never seen the sea - came to write his extraordinary poem.

Hilary Davies is a co-translator of Yves Bonnefoy’s Prose, 2020, and a contributor to an upcoming anthology of contemporary Austrian verse, The High Window 21, 2021.
But Hofmann’s urge to enumerate everything—be it in his lists or in his prose—means that sometimes we can’t see the ocean for the wave. What is most striking, for example, in the “central” section of the poem is the way in which Rimbaud, by careering to all the imagined corners of the high seas, presents the reader with a vision of voyage that is all-encompassing, variegated and dynamic even when the images are of putrefaction and destruction: “I’ve seen vast, seething swamps, fish traps / In the rushes where entire Leviathans fester” (in Jeremy Harding’s translation). His linguistic choices are the opposites of those adopted by that other great poet of the ship without a (normal) crew, Colderidge, whose vessel shoots hither and thither across meridian and equator with minimal local colour. It would have been fascinating to see Hofmann place them side by side.

What a contrast again the next poetic venture onto the water is—apparently, at least. Eugenio Montale’s “Barche sulla Marna” takes place far inland, in a riverside of embankments, geometrically aligned trees, canoes, rowing boats and even, possibly, a regatta. The scenery will be familiar to anyone who has spent time in the undramatic but bewitching countryside of northern France. There is, however, something Protean and unsettling about this poem that draws Hofmann in. Montale is notoriously allusive, a challenge and a reward for those prepared to take care over him. Hofmann gives some biographical notes to set the scene: publication dates; the structure of the collection Le occasioni (1939), from which the poem is taken; Montale’s affair with the American Dante scholar Irmna Brandeis, with whom he travelled to Eastbourne and France in the 1930s; and his longstanding, effectively conjugal relationship with the Italian writer Drusilla Tanzi.

“Barche sulla Marna” is akin to a graphite and watercolour wash, where colour bleeds beyond the lines of definition, where tiny details can carry almost the full symbolic weight of the work. (Think, for example, of David Jones’s painting “Calypso’s Seaward Prospect”, in which the sea invades the sitting room and the empty chair sits out towards the boats feiting the bay.) Oftentimes the poem is a memory, a dream, a lazy day on the water. Yet nowhere can this fact be pinned down. Hofmann stresses how from the start we are moving, everything is moving: not just the river, but the banks, the seasons. “This is Heraclitus for hardcore Heraclitians.” Things are not what they seem: bridges are upside-down; an optical illusion causes us to row through the meadows. Tenses shift and wink at us; at the start the Moon is a daytime planet, and by the end the Great Bear is rising. Even though, at its height, “the dream is this: a vast / unending / day, almost motionless...was one high silence in the noontime’s / rhyming cry” (in William Arrowsmith’s translation), the river soon carries that, and us, away. The boat descends downstream, out to sea, to the dissolving elements of water and time, the vastness of the cosmos. Perhaps “Barche sulla Marna” isn’t so far removed from “Le Bateau ivre” after all.

After the delicacy of Montale, Karen Solie’s “The World” comes as a shock. The deadpan mode of the speaker, whose flow of consciousness seamlessly registers everything from golf club to OLED high-definition screen to retractable clothesline; the long lines and looping syntax; the lack of metaphors (though I’ll come back to that); the ponderous philosophical interjections, such as “It could be when all pursuits have been satisfied, / life’s problems will remain untouched”: these come from a far removed poetic place. Yet very quickly the reader begins to suspect she is sailing along on one gigantic metaphor.

Yes and no: The World, qua immense ocean-going liner for rich lotus-eaters, really exists. It sails the seas (or did, pre-Covid) like some bloated version of the Flying Dutchman, sucking up panoramas, ports and oceans, but resting nowhere: “We golfed on the tundra and from The World / were airlifted to pristine snowfields, cliffs where we dined / alfresco above frozen seas”. The poem is a sardonic critique of such an enterprise, and Hofmann expertly draws out its chilling, deadening, soul-destroying effect. “This sort of Lucullan life”, he writes, “the incessant calculation of experience...the supplying of bar codes for it, leads to its disappearance...The decontextualization of everything is a prequel to its withering.” The sea is eerily, disturbingly absent from the poem in spite of the nautical setting; the touristic landfalls succeed one another, sickly as endless desserts. As Hofmann says, the holidaymakers “are frankly bored, bored, bored”, their affect flattened. Abroad The World, the world has been reduced to images on a screen. In our brave new era of Zoom drinks and virtual meetings, Solie’s poem is a salutary reminder of why we need the real.

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—Michael Palmer, author of The Laughter of the Sphinx

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Putting Ireland in the frame

Eavan Boland and other women poets reflect on the cyclical nature of time

ERIN CUNNINGHAM

THE HISTORYIANS
EAVAN BOLAND
80pp. Carcanet. £10.99

THE MOTHER HOUSE
EILEÁN NI CHUILLEANÁIN
72pp. Gallery Press. £18.50.

MARINE CLOUD BRIGHTENING
MEDBH MCGUCKIAN
88pp. Gallery Press. £18.50.

DAMEANGELI
MARY O’MALLEY

DOUBLE NEGATIVE
VONA GROARKE

MERCY
RÓISÍN KELLY
64pp. Bloodaxe. £9.95.

Eavan Boland, who died last year, was preoccupied by the disparity between Irish history as it was experienced and Irish history as it has been passed down to us, lamenting our loss of the nuances of past lives – those of women in particular – amid our study of broader historical currents. Her posthumous collection The Historians, which recently won the Costa poetry award, provides us with a final exploration of these concerns, which were central at the forefront of her thinking since her first collection, New Territory, was published in 1967. Instead of understanding history as a sweeping teleology, Boland advocates a cyclical view of time: “No one... / is cut off from / the other/ / no one ever / has no ancestors...” (from “In the Barograph”).

Flourishing as a poet of the moment, Boland’s The Historians is interested in upturning the idea of a fixed historical narrative. “For James Connolly” commemorates the Rising of 1916, which took place amid “the daft beginnings/ of a fatal century and their [the rebel’s] sad endings,” and locates this instance of historical rupture in the “moment / just before the wave of change crashes / and goes into reverse.” Ni Chuilleanáin’s history can double back on itself, folding into patterns of repetition and reversal. One particularly resonant echo in many of these new collections is W. B. Yeats, who repeatedly compounded his “Age of Fasts” view of time as circular or revolving. In “The Fool by the Roadside”, he describes a pattern whereby “all works that have / From cradle run to grave / From grave to cradle run instead,” comparing this process to the unwinding of a spool into “loose thread”. This imagery of thread appears in Ni Chuilleanáin’s collection as a way of questioning traditional understandings of history, making good on her proposal of “a different plan” for looking at the past. In “Mara Edgeworth in 1847”, which recalls Edgeworth knitting quilts for the porters who helped to ship food from America to Ireland during the famine of the 1840s, the knitted wool becomes a metaphor for such historical acts of generosity or kindness, which harden emotion into consequence, “the trace / of / [the men’s] work unravelling like a worn thread of wool, their kindness / out of anger stretched across the Atlantic”. In “Hobstetter’s Serenade”, a poem about the death of Ni Chuilleanáin’s sister, the same imagery portrays memory as an unwinding of historical threads: “If I go / in search of her I must unwind and stretch out the thread / she left us, so it twines like a long devious border”. The poem addresses a personal grief, but that “long devious border” also calls to mind the partition of Ireland, cleverly overlaying intimate with national histories. A similar imperative is at play in Medbh McGuckian’s Marine Cloud Brightening. McGuckian, in her poem “The Pardon Churchyard”, uses the image of “the narrowest thread, the nautical / rope, the string of DNA / in his coiled backward twist” to suggest that “the past cannot be held in place”; the same poem draws together “the pre-beginning and the post-end” in a Yeatsian evocation of endings transmuted into new beginnings. Throughout Marine Cloud Brightening McGuckian displays an interest in resurrection, which she compares to the annual cycle of the seasons, ending “The Pardon Churchyard” with an image of the dead “cautiously / resurrected // as in all past Januaries”.

McGuckian explores this idea through references to Seamus Heaney, whose death is commemorated by a grouping of poems at the centre of the collection, new death as a combination of deterioration and rebirth: “Part of it is decaying, part nascent / like opening up a new heart.” Elsewhere in the same poem, these metaphors are paralleled by references to rebirth in the Christian tradition. “Mar- iola with Angel Choir” begins with an image of the “rough-hewn cross / ... already regenerating”, and “Alone in a Lost Poem” meditates on the work of poetry itself, which “say[s] something new / with old words”. As in Ni Chuilleanáin’s poetry, this “world completely knotted together” where “born things are born” is both coiled and unraveling. As in her meditations on Irish history, McGuckian’s poetry offers an alternative to the Eurocentric narratives of the past present. Her posthumous collection is a testament to the power of history, reviving the past as a metaphor for the present and the possible future.
indulges in various redoublings, which “swerves and curls / backwards”. Yeatsian imagery appears throughout Gauden Angeli’s “Descent”. “Threads have been pulled / time woven, knotted, snipped”. “The Bee and the Helicopter”, meanwhile, depicts “time, how it curves back” through the image of a woman who “sat at our births // dulling out thread”.

Vona Groarke’s Double Negative experiments with temporality to a still greater extent, interrogating the idea of time as a physical, malleable object with which we can engage on a material plane, obtaining or possessing it, as in “the squirrelling away of a snick of day” in “Against Monotony”, or the “hours gathered” in “Against Vanity”. Groarke makes explicit the strangeness of our conventional figurations of time in idioms such as “we are buying time” and “I kill an hour”. Time is frequently, if implicitly, envisioned as a commodity, and these poems play with the idea of time as transactional, a series of diminishing returns across an individual lifetime: “the future was the bridge / but somewhere it changed to the toll / You hand over coins, he hands back smaller coins”. “Stone Trees”, a poem addressing death and its effects on the living, epitomizes the tension in Groarke’s verse between our possession of time and its escape from us. In a typical metaphor, the speaker presents herself “rounding on middle age / hours stack up like saucers on a shelf”, but the question ultimately asked by the poem is “who knows the difference between loss and accrual / over so much time?”. Although she longs for tangible things, “words with hard endings” or “an obvious kind of truth”, the reality of time is elusive; the poem concludes that death exposes “what time does to the quick of us”, which is not a question of familiarity but of “astonishment”. The frameworks in which we keep time are ultimately an evasion of the true abstraction of ageing and death; Groarke dismisses the metaphor of time as a spool as a fanciful panacea: “My mother never sewed – the spool box was for optimism, / it had no winter in it”.

Roisin Kelly, in her debut collection Mercy, takes up many of the same themes as her more established counterparts. “Leave”, a poem about the end of a relationship, notes that the process of decay is also one of renewal, with an apple’s “flesh fading” and “slow return to earth” incubating “something still alive that waits, / sweetening in its fermentation, in its nourishing / of an earth that returns again and again”. Kelly, like Boland, suggests that time unfolds cyclically, with days and seasons constituting repeating patterns: “the sun will rise after night, / the birds will sing after winter”. She also imagines time figured in reverse - the speaker mentally plays the scene of departure “backwards on a loop... returning and returning to me”, and concludes the poem with the assurance that “in the cellars, barrelled apples sleep / and dream their short lives in reverse”. Such reversals appear on an astrological level in “Mars in Retrograde” and “Mercury in Retrograde”; and in “Tom Barry” the speaker “see[s] the train fly backwards over silver sleepers / as apple peel flies upwards to my silver knife”. These images of return dovetail with frequent allusions to history and genealogy. “Granuaile”, whose speaker is the sixteenth-century “Pirate Queen” Gráinne Ní Mháille, asks “Do I go forwards, can I go back?”, while “Mary Anne MacLeod” has Donald Trump’s mother, in a fantasy of return to the Scottish island from which she emigrated to America, wondering “what guides us back to the river we hatched in... If I could, I’d roll the Earth like a stone / back through a life’s worth of Novembers”. The pastoral idyll of the island is a foil to the “gold dust” “Tell” of her son’s world, counterpointing recent strife with imagined historical moments of repose. Led by Eavan Boland, who is explicitly cited as an influence in Mercy, Kelly returns to women’s lives recent and distant, working poetically to perceive and explore the past. Her debut, like the other volumes reviewed here, provides a compelling and provocative account of the workings of time; like the histories they explore and represent, all of these collections are well worth returning to.
 Revolutionary reckonings
Greek independence, 1821 and the historians

MARK MAZOWER

The uprising in Ottoman Europe which culminated in the independence of Greece was launched exactly 200 years ago. In a matter of months, a Christian peasant insurgency ousted the Ottomans from most of the Peloponnese in a conflict of immense ferocity, while Greek ships challenged the Sultan’s hold over the eastern Mediterranean. The contest could scarcely have been more uneven; Europe’s Great Powers could not have been less supportive. Yet the Greeks persisted, ploughing the Ottoman Empire into crisis, mobilizing the sympathies of the European public and eventually forcing the Powers to intervene to bring the fighting to an end by backing the establishment of an independent Greek state. Civid is unlikely to stop the exhibitions, lectures, conferences and festivities that have been planned; online you can already buy bicentennial backpacks, mugs, pens and commemorative coins. Nor does the anniversarv merit less: the Greek war of independence was perhaps the earliest triumph of nationalism – famously defined by Lord Acton as the idea that “nations would not be governed by foreigners”. It was in this sense a forerunner of the political struggles that transformed the map of Europe and created the world we inhabit today.

In 1822, a French philhellene called Claude Raffened, based at the consulate in Smyrna, published the first volume of his Histoire des Événements [sic] de la Grèce. He was conscious of living in exceptional times. “There are famous epochs which seem marked out by Providence”, he begins. “Such were the centuries of Sésostris, Priam, Alexander, Caesar, Mohammed and Louis XIV, and such, too, is our own.” Two more volumes appeared, along with a separate history of the modern Greeks, before the author was killed in the struggle for Athens five years later. Raffened was probably the uprising’s first historian but others quickly followed in Europe and North America. Inside Ottoman Greece, the printing press had been unknown; when it arrived after independence, veterans and their proxies began settling old wartime scores on the page. Their battles were not for the faint-hearted; anyone perturbed by the quality of public discourse in the age of Twitter should read the critical abuse endemic in Athens in the nineteenth century. The former chieftain Mavrommatis taught himself to write at the age of thirty-two and produced famously invective-filled memoirs, a classic of modern Greek letters. The politician Spiridon Trikoupis’s politely thoughtful three volumes – hailed in London as the work of a “second Polybius” – were contemptuously dismissed in Greece as “a speculative enterprise” by a Peloponnesian grandee whose own wartime recollections contained insults of such range and length that his family sat on them for a century. Memoirs elicted Controversies, then Controversies of the Controversies. Chroniclers published mammoth document collections to defend the honour and reputation of clans, islands and entire regions.

The Greek state embraced the veterans and their memories but cared little about wartime records, mouldering in ministry basements when not thrown away. It was left to a young researcher-collector called Giannis Vlahoyiannis to mount his own salvage operations in the capital’s second-hand bookshops, tavernas and scrap-merchants. In 1901, he listed some of his finds: “The Samos archive was found in a builder’s yard at 100 Oodos Athinas; the collection of texts from the siege of Messolonghi was found in the same yard; ... another valuable collection was found in the garbage of the paperworks in Faleron.” In 1915, Vlahoyiannis was appointed first head of the state archives; but on the eve of the Second World War, he was still bemoaning the “grievous signs” of indifference that had shrouded the subject for nearly a century. That all changed in the Cold War, when indifference was replaced by ideological combat and the meaning of 1821 became an interpretative battlefield. The stridently anti-communist colonels who seized power in Athens in a military coup in 1967 had a fixation with the event. They declared their dictatorship to be a “national-salvationist revolution” (ethnosoterion epanastasis), which would complete the work of its predecessor. In 1971, the 150th anniversary of the uprising, more than 300 books were published on the subject – an astonishing number dwarfing that of any year before or since. The nation’s classrooms rang with the exhortation: “Long live the revolution of 25 March 1821! Long live the revolution of 21 April 1967!” It was ironic to watch an authoritarian military Junta heroizing a bunch of unruly and quarrlesome chieftains who had been united by few things stronger than their loathing for the idea of a regular army. But the predictable result of turning 1821 into fascist kitsch was that by the time the colonels fell from power in 1974, everyone was fed up with the subject.

This explains why, amid the truly remarkable resurgence in historical studies in Greece that took place with the restoration of democracy, the subject of its independence struggle was initially neglected. An exception was the scholarly journal Mnimon, which consistently published high-calibre research on the subject. Just three years ago, it published not one but two important volumes of essays on the Greek revolution. These signalled an end to the neglect of the recent past and showcased a younger generation of historians that was finding new reasons for returning to 1821.

One of these volumes is a collective tribute to the late historian Despoina Themeli-Katifori, who had contributed to the journal from the start. She had produced a pathbreaking dissertation in the midst of the Junta in which she examined the eradication of piracy in the Aegean in late 1820s. It was not the kind of subject the Junta liked to dwell on, not least because it used the wonderfully rich papers of the maritime courts to highlight the more mercenary struggles that often powered the revolution. Her work highlighted the importance of the economics of the war more generally, a crucial dimension which earlier generations had almost entirely ignored, as well as the realities of the independence struggle at sea.

Continuing Themeli-Katifori’s maritime focus, Gelina Harlaftis at the Institute for Mediterranean Studies in Crete has directed two astonishingly rich collective research projects. The first, dating back to 2004, deployed an international team of scholars who scoured shipping manifests, trade statistics and other archival data in some sixteen cities around Europe to build up a picture of unprecedented scope and detail, not just about the Greeks and their ships but about the entire eighteenth-century Mediterranean world of shipping. They sprang from a vast online database ensuring their work will inspire more research in future. A second volume, out this year, focuses on 1821 and the interconnections between commerce and fighting during the conflict. Cumulatively, this work changes our understanding of the relationship between Mediterranean commerce, empire and nationalism at a crucial phase in world history. Since Fernand Braudel, the Mediterranean has generally been relegated to the status of a secondary seaway after the discovery of the Americas. In fact it was at the heart of Europe’s growth, with Greek ships in particular not only carrying the Russian grain trade and driving the Tsarist expansion into the Black Sea, but linking the Levant to Montevideo, Bombay and Calcutta. The eighteenth-century Ottoman Empire too was no bystander: in reality it fostered this trade in all kinds of ways in the decades preceding the struggle. Even after the fighting started, amid scenes of great violence as we have seen, Greek ships continued sailing in and out of Ottoman ports, blurring the line between combatant and non-combatants often to the point of non-existence in a struggle in which legally there was actually no Greek navy but rather a set of occasionally-contracted vessels that remained privately owned by shipowners based in the islands.

The larger economics of the struggle that began in 1821 is another area where new scholarship is
The Greeks were poor in most things but wealthy in one - their language

money may not have bothered earlier histori- ans but it certainly bothered the proto- nists. Soldiers haggled over their wages; traders ran blockades to prevent all sides. A superb new study by Antonis Diakakis of the town of Messolonghi, perched between mountains and lagoon, brings the material conditions of wartime life sharply into focus. At sea, Greek crews bar- gained hard for pay and prizes. Elytchia Liatsa’s new analysis of the all-important Hydriot fleet drills down into the expenses of a single ship, the frigate Timios Stavros, and plunders hand- hardened into the war economy from the start, thanks to the investments of Greek leaders like Pet- ros Mavromichalis, the so-called Bey of the Mani, but the bargain not only created a demand for the island ships; it also enabled a new means of financ- ing them, and it is not coincidental that one of the earliest administrative acts of the first provisional government was to assign its fiscal prerogatives over the islands of the Aegean. It was thus the poor farm- ers and traders of Naxos, Santorini and other similar tourist destinations in our own times who became part of a great experiment: establishing a cen- tralized state in the midst of the conflict. The islands were targeted for a reason: the wart- time government found it hard to squeeze anything out of the big power greed. It must have seemed like the islands had much more to lose than the mainland, and were able to negotiate a peace on their own terms.

Along with Potakos, a number of these literate Greek intellectual-revolutionaries had banded together before 1821 with colleagues (e.g., the Filiki Etaireia, or Society), the secret conspiratorial organization that had been formed in Odessa in 1814 and laid the groundwork for the revolution. It was not the largest of the secret societies that alarmed the Holy Alliance in those years but it was certainly the most successful, for which other claim to have won national independence? Greece’s intellectual his- torians, for whom modernity was equivalence with the Enlightenment, once focused on the high- profile, mostly older Greek savants who wrote seri- ous texts and were in close contact with their coun- trymen in Paris, London and Göttingen. The new research focuses on these younger men in the thick of the fighting, “secondary” figures (as two scholars describe them) who served the revolution as Joachim Murat’s most ardent propagandists and acting as the crucial intermediaries between the more parochial fighters and the international scene. Great ideas give way to the networks as the key to the Greeks’ revolu- tionary success.

One of the best works of this kind is Vasilis Pan- ayiotopoulos’s study in 2019 of a little-known figure called Kastriotis, who wrote the memorandum for the government in 1821. It was the turning point of the war, and he was the main one to turn to in 1821 to take charge of the uprising there? The life of the “lesser” Kastriotis is revealed to be of some importance after all as the reader, guided sensitively by the author, tries to fill in the blanks in the history. The story was pro- duced by a younger scholar, Giannis Kokkonas, who recreates the ideological activism of another “lesser” Etarist, Skyllitzis Omiris, whose cease- less journeying and intense commitment provided Greek islanders with counsel and guidance at key moments.

Kokkonas is also the author of a remarkable piece of historical sleuthing. The Greeks’ capture - and subsequent sack - of the town of Tripolis in the Morea in September 1821 was the first major victory of the revolution and a precedent for the military negotiations between representatives of the town’s Ottoman elite and the Greek revolutionaries. Kokkonas has dug up an extraordinary verbal account of the exchange - a record kept at the time by a conscientious Etarist who almost everyone else has overlooked - to show both the Ottomans and the Greeks struggling to define the political stakes of their conflict and to realize what politi- cal dispensation might follow. Once again it turns out to have been the humble Greek revolutionaries, as yet lacking any state of their own, who under- stood the power of the written word and give us insights of astonishing immediacy.

Which leads naturally to the last and perhaps most important area now opening up before our eyes. Can the Ottoman speak? would be a reason- able question of the generations of historians who simply ignored the entire imperial dimension of the conflict. But Ottoman studies have taken off in Greece and this has begun to change. We now have, for instance, the translation of an important account of the revolution written by an Ottoman official from the Morea. The impact of seeing these events through Ottoman eyes can sometimes feel real- ized. The publication of the recollections of Yusuf Morawi Bey in particular speaks not only to the presence of Ottomans in Greek universities, but the Daily Mirror, with colleagues in the field in Turkey and elsewhere, and to the Greek National Research Foundation’s laudable commit- ment to supporting this work.

How might have thought that there was nothing more to be said about 1821. And yet, this is not how history works. The eternal verities of the revolution and the endless replays of a few familiar scenes have hidden a far more interesting reality, one in which the emergence of an independent nation turns out to have been simultaneously a new chapter in the life of the empire it was trying to escape and a further chapter in the life of the continent it was seeking to join. It is unlikely that there will be any more appropriate or important tribute to the revolutionaries of 1821 than the devotion of the his- torical profession in Greece today. ■

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Poet of the too-present

A new adaptation stages the unsettling power of Stevie Smith

NOREEN MASUD

STEVIE SMITH: BLACK MARCH
DEAD POETS LIVE

Filmed at the Wanamaker Playhouse, available on
Globe Player until April 5

A YEAR INTO MY DOCTORATE, knowing nothing, I visited the Hull History Centre and called up every item in the Stevie Smith archive. The librarians brought in a large roll of paper and laid it diagonally across the Map Table. It was a roller blind. On it Smith’s poem “Anima, vagula, blandula” was writ small in black marker pen, dated February 4 1969. That was all.

What happened next was not archive fever but archive theatre, performed for the benefit, and probably the tired amusement, of the staff. I panicked. I went to the desk and requested weights and a magnifying glass. I inspected the ends of the writing. I stood on a chair and took photographs from every angle. I have more images of that blind than of all the manuscript of Novel on Yellow Paper (1936). They are all useless.

The blind is not relevant. But I had to behave as though it might be: to find a way to manage its large, awkward substance. I had either to find it a place in my thinking or a way to handle its unwieldy presence, to go on around it but with it. Because something or someone else is always hanging around, in the way, when you read Stevie Smith. In the illustration to her poem “Thank You”, two little girls peer at the reader over a wall, but they don’t seem to be looking for anything. Drawings run up and down the margins, cryptic figures with nothing obviously to do with the texts, frozen in conspiratorial smirks. Reading a poem might involve triangulating the drawings for interpretation; more often, it involves an uneasy half-ignoring of these lingering watchers, turning our backs on them as we attempt to make sense of writing that is already troublesome enough in itself.

These figures are too solid, too ridiculous to be ghosts, to haunt. They are more like the person at the party who hovers at the edge of a group, smiling, but whom no one owns up to having invited. Aural visitors abound, too. In the recent Dead Poets Live production Stevie Smith: Black March, released to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Smith’s death on March 29, 1969, is a reflection (brunette, very good Stevie Smith) recites Smith’s poem “To the Tune of the Coventry Carol”. She does not begin by singing it. The title is enough to call up the tune, which lingers mostly in the background, because, almost inevitably, the tunes that Smith chooses to shape and form her poems do not quite fit. Instead of holding the poem in a secure framework, they drift, hanging around in the doorway, neither coming nor going. These tunes, one suspects, were a compromise: the best way Smith had of capturing what she called, in a letter of 1948, “the missed-shot tunes” that ran around her brain, which she could not “always reproduce even by singing”. She went into more detail in a radio broadcast called Poems, Drawings and Music: “Halfway through a poem it will begin, the tyrannical beat of an ancestral tune, half heard, not quite remembered”. We leave Smith’s work with the sensation of something on the tip of our tongue which we cannot quite recall, an irritable still lingering.

Adaptations of Smith’s work for stage and radio - such as her radio play A Turn Outside (1959), Hugh Whitmore’s play Stevie (1977) and this new adaptation - make this lingering Other literal. They insert a man. Whitmore actually calls him “The Man”. He hangs around, interviews Smith (whether she is played by Glenda Jackson, Zoë Wanamaker or Juliet Stevenson), interjects and argues, tells the story of her life, and acts generally as an intermediary between Smith and the audience. In this latest production, the man is James Lever. He takes turns with Stevenson, adding historical and critical context around her complicity of Smithisms. I have always struggled with this inevitable extra Man. Smith’s father, famously, ran away to sea; she admits in her third novel, The Holiday (1949), that she is not conditioned to having a man around, with its attendant disadvantages. Who is the man for her? She asks. Why do we need him? Lever co-wrote the script of this production. Still, I felt awkward whenever he spoke, embarrassed for him and his failure to recognize his own irrelevance, his hanger-on status in Smith’s world - what she called, in one poem, her “house of female habitation”.

But to deal with Smith at all is to give in to awkwardness. Everything is so present in her work: too much shows up, and too enthusiastically. Smith showed up too hard to her performances in the 1960s, singing to aghast audiences, eased by “no protective curve” in her posture, as Glenda Jackson put it. She warbled poems such as “Do Take Muriel Out” on one note at length, before dropping them recklessly into a dangerously low pitch, lower than she could comfortably reach. Although Juliet Stevenson mostly spares us the singing, she recites hard. Where Jackson’s Smith was mousy-upright, and Zoë Wanamaker’s mischievous, Stevenson plays Smith as a gimblet half-schoolgirl half-headmistress, staring straight into the camera as she snaps out the lines. Under her gaze, I found myself writhing off the sofa in guilty discomfort. So it worked.

Smith is the poet of the too-present, hints Stevie Smith: Black March, in more ways than one. The performance claims Smith for our own strange times. It juxtaposes “Do Take Muriel Out” - poor Muriel, alone, “goes home to too much leisure” - with footage of our lonely lockdown lives: a woman glumly shopping in a face covering, doing a solitary jigsaw with a glass of wine. But it is Death who is being urged to take Muriel out, to break lock- and-dance her over the blasted heath. At this point the camera cuts back to Stevenson’s face. Is this too close to the bone? It is certainly awkward.

Awkward, too, those drawings, which are drawn from plentifully into this performance. Publishers squirmed on first encountering them. At one point, Smith herself was embarrassed: she told Diana Athill in a letter that the pictures could, after all, be omitted. She’d had another look and decided that she couldn’t really draw hands, or the back legs of animals. Smith draws hands with four fingers, which, as cartoonists know, is too many: modern three-fingered, claw-like, hands. So Smith’s characters hold their hands out in front of them, or at strange angles, like uncomfortable teenagers. And her animals have pointy back legs which sometimes seem to occupy a slightly different plane from the front ones. Rather than helping her cows and cats to balance, they turn an animal into a kind of uneven table - one which might come down with a thump when you try to write or draw on it.

One hears this thump in the poems, too - in the rhythm of “The Blue from Heaven”, for instance: Go back, Gameover.
Go back to the palace, said the King.

She went back to the palace
And her grief did not seem to her a small thing. Thistles and overextended and syntactically awkward, now I want to stuff a wad of napkins under the opposite table leg to soften the rocking. Ultimately, Smith changed her mind again about the drawings. If the pictures couldn’t be included, she decided, Athill would need to release her from the book contract altogether. (“I know this is very troublesome of me”, she half-apologized.) Athill backed down. The drawings were allowed in, blurring and raising their eyebrows. Readers would have to find a way to get on with them - and to cope with the unspoken poetry rocking under them like a Map Table overweighted with a monstrous, inexplicable blind - as they tried to go on with their work.

James Lever and Juliet Stevenson in Stevie Smith: Black March

We leave Smith’s work with the sensation of something on the tip of our tongue which we cannot quite recall

Noreen Masud’s first book, Hard Language: Stevie Smith and the aphorism, will be published later this year

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14
Playing in a world of his own

How Louis Armstrong dealt with the big-band era

RUSSELL DAVIES

HEART FULL OF RHYTHM

The big band years of Louis Armstrong

RICKY RICCARDI


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Universally endearing yet perpetually controversial, Louis Armstrong (correctly pronounced “Lewiis”), never led the easy life his world-famous grin seemed to advertise. Along with countless triumphs, he met difficulties and complications in every period of his long career, and never more exhaustingly than within the scope of this book, from 1929 to 1947. For a man born in 1901, that period should have been the prime of life, but few have seen it as the prime of Armstrong’s musical life. His fame, it’s true, spread all over the world, yet he seemed to be constantly vexing critics and chroniclers who wished he would play a different repertoire, in a different manner, and with, as they saw it, a purer view of his responsibilities to the art of jazz.

Of course, he had amply discharged those responsibilities at a very early stage: nobody in the 1920s had done more than Armstrong to establish jazz as a medium of personal expression, through his rhythmic daring, speed of thought and execution, and fat, commanding trumpet tone, usually exercised in small groups where his solo virtuosity didn’t have to be “showcased” since it was naturally outstanding. But the 30s proved much less easy to negotiate. Jazz was no longer a regional small-scale music, bred in the relative seclusion of New Orleans and South Side Chicago, but a phenomenon finding its place in a wider world of entertainment. Jazz groups, in Larson’s words, were now “growing ever larger, their presentation a theatrical feature. Wondrous in its day, a group like Armstrong’s Hot Five could no longer fill the stage in the way that showbusiness required; so Louis became the instrumental equivalent of a spotlight soprano, operating in front of a chorus-like ensemble - his big band.

The quality of that ensemble was, alas, extremely variable. When Armstrong took over a pre-existing band, like Luis Russell’s, which had played itself into a confident groove, things generally went well. Even with a put-together band, if an instrumental maestro was present, a coherent and purposeful sound might result, as in the case of the 1930 outfit featuring Lawrence Brown’s trombone and Lionel Hampton at the drums. Armstrong always responded best when there was no one there excepted in his line-up. But otherwise, through the 30s, there were too many failures of intonation, rhythmic unanimity, and improvisational competence in the Armstrong big bands. Louis himself complained remarkably little about all this, but he was never a disciplinarian leader in the manner of Jimmie Lunceford or Cab Calloway or even the passive-aggressive Count Basie.

(On the contrary, for a while Louis openly permitted among the sidemen a certain level of irreverence for reefer-smoking, a habit that in 1930 had brought him nine days in a California jail.)

I hoped that Ricky Riccardi, the understandably besotted Director of Research Collections at the Louis Armstrong House Museum in Corona, New York, and a prolific Armstrong blogger, would stop short of claiming that Armstrong’s solo playing was so magnificent as to rescue even his most disorderly 30s recordings. But no, that claim is made, in this assessment of some sessions from April 1933:

Some of the RCA songs are dogs, some of the arrangements are poor, and some of the section playing from Armstrong’s band is woeful but none of it matters, on track after track, Armstrong flies around his horn like Superman, totally in command and able to pull off any and every idea in his mind.

But of course it does matter: the disparity between the leader’s virtuosity and the ineptitudes of his colleagues often makes for uneasy listening. Armstrong’s splendour shows up the tawdriness of his surroundings. He’s in a world of his own - in fact Teddy Wilson, the band pianist of that moment, said as much: “The band could be terrible, and he just went right straight ahead and played in that world of his own and was never at the mercy of the band.”

In one sense perhaps not, but to borrow from another art, these split-level performances were much like watching a superb dancer in front of a clodhopping corps de ballet.

His managers must bear some of the blame. Tommy Rockwell, the first, knew the mechanics of the recording trade, but not necessarily what to do with it. It was under his regime that Louis worked up his showbiz stunt: a couple of concurrent recordings at 200 high-cut C’s, capped finally by the barely reachable topmost F. It never failed to wow vaudeville audience who might otherwise have remained unmoved by the music; but over time, this grandstanding habit made a wreck of the legendary Armstrong lip, so his 30s career became a thing of medically-avoided stops and starts. Rockwell was an interferer in the studio, too, and in 1939 he did one great thing, by insisting that Armstrong record “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” at ballad tempo. The results set Louis off on a career of lovesongs-singing - the good, the literate, heartfelt songs of those years - where his vocal freedom, rhythmic and melodic, at once became a resource for a generation of vocal specialists as disparate as Bing Crosby and Billie Holiday.

Rockwell gave way to Johnny Collins, a borderline gangster who was not unhappy with that image, who presided over the period when Armstrong was chased from pillar to post (and eventually away into Europe) by various factions of the Mob. A drunken, brawling dispute over Armstrong’s choice of tunes ended Collins’s tenure on the spot. Narratively, however, the trouble with these two managerial stints is that they never quite faded out of the picture, bobbing up again repeatedly to complicate it with new proposals or claims. A confusion of obligations and semi-settled contracts (monitored with remarkable tenacity by Riccardi) persisted even after Armstrong had settled on a permanent commercial guardian in the shape of Joe Glaser. An accredited brothel-keeping Chicago hoodlum, Glaser had come burdened, Riccardi shows, with an appalling series of underhanded rape allegations against his name, but strangely they never quite came to court. Riccardi claims that Louis knew about “his chicks”, but was brought up in a section of New Orleans so lawless it was known as The Battlefield, and later banished in Dickensian fashion to the Colored Waifs’ Home after firing off a pistol in the street, and he was perhaps more accustomed to most to turning a blind eye to crime. Glaser, for his part, grew into the job, working Armstrong over-hard, some thought, but continuing to defend him with trademark ferocity almost to the end of his career.

Much of the teeming detail Riccardi has assembled illustrates how steeply uphill was Louis Armstrong’s rise to national and international stardom, in ways not encountered by competing white leaders like Benny Goodman or Tommy Dorsey. The social conditions endured by Black bands at large in the American South are familiar from many jazz histories, but still shocking. As late as 1939, The New York Times was remarking: “Though we could get along without Mr Armstrong’s apeman antics, his trumpet tooting is phenomenal”. And the Showboat movie review in The New York Times of 1938 boasts: “The movie Cabin In The Sky was still advising, ‘Don’t be afraid of the all-colored cast’.

Some of his contemporaries called Armstrong an Uncle Tom, playing up to the assumption of the white audience. But even had that been true, it would have been an acting triumph in itself, keeping the perpetual grin on show amid such casually dehumanising commentary. Backstage, on the tapes to which our author has exceptional access, Armstrong voiced extremely salty opinions on these and many other matters, and Riccardi must be thanked for not muting the chosen vocabulary at any point (which would include the n-word, among others, abound). Incidentally, the author succeeded in boiling down his account from “an obscure 290-page work”, a noble and necessary effort. But in editing terms, the Oxford University Press will not be claiming this as their finest hour. The test needed a lot more checking for typos, omissions and inconsistencies, for example, the three versions offered of the screenwriter Elliot Paul’s name, none of them marked “sic” and none of them appearing in the index, from which in fact many essential names are missing - as for example, the one time friend and amuse British readers occurs when our best-loved trombonist is introduced as “the vocalist George Chisholm”. George did have a habit of ending some performances with an extended scat, as for example “(Along the line the train came puffin’ / Scotland twelve, England nuftin’),” but a vocalist he wasn’t.

I wish Britain’s own trumpet master, Humphrey Lyttelton (“that guy who swings his ass off”, in Louis-language), had lived to see the sheer accumulation of detail this book provides. His teenage years fell squarely within its period, and he quickly became attuned to the Armstrong of the 30s, and even to the shaggy big band sound that backed him. In fact, Humph told me, he found it difficult at first to enthuse, as he felt he should, over the earlier Armstrong output, so widely regarded as revolutionery, style-setting and so on. My own postgraduate generation never faced that problem, for the age of reissue has begun, leaving us knee-deep in the LP compilations of the vintage stuff, starring with Armstrong’s second-cornet role in King Oliver’s Creole Jazz Band of 1923. And Louis was still touring in the 70s, so I can experience the historic thrill of his tone on my attack in the flesh. One of my proudest claims is that I worked for him for one hot day in 1967, playing in a student band on the back of a truck in St Tropez, to advertise his evening concert on the beach. I got to sit in for all of afternoon, the Armstrong band bus passed our wagon on the street, and most of his musicians took photographs of us - as comical a reversal of the realities of homage as there could be.
The Good China Story?

Literature as a nation's lifblood

JEFFREY WASSERSTROM

LAND OF BIG NUMBERS

TE-PING CHEN


PEACH BLOSSOM PARADISE

GE FEI

Translated by Canaan Morse


WHY FICTION MATTERS IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

DAVID DER-WEI WANG


X Jinping is often described as China’s most powerful leader since Chairman Mao. He is also the most literary-minded. Xi became head of China’s Communist Party in 2012, and his main source of authority remains his leadership of that organization. He has acquired many other positions and titles (from President to Comm- ander-in-Chief) but it often seems he still covets two imaginary ones: Author-in-Chief and Grand Arbiter of Stories. Volumes by China’s leader are, as in Mao’s day, the first visitors see on entering bookstores. When speaking in foreign settings, Xi reeks off the names of his favourite authors associated with the country he is visiting. Chinese classical allusions pepper his domestic speeches. And he has urged Mo Yan’s famous author to focus on revolutionary goals by insisting they treat as a sacred duty “telling the good China story”. This includes not just the present but the way Chinese writers approach history.

Xi’s focus on storytelling recalls not just Mao (1933-1976) but also Chen Duxiu (1879-1942) and Li Dazhao (1889-1927), the scholarly pair who co-founded the Communist Party - an organization whose centenary will be marked in July by versions of the “good China story” being told repeatedly across myriad media. Before working with an adviser from Moscow and a small group of protégés (including a young Mao) to establish the Party, Chen and Li edited and wrote for an extraordinarily influential periodical, Xin Qingnian (New Youth). Founded in 1915, it carried commentaries, translations and poetry and fiction written in experimental styles. New Youth’s contributors - including Mao, one of whose essays in it criticized Confucianism - championed the potential of liberalism, anarchism and socialism to save China, emphasizing literature’s potential to aid this process. During 1920s the magazine lost its eclecticism and devoted into a Party organ.

Xi’s concerns with the “good China story” at the juncture of this year’s centenary may be this is a good moment to take stock of how literary and political trends in the country intersect. Three very different new publications provide us with a lens through which to do this. Land of Big Numbers is the debut book by Te-Ping Chen, a Chinese-American journalist who spent years in China reporting for the Wall Street Journal. Chen’s beautifully crafted stories take place in diverse settings, mostly different Chinese urban and rural areas but a few American locales slip in; they are diverse in tone - some whimsical, some bittersweet - and also style. Some are straightforward, close to journalism; others, such as “Lulu”, featuring a digital activist and set in a near future in which current technological trends have creepily moved forwards, veer into William Gibson territory. Perhaps the best is “New Fruit”, with its elements of magic realism: a novel food “with a taste marvelous and rare, sweet with an underside of acid” suddenly appears in an urban neighbourhood whose quotidian rhythms are sketched out in ethnographic detail. Eating the delicacy changes the way memory and emotions work, triggering wrenching remorse about past traumas, such as the Cultural Revolution. In other tales, characters exult in new possibilities for life and love.

Peach Blossom Paradise is a novel by a Beijing-based winner of the prestigious Lu Xun Literary prize. (Lu Xun was a contributor to New Youth; though he was an iconoclast who never joined the Party, Mao sometimes described him as his favourite modern writer.) Ge Fei’s title alludes to the idyllic hidden “peach blossom” land in a famous fable. His version of this is an isolated rebel stronghold, a sort of mash-up of Brigadoon and Robin Hood’s Sherwood Forest. A complex work of alternative history (its invented characters commit deeds that parallel those of real revolutionaries in the late 1890s and early 1900s, while forming and breaking plenty of romantic attachments), it has been gracefully translated by Canaan Morse, following its initial publication in China in 2007. The action is set exclusively in China, though there is an allusion to a character’s sojourn in Japan, a place many Chinese radicals of the time went to study, avoid arrest, and do other things, including founding political journals.

David Der-wei Wang, a Harvard professor originally from Taiwan, is among the world’s leading authorities on the literature of the era when Peach Blossom Paradise’s events took place and New Youth began publishing. Despite its title, Why Fiction Matters in Contemporary China moves between that period and the age of Xi. Early on, Wang combines a discussion of Xi’s new “good China story” idea with an analysis of two notable old texts by Chinese progressive writers who spent time in Japan. The Future of New China (1902) by Liang Qichao (1873-1929) - a radical reformer who founded more than one journal while based in Tokyo and was a major influence on New Youth authors - is an unfinished novel (only a fragment was ever published) that reflects back on its own era from a time in the far future. Written when the Qing was bullied and disrespected by foreign powers, it imagines a China of the future basking in the glory of hosting a World’s Fair.

The other text is “Diary of a Madman” (1918), a short story by Lu Xun (1881-1936), considered the most important work of fiction New Youth published. Its protagonist, who is either deluded or suffers from seeing reality too clearly, becomes convinced that a secret cannibalistic code, calling on people to “eat people”, is written between the lines of Confucian classics, a metaphor for hidebound hierarchical traditions and their soul-crushing impact on Chinese youth. One of Wang’s goals is to encourage readers to see how Xi’s concerns with storytelling fit into a grand Chinese tradition that posits literature as central to the libedon of the nation. This tradition, however, was once rooted in plurality: even Mao, in his early years, thought there was more than one “good China story” - and this meant generically, stylistically, even ideologically. Xi, however - like Mao in his later years - has stricter criteria for what constitutes “good”, and this has had a catastrophic effect. Today, Wang finds the alternative Chinese storytelling spirit of Liang and New Youth residing largely in the country’s exiles, such as the dissident Ma Jian, who has long been based in London.

What connects Chen, Ge and Wang’s books is a sense of dreaming: both in terms of aspiration and of something more sinister and nightmarish. One of Chen’s best stories, “Flying Machine”, concerns a villager with big dreams, an enthusiastic rural inventor whose optimism remains undimmed even when the schemes fail. Another, “Gubenlu Xiu Spirit”, unfolds in the nightmarish milieu of a subway station filled with people who grow anxious as the train they await keeps being delayed; they find they are both enacting and the terminal, and finally see their train arrive - only for it to go speeding past. Peach Blossom Paradise concerns revolutions whose dreams fail to materialize. Liang’s unfinished novel is about a dream coming true, while “Diary of a Madman” brings a nightmare to life.

It might be instructive to consider a hypothetical exercise: if Liang and the contributors to New Youth were faced with Xi’s China, what would they make of it? Liang would be pleased to learn China had hosted the 2008 Beijing Games and 2010 Shanghai Expo but dismayed to find the Communists in power. New Youth contributors who embraced Marxism-Leninism would be pleased about the dominance of the Party but perplexed to learn that Xi, like his immediate predecessors - but unlike Mao - reveses Confucian. Many, perhaps all, of our time-travellers would chafe at the limits on authorial invention inherent in the “good China story” idea, and the discovery that some of the most daring Chinese works are banned in Beijing.

Picking up Peach Blossom Paradise might reassure them on this score. The novel ends with a gesture towards accepting the Party’s teleological view of history, in the form of notes on how its fictional characters and their descendants would fare under Communist rule, but it includes fanciful elements and references to revolutions running into dead ends. Yet, barely a decade on from its first appearance in China, it is not clear that such a novel could be published in the country now. Contributors to New Youth would be disturbed to learn of a trend that began before but has accelerated since the rise of Xi: more historical periods being deemed sensitive, and more subjects deemed taboo.

Our visitors from the past would likely relish Land of Big Numbers, its engagement between genres, and admixture of tales that Chinese culture with ones that encourage reflection on autocracy, along with its cosmopolitanism, might make it seem like a kindred work to the periodicals of their own time.
Walled kingdoms of the mind
The forging of modern China through the story of a family

NICK HOLDSTOCK
MY OLD HOME
A novel of exile
ORVILLE SCHELL
624pp. Bantam Dell. $29.95.

DESPITE THE COUNTRY'S global pre-eminence, in the West most people's knowledge of the foundational years of the People's Republic of China is limited to a vague familiarity with Maoist excess and the violence in Tiananmen Square in 1989. Orville Schell's debut novel, My Old Home, aims to introduce general readers to this tumultuous period through the fictional experiences of Li Tongshu, a professor of music in Beijing, and his son, Little Li.

Both characters' lives are warped by the Chinese Communist Party's attempts to radically reshape society. The father, a proponent of Western classical music who spent time in the US and married an American, is repeatedly persecuted for his associations with foreign powers and culture, while his son is banished to a distant province for a decade.

Though the pair are reunited in the early 1980s, when Party control has slackened, the father dies shortly after, prompting Little Li to visit San Francisco. He returns just before the Tiananmen Square protests.

There are multiple challenges to writing a novel whose action takes place over a long period, portraying a family narrative against a grander tale of national change (Thomas Hardy and George Eliot spring to mind as experts at the genre). Schell, a scholar and journalist who has been writing about China since the 1960s, is certainly well qualified to convey the broader national story, and on a factual level most of what he has to say about the period is perceptive. Some of this is conveyed naturally, through dialogue and incident, yet much of the novel's exposition reads as if it has been taken from a textbook. At one point we are even told about the "towering pyramid of differentiated party positions and attendant privileges that were hauntingly similar to the very hierarchies that had formed the core of Confucian/scholar-gentry rule". The author has also plumped for the baffling usage of Chinese characters throughout for proper names and idioms.

There are some nice details — pigs named after Nikita Khrushchev and his wife; traffic lights inverted by Red Guards so that red means "go". But the prose is ultimately stale, melodramatic and often clichéd: eyes sparkle, nerve endings jangle, tears of joy stream down cheeks; voices crack with emotion, hearts sink. Little Li feels himself being carried into the "uncharted waters of an unknowable future"; accusations of counter-revolution leave "stains that no power on earth was capable of cleansing".

Li Tongshu and Little Li are one-dimensional. Their motivations and feelings are never left in doubt. The father is a "model of restraint, courtesy and uprightness" who is "deeply Eastern and Western at the same time". The son is passive and impressionable. Schell attempts to reconcile the micro and macro through a series of equivalences between the characters and the wider political situation, but these invariably feel forced: "China was most assuredly a land of walls, but he was also imprisoned by the walled kingdom of his own insecurity". There is also a death of convincing female characters. Little Li's mother is barely more than a ghost; apart from her, the novel is characteristic of the women Little Li encounters is that they are sexually obliging (many breasts are described along the way). The novel's epigraphs — a quote from the Book of Isaiah and Pablo Casals's statement that "Music will save the world" — leave little doubt about its messages, which are neither developed nor complicated throughout its 600 pages. Late in My Old Home Schell makes a more informed allusion to his own cinematic work: for anyone who wants to learn more about the forces that shaped today's China, this is a far better introduction.

An end to Genghis
Heroism in a Chinese epic

TOM UE
A HEART DIVIDED
Legends of Condor Heroes: Volume IV
JIN YONG
Translated by Shelly Bryant, Gigi Chang and Anna Holmwood

A HEART DIVIDED is the fourth volume in Legends of Condor Heroes by Louis Cha Jing-yong (1924-2018), and the final book in the first arc of the twelve-volume Condor Trilogy. Originally written between 1957 and 1963, the entire series is currently being translated into English by Shelly Bryant, Gigi Chang and Anna Holmwood.

Legends opens in 1205, during the Jin-Song Wars, and ends in 1368 with the establishment of the Ming dynasty. Cha crafts into this history the story of a book: the "Nine Yin Manual", documenting a set of advanced martial arts. Generations of great fighters have lost their lives trying to gain possession of the Nine Yin, The Contest of Mount Hua is designed to bring order to the wulin (the community of martial artists). Its winner will be declared the Greatest Martial Master Under the Heavens, and he or she will become the manual's custodian.

The first arc was initially serialized between 1957 and 1959. In it, the good-natured, if impeccably dull, Guo Jing rises from zero to hero. This Song patriot grew up with his mother in Mongolia under Genghis Khan's protection, and we come to learn about twelfth-century China and the wulin through his eyes. Throughout the books Cha demonstrates an uncanny ability to raise broader social, political and historical questions by means of Guo's narrative.

Structurally, A Heart Divided is framed by Guo's meetings with the Reverend Sole Light — formerly the Southern King Duan Zhixing — and with Genghis Khan. At the start of the story, Lotus, Guo's love interest, is injured, and the pair seek the Reverend Sole Light's help.

For the Reverend, it is a case of déjà vu. Years ago, he had refused to heal his consort's illegitimate child. He would have had to draw on his primal strength, which would have compromised his performance in the Contest. The Reverend could not forgive her for loving another, and he watched as she killed her own child. Now he faces a second chance: he can save Lotus — but only by relinquishing his claims to the Contest and the Manual.

We might compare the Reverend with Genghis Khan. Through Guo's conversations with the Mongol ruler, Cha rummages over what it means to be a hero, and his commentary resonates as much for the thirteenth century as it did for the twentieth and, for that matter, does for the twenty-first.

As Genghis Khan gloats about his enormous empire ("you can ride in any direction — east, south, west, north — and it will take a whole year to reach the border, even with the fastest horses"), Guo reprimands him for the human costs of his project. His military prowess may be formidable but his success has been "built upon a mountain of white bones and a sea of widows' and orphans' tears". Guo's criticisms do not stop there. He asks Genghis Khan what the value is in sowing misery everywhere if he can but occupy so little space when he dies. In Guo's view, the conqueror is no hero, and his observations on the Mongol ruler: "as he looked back at the trail of dust in his wake, he had no idea where he had come from, where he was going or why he was even there. A choking, gurgling sound rose in his throat. Blood sprayed from his lips, staining the ground".

The word "hero" is on Genghis Khan's lips as he lies dying, leading Cha's narrator to speculate: "Perhaps he was persuaded by Guo Jing's words?" Guo doesn't say it, but he himself must live with the consequences of having saved Genghis Khan's life, thousands of pages before, when he was a small boy.

Years and years of stories remain, for us as much as for the characters of the Condor Trilogy: the volumes are appearing at a rate of one per year, with eight still remaining. By making available in English one of the most popular works of the twentieth century — an estimated 300 million copies of the series have been sold — MacLehose Press's project is itself little short of heroic.
Poet and legislator
A vision of Andrew Marvell in the round

DAVID WHEATLEY

ANDREW MARVELL
A literary life
MATT giov C. AUGUSTINE

In 1650, Andrew Marvell marked the death of the poet Thomas May with a pointedly waspish elegy. Long unsuccessful in his attempts to woo a patron, May had transferred his allegiance from the Royalist to the parliamentary cause, and is portrayed by Marvell as an opportunist and poetaster. As Matthew C. Augustine notes in his fine new study, Andrew Marvell: A literary life, the reader might pause on the idea of May’s turncoat fickleness as grounds for attack. The panegyrist of Royalist heroes Richard Lovelace and Francis Villiers, in the years before he produced his “Horatian Ode upon Cromwell’s Return from Ireland”, Marvell is not just among the most celebrated political poets in English, but one of those whose personal stance at any given time, even within individual poems, is most difficult to read.

Some poets change their views through lack of principle and others to show true principle in a changing world, Marvell might reasonably have argued in his defence, and in rejecting May he was signalling that he was of the latter tribe. For many modern readers, though, the knotty question of Marvell’s political loyalties may be a moot point: it is as a metaphysical poet of love and nature that he is principally remembered. As against this, Augustine proposes a vision of Marvell in the round, supplying a biographical hinterland to the best-known poems and making a case for the mass of lesser-known and politically inspired work.

One aspect of Marvell’s style that has continued to find undiluted favour among poets is the rich image-world of his metaphorical conceits. In an essay from The Force of Poetry, Christopher Ricks applies William Empson’s phrase “the self-imwoven simile” to Marvell and his fondness for a turn towards interiority (“The mind, that ocean where each kind / Does straight its own resemblance find”), which he interprets as a response to civil strife, and examples of which he traces in Northern Irish poems and their responses to the Troubles. The readings of “The Garden” and “Upon Appleton House” here do not make a case for Marvell as a forefather of Ted Hughes and Alice Oswald, but do usefully fill in their Neoplatonic background, and the near-Buddhist states of illumination they attain (“annihilating all that’s made / To a green thought in a green shade”).

Empson also detected a gay subtext to Marvell’s Mower poems and, as Augustine shows, Marvell’s indeterminate sexuality (notwithstanding an apocryphal marriage to his landlady) often provided his opponents with satirical ammunition. “Last Instruct-ions to a Painter”, a long and little-read poem on the Anglo-Dutch war of the 1660s, is full of grotesque satirical language, some of it colourfully sexual. Augustine is good at unpacking satire as a vehicle for Marvell’s self-positioning among the Laudians, Arminians and myriad other Restoration factions.

Staying close to the poetry at all times, Augustine’s study does not mention - and may predate - recent research suggesting Marvell worked not, as previously believed, as an English spy in Holland, but as a Dutch double-agent in the service of William of Orange (TLS, April 10, 2020). If true, this is entirely consonant with the “plastics” in Augustine’s term, of Marvell’s politics and the world in which he operated. His tacking between public and private realms, and finding a lyric voice equal to both, is high among Marvell’s achievements, even if it sometimes hampers critics’ attempts to place him - even a critic as supremely self-assured as T. S. Eliot, who noted (TLS, March 31, 1920) that “the quality which Marvell had, this modest and certainly impersonal virtue - whether we call it wit or reason, or even urbanity - we have patently failed to define”.

Unlike Shelley’s vision of the poet as an “unacknowledged legislator”, Marvell was for much of his life a working MP, a poet who had authority in the public sphere. The poet of “The Garden” knew a lot about the disappointments of politics (“How vainly men themselves amaze, / To win the palm, the oak, or bays”), but the “green thoughts” he discovers in his “green shade” are anything but an escapist retreat. Tough and worldly, yet mysterious and mystical, Marvell’s incomparable lyrics continue to exercise their lasting spell.

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Reimagining Andrew Marvell: the poet at 400

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Since the tercentenary of his birth, in 1921, Andrew Marvell has come to be recognised as both the most important seventeenth-century poet after John Milton and as a courageous defender of toleration and freedom from arbitrary government. Indeed, since the ‘historical turn’ of the 1970s and 80s, politics has become the privileged paradigm of new research on Marvell, as it has for much early modern literature. This conference looks to the future of Marvell studies by asking: what comes ‘after’ politics? In a way the answer may be ‘more politics’ – but a politics newly conceived and newly invigorated by a return to form, to poetry and poetics, to the life of writing and the life in writing. This conference thus seeks to imagine not only a new century of Marvell studies but also the future of interdisciplinary early modern research more broadly.

Organised in partnership with the University of St Andrews

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The British Academy
Three poems for Andrew Marvell at 400

The Glow-Worm to the Mower

Since you're unlikely to astound
yourself by having more to save
than hay, small wonder you've not found
why wave upon successive wave

would summon, far inland, sea-sounds
from a dull scythe or sickle.
When Juliana and you downed
tools to lunch on cheese and pickles

atop the triangular mound
with its outcrop of hairy vetch
for which your meadow is renowned
it must have felt like the home stretch

to a safe harbour. Black horehound
in the sheugh ... The sun a sea-gong ...
All afternoon you would expound
on how a mower must be strong

while Juliana, tightly wound
as ever, slowly went off-script,
the vetch-garland with which she's crowned
having by dusk completely slipped,

the ties by which lovers are bound
also substantially weakened.
We mourn all those poor souls who've drowned
because our own inconstant beacons

have led to their running aground;
bear in mind it's by, and from you
(and not the other way around)
we glow-worms steer and take our cue.

PAUL MULDOON

The Mower Redux

Like this tree. Buried under herbs
& flowers. Purity disturbs

it. Fungus eating through the small
leaves. Tiny cankers. A shortfall

in vigor meeting the desire
to fail. But in failed speech a higher

order sticks. True survey, & in
green gardens green annihilation

speaks. You are a dream baby caught
in wool. The enemy of thought

is thinking. Problems talk away
themselves in time. As hay binds hay.

As love is subjects, endlessly
combined. Infected. Like this tree.

WILL HARRIS

By the tide of Humber

In 1641 Andrew Marvell's father was drowned crossing the Humber in a barrow boat. The poet's "To His Coy Mistress" was written some nine years later.

Which way to walk? eastwards by ebb tide,
past the stink of the upriver staiths
and a small brick school between garden and church,
to the spit of Spurn, that land's-end shifter,

or westwards inland, the estuary shrinking
till you'd almost walk across sandbanks and mud
southwards to Cambridge - the way out, straight
by Ermine Street for a Roman departure.

Now I by the tide of Humber once more
ponder these shallows more lethal than deeps,
and a barrow boat, grounded, where a wash of water
unpicks what was lost of him bit by bit -

and think, no fine and private place
was his, just the city's effluent waste
seeing seawards, the spirit of him held
forever in the tide's endless erasures,

till Spurn divides sea-lappers from the still
to curb the hacking flow that pours
salt into fresh, daily, and seems
a hurt refreshed, a trouble restored.

Now I, by the tide, still whisper farewells.
Te patre, Caesar (royal head or round) -
my warring self by such waters crossed:
fluvial, marine, knitting frets between,

where contrary currents make shifting sands
channel a ripptide, then swing and suck
any light craft under - as if I carry
his death within, unfinished, unsung.

So I, by the waters that quarrel and kill,
stay, for contraries no war resolves,
to complain of love in verse that hides
an elegy, deep in the undertow of tide.

ANGELA LEIGHTON

1 "You father, Caesar", from Marvell's earliest known student poem in Latin, published in Cambridge, 1637
Planted in foreign soil

A rich portrait of a difficult marriage

ANN KENNEDY SMITH

INVENTORY OF A LIFE MISLAIRED

An unreliable memoir

MARINA WARNER


In 1944, Emilia “Ilia” Terzulli was twenty-one and working in a typist when she met Esmond Warner, a thirty-six-year-old staff officer in the Royal Fusiliers, then stationed in Bari in southern Italy. She came from a poor family, while he was the son of Sir Dalhilm “Flair” Warner, the famous English Test cricketer and journalist, and Agnes Blyth, of Gilbey’s gin fame. Even before they married, Esmond took charge, confidently reassuring his parents that her life will be mine, NOT her circle’s”. Back in London, he proved it by buying his wartime bride a pair of Peal’s bespoke brogues, similar to the sensible lace-ups worn by the young princesses Elizabeth and Margaret, and suitable for an English countrywoman’s life. Such shoes signalled that for Ilia, there would be no going back: “the brogues would plant her on – they would transplant her to – British soil”.

Marina Warner’s books include novels and short stories as well as studies of female myths, iconography and fairy tales. *Inventory of a Life Mislaid* draws on elements from all of these, to tell the story of the early years of her parents’ marriage, sparked by Warner’s discovery after her father’s death of two coiled-together rolls of negative film, one from 1944, the other from 1952. “A compass points of his life”. The snapshots are among a series of objects, ranging from her mother’s “half-moon” diamond rings to an Egyptian cigarette tin, through which personal memories and fragmentary accounts are intertwined with Warner’s own extensive research and imaginative retellings. This is a wonderfully rich, partly mythical memoir that sits through the past to connect a family’s secrets to the deep-rooted colonial assumptions that still resonate in a post-Brexit Britain.

Warner was a toddler when her father accepted a job as a bookseller in downtown Cairo, running a new branch of W.H. Smith. Esmond had fallen in love with the cosmopolitan city where he spent furloughs during th[...]

When expected legacies did not materialize to support his expenses tastes, a controlling side to her jovial father emerged

*The journeys of the world’s greatest musical instruments*

JONATHAN BUCKLEY

LEY’S VIOLIN

An Italian adventure

HELENA ATTELEAN


If you go to see a virtuoso playing a Brahms piano concerto, it’s highly unlikely that the pianist will be playing an antique instrument – it’ll be a recent Steinway, most probably, or a Yamaha, or a Fazilii. Go to see a virtuoso playing the Brahms violin concerto, on the other hand, might well be playing an instrument that was created in the eighteenth century, or even earlier. Of these venerable instruments, the most charismatic are those made in Cremona, particularly the ones created by the Stradivari family. Nothing, supposedly, can match the tone, the projection, the responsiveness of a Strad. The titular instrument of Helena Attelee’s *LEY’s Violin* is not a Stradivarius, but the sound it produced was nonetheless enthralling, and when told by its owner that the weathered old instrument had ley in its DNA and was adjuvetica to be “absolutely worthless” by a dealer, she sensed the beginnings of a good story – and an opportunity to spend time in one of the few Italian cities with which she was not familiar. The narrative of *LEY’s Violin* turns out to be less tightly focused than the title might suggest. Not until the book’s coda does Attelee do any proper sleuthing, and it only takes a quick trip to Russia and a dose of deno[...]

When expected legacies did not materialize to support his expenses tastes, a controlling side to her jovial father emerged

*Fiddling the facts*

The opening excursion to Cremona introduces the foundational figures: Amati, Guarneri del Gesù and Stradivari. We proceed to Florence for an overview of the musical life of the Medici circle, and to Rome for the rise of instrumental church music and the career of Arcangelo Corelli, court musician to Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni. Venice and Viadini have a moment in the spotlight, as one would expect. Less familiar figures include Count Ignazio Alessandro Costo di Salabue, the very first violin dealer, and his unsung successor, Luigi Tariasco, who was said to have died on a cash-stuffed mattress, clutching a violin in each hand.

From time to time the motif of Ley’s violin resurfaces. Stopping off in Rome, someone of Pesaro, Attelee enjoys the possibility that the instrument had once belonged to one of the army of musicians employed by the provincial theatres that sustained Italy’s nineteenth-century operatic opera. After recording the decrepit sons of the Sorrento Musik, who plundered countless instruments at Hitler’s behest, and the subsequent ve[...]

Sections on Occitan folk music and the Roma of Abruzzo provide interesting diversions. More illumi-
nating still is the chapter in which Attille ventures into the Dolomites, the source of the Alpine spruce used extensively by the great luthiers of Cremona.

This is an engaging episode, with its description of the ingenious and tortuous methods by which the timber was transported down from the mountains to the Venetian Lagoon, and thence up the Po to Cremona. An account of the revival of the lutherian's craft in contemporary Cremona, where the techniques of manufacture are much like those of the sixteenth-century pioneers, is another highlight of Attille's travels.

Towards the end of the book, a master luthier tries to describe the experience of playing the Kreisler, a legendary Guarneri del Gesù, which had once belonged to Fritz Kreisler. It's an extraordinary feeling - "something almost supernatural", he says.

Here, and at a few other moments in Lev's Violin, one wishes that Attille had gone a little further in her exploration of the mystique of the Old Italians, as they are known in the trade. People have come up with various explanations as to why these instruments sound so wonderful. It is explained by the special quality of the wood, or by the way the wood was treated or varnished, or by some detail of construction. For that matter, is the sound produced by a Cremona violin really superior to that of the best modern instruments? Various experiments have shown that most listeners cannot distinguish between a multi-million-dollar Stradivarius thoroughbred and a high-end present-day violin. Studies conducted at the Institut Jean Le Rond d’Alembert in Paris showed that audiences generally preferred the sound of the non-antiques. Not only that: the elite-level violinists who participated in the tests were themselves unable to distinguish the old from the new by ear.

And yet, most concert violinists, given the choice, would unhesitatingly take a Strad over a new violin. Why is this? It’s not, I think, that the former is intrinsically the better generator of sound, but rather that it makes the performer a better player, as if the musician were compelled to excel by a consciousness of the instrument’s lineage. The explanation for the Stradivarius effect perhaps has as much to do with the supernatural as with physics.

In the opening pages of her book, Attille proposes that Lev’s violin might “have made infinitesimal shifts in its own structure to accommodate ... the focus of particular dislike. A short-sighted, bookish boy who was unusually close to his father, he drew the attentions of a long line of bullies. The family had for many years been a subject of a poisonous letter-writing campaign, the anonymous author of which scrawled numerous racial slurs, death threats and crazed ramblings. The police were called in to investigate. Sceptical, even actively hostile, they decided, against considerable evidence, that it was an inside job and that George himself had written the letters.

When a cow, a pony and a sheep were savagely mutilated in the dead of night, first local and then official suspicion fell on George. A combination of misfortune, implacable police prejudice and the flagrant racism of the times combined to throw the boy (the Daily Mail called him “a degenerate of the worst type ... his jaw and mouth are those of a man of very debased life”) resulted in George’s arrest; he was tried and imprisoned for crimes of which he was self-evidently innocent. It was only some years later that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle took an interest in the case and the plight of George, and began a gruelling battle to clear the young man’s name.

An odyssey of Shrabani Basu’s otherwise solid, well-told account of the mystery is her insistence that it remains little known (“few today have heard of the Edalji affair”; “it is ironic that few today have heard of it”). Many readers will have recognized the above outline as cleaving to Julian Barnes’s Booker-nominated novel Arthur and George (2005) and its television dramatization starring Martin Clunes. Perhaps these versions of the hounding of Edalji have already slipped out of cultural memory, so Basu’s factual account is needed; certainly it lays out those complex events with great economy and skill. And it contains some new information: in 2015 a cache of letters emerged which showed the key officer in the case, Chief Inspector G. A. Anson, in a very bad light indeed. The most original and striking chapters here deal with Anson’s long feud with Doyle, and offer excerpts from their increasingly wounding correspondence. It’s a privilege to watch two old stage of the Victorian century circle each other, drawing blood where they can. Doyle revealing that he considered Anson to be “stupid and prejudiced” while the professional investigator wonders in print whether the celebrated writer is “an utter fool as well as a knave.”

Basu also seeks to draw contemporary parallels (not all persuasive), invoking Edalji to George Floyd, Black Lives Matter and the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol, before concluding that “the events of over a hundred years ago in Great Wyral could have been taking place in the present”. She takes, correctly, a dim view of the corrupt establishment of the day. “Conan Doyle, as “an imperialist to the core, brought up with the firm belief that the inherent superiority of Western civilization was the foundation on which the British Empire had been built”. She might have gone more to bring out the more overtly racist forces at work in opposition to Anson and others: a petition to free George that gathered over 10,000 signatures, letters of support from such luminaries as J. R. Ackerley, Jerome, and J. M. Barrie. And Jerome K. Jerome; and, on his release, an invitation for George to Doyle’s wedding. “There was no guest whom I was prouder to see”, wrote the groom about the occasion.

The prose tends at times towards the journalistic. Basu is liberal with clichés - news spreads “like wildfire”; “tension in the courtroom could be cut with a knife”; “Conan Doyle ... left no stone unturned” - and the text has several echoes and repetitions (upon her introduction we are told that Doyle’s second wife Jean is “beautiful, witty and talented ... and enjoyed challenging him” later, that “Jean was intelligent and witty and chagrined Conan Doyle”). Basu also claims erroneously that Sherlock Holmes was depicted in Doyle’s stories as “opium-addicted”. These infelicities aside, the book is thorough and authoritative. It is a fine testament not just to George but to all of the Edalji, their persistence and forbearance in the face of suspicion and disaster. Anyone who knows the story will remember that although it alights on the pressure points of early twentieth-century England - race, class and Empire - it is ultimately a frustrating, inconclusive set of events with little justice or closure for anybody. Shrabani Basu can offer no solution or fairness at such a distance, though she has plenty of cool outrage. The importance of this work is represented symbolically in an afterword in which the author is graced first by a photograph of her subject and then clearing away the moss and dirt that has accrued about it, ensuring, both literally and metaphorically, that the name of Edalji remains, for now, in the light.
Get stuffed
A journalist’s encyclopedia of gaudy nightmares
FRANCES WILSON

Pedro and Ricky Come Again
Selected writing 1988–2020
JONATHAN MEADES

In Bunkers, Brutalism and Bloodymindedness (2014), a documentary about the poetry of concrete, Jonathan Meades, in trademark suit and tie, talks to another Jonathan Meades, also in trademark suit and tie. The only difference between the two Meades is that the second one has an edition of Swinburne in his pocket, to prove that he is an aesthete. The presenter as his own double is a riff perhaps on Gilbert and George, but it also brings to mind Jekyll and Hyde because Meades is himself Javan-faced. The same television entertainer who monkeys around harmlessly for the camera approaches his pen as a blunt implement. But then, as Meades says towards the end of these nearly 1,000 pages, we commit to writing those things we would never say in person.

Pedro and Ricky Come Again – the title “alludes to a sort of vainglorious masculinity” – gathers together thirty years of rants, ruminations, book reviews, after-dinner speeches, interviews – including those in which Meades interviews Meades – and journalistic reflections. The subjects returned to are, broadly, “retrophilia” in English buildings, food and drink, the town versus the country, bad taste, Meades’s hatred of Tony Blair, his love of Ian Nairn, his ambivalence towards his hometown of Salisbury, and his war against received ideas.

The principal subject is, however, Jonathan Meades, and the selection is a form of autobiography. Meades complains that he got through Cathedral school without being kissed by a clergyman, informs us that he would like to be stuffed after death and put on display, and muses that he can sympathize with all forms of sexual perversions, to his daughters’ relief, incest. His default mode is the schoolboy squib: “It is difficult to imagine Sir Roy Strong ejaculating over the centre spread of Whitehouse”; Prince Charles’s opinions are “cruel”; he likes the thought of masturbat- ing nuns: Genet, Burroughs and Kerouac are “bottom feeders”. These blasphemies are pitched against the “horrible” impressionist prose of double-barrelled toffs such as James Lees-Milne and Patrick Leigh Fermor: “Ghastly writers”. The writers he admires – Peter Conrad, Anthony Burgess and Kingsley Amis – are described as versions of Meades himself. Peter Conrad “doesn’t give an emu’s gonad for the opinions of the several schools of formalistic self-sabotage which had turned his supposed discipline, Eng. Lit., into a hermetic farce”. Burgess was “in person” both “genial” and “generous” but “on the page” he was “rancorous and grudge-bearing and full of antipathies”. The most impressive aspect of Kingsley Amis was “his infinite circle of knowledge”. There is nothing that Meades reveres so much as the “all-too-English disease of being too clever by half”. While Conrad “knows everything”, interviewing Burgess “was like spending a few hours with an ambulatory encyclopedia”.

An encyclopedia is what Meades is aiming for here. The sections are arranged alphabetically, from Art and Artists to Writers; Concrete comes between Cities and Death. We are given the date of each piece of writing but not the place of original publication. It little matters: Meades has only one written voice. Almost too heavy to hold, nothing about the book is user-friendly. But then, as Meades puts it, who wants friendliness from books or from build- ings? It is designed, he explains in his introduction, to be dipped into “like the fondant, near-liquid Gor- gunolata which is currently fashionable in southern France and which produces gaudy nightmares”.

Nabokov, Meades says, “sought to make books which were as perfectly shaped and self-contained as his beloved butterflies”, and Meades has sought to make a book shaped like his beloved Blenheim Palace: brutalist, arrogant; a moving finger. It is tempting for the critic to pile the insults high because that is what Meades does, too: each over- loaded sentence becomes the pursuit of the perfect putdown. The British are “a peculiarly divided, culturally impoverished, proudly philistine, socially dysfunctional, self-deluding country whose greatest collective gifts are for pasticaje, spin, PR, merchan- dising, rebranding, euphemism, and of course the keen gullibility that such forms of mendacity ini- tially create and subsequently depend upon”.

Pedro and Ricky Come Again is, in both size and style, a brute of book, made of literary breeze blocks. But as the sometime Duke of Marlborough once said of Blenheim: “My house is an education, not an entertainment”. —

Sybarite showman
Teaching a Calvinist country to eat with delight
STEPHANIE SY-QUA

The Man Who Ate Too Much
The life of James Beard
JOHN BIRSDALL

John Birdsell’s impetus for writing this book was rage. It grew out of an article he published in 2014 for the now-defunct food magazine Lucky Peach, entitled “America, Your Food Is So Gay”, which looked at the three (gay) wise men of twentieth-century American cuisine – James Beard, Richard Olney and Craig Claiborne – and the “erasure” of their sexuality from the “New American” cuisine they helped usher in. In the article, Birdsell reminisced on Pat and Lou, gay “uncles” who used to babysit him, recalling in particular Lou’s burgers, “a thick impasto” of caramelized onions, Dijon mustard and Roquefort, “glided beneath the electric broiler element”. This was, he wrote, “my first taste of food that didn’t give a fuck about nutrition or the drab strictures of home economics ... I see them now, those burgers, as unflinchingly, unapologetically, magnificently queer”. In the preface to The Man Who Ate Too Much: The life of James Beard, Pat and Lou are men for whom “food was a language that defined the other, the coded language of the “closer”, who used food as a public expression of “the exuberance of intimate lives they couldn’t otherwise reveal”. Such food is Beard’s legacy.

Beard was born in Portland, Oregon, in 1902. He could remember what food tasted like before industrial farming and megamarts. The most senior of the three wise men, he remains the best known, too, for his celestial television work, prolific journalism, tens of cookbooks, and the foundation established in his memory. He is the man who elevated the burger from cheap lunch-counter fare to the extravagances we know today. But if he taught a Calvinist country to eat with delight, the moralizing tone of the book’s title captures a certain unease about the limits of pleasure-seeking, further betrayed in the public’s fix- ation on his physique. At 6ft 3in, he was the “three- hundred-pound sybarite and showman”. These excesses were tempered, however, by his carefully crafted image as an avuncular, sexless bachelor, fluent in “American cornball vernacular”.

After being ignominiously expelled from Reed Col- leges over a housed-in incident of “oral indelicacy with a professor”, Beard travelled to Europe in sem- exile, hoping to work in opera. The opera didn’t work out, but London’s Soho initiated him to gay subculture, where half the thrill was the hunt for hotspots, one of which was the basement bar of the Criterion Hotel in Piccadilly, nicknamed the Witches’ Cauldron “for its bittiness” or Bargain Basement, “since the men could be had so cheaply”. In Paris, gay life was more above ground, and the city was to provide a more holistic education, as he dined on blanquette de veau and boeuf bourguignon after long nights spent cruising. He developed a love of rich stews of the sort he would later call “Game in the Gourd”, a term which, Birdsell says, exemplifies his “playful and unabashedly queer” relationship with language (see also “chichi” and “doodadery”). He loved bistrots, with their sawdust-covered floors, where one could dine alone with a bottle of wine – the sort of place, says Birdsell, “that didn’t judge its
customers’ appetites, only tried to satisfy them”. Birdsell’s research is evidently extensive, drawn mostly from four main archives of Beard’s books, articles and letters. But, he points out, towards the end of his life, Beard also destroyed things he thought might “trouble his legacy or embarrass his friends” and even tasked his friend Marion Cunningham with flying over from California after his death to sift through his documents and destroy “any last incriminating papers in the house – anything gay”.

Le rouge et le noir
Lessons from France’s culinary capital

Andrew Irwin
Dirt
Adventures in French cooking
Bill Buford

Bill Buford’s career seems more than a little charmed. Editor of Granta, then Fiction Editor at the New Yorker; a stint in Italy and New York diving into Italian cuisine (recorded in his previous book, Heat), and then a lengthy sojourn in France to grapple with the complexities of French cookery, where he masters the repertory and the language, and by a happy series of introductions,befriends many of France’s most famous chefs. If he weren’t so likeable, he might be easy to dislike.

The French adventure is the subject of Dirt, which begins on a train from Washington DC to New York, somewhere around the Chesapeake, Buford finds himself in conversation with the acclaimed chef Michel Richard. From there, we are taken to the culinary capital of Lyon, where the author, his wife Jessica and their two young sons install themselves (with the attendant travails of immigration to France outlined in tragicomic detail). Buford trains with a renowned local baker, Bob (for whom the most richly flavoured bread requires nothing more than freshly milled flour, water and a little bit of la vieille pâte), attends the Institut Paul Bocuse, secures a stage at La Mère Brazier restaurant, and meets the legendary Chef Bocuse himself (who died a few years later in 2018). The book is both a memoir and an account of its own writing (with occasional asides about what would make for “good copy”), and Buford flies enthusiastically from subject to subject. We learn of his family life in France; the crucial difference between good and bad wheat; and the making of traditional boudin noir (during la tuille, “a local rite”, he tastes fresh pig blood: “It was warm. Rich. It was thick and weighty on my palate... Can something taste red? This was red”). With clarity and depth, he explores the early history of French cuisine (including the popular but untrue claim that Catherine de’ Medici is solely to thank for its beginnings), and considers the lasting importance of La Varenne’s Le Cuisinier François (1651), and the influence of Renaissance Italy on France’s culinary developments. He notes, for example, despite widespread Lyonnaise scepticism, how many of France’s techniques and terms come from its neighbour (salaison, biché, pâté, fourchette). Yet that influence went in both directions: perhaps the most Italian of French foods is derived from the French ragout (“Ragoût”, Buford writes, “is an early seven-teenth-century word. It first appears in print to describe an exuberant platter or an exciting painting or a flamboyant piece of text – with some extra quality that wakes up the audience member or art appreciator or reader.” La Varenne seems to have been the first to apply it to food in writing.)

Though this is no recipe book, the reader ends up learning quite a lot about how to cook. We discover how to prepare moulles à la poulette (mussels cooked in wine, with a sauce made from the jus, thickened with roux, mixed with cream, shallots, lemon, white pepper and an egg yolk), and the difference between cooking fish à la bonne femme and à l’anglaise (the former poached, the latter fried). We find out the correct way to rissole, and how to make a beurre rouge (mince shallots; cook gently in butter; add a lot of red wine and reduce it to “syrup”, before building it all up again with a huge amount of butter to create a delicate emulsion). We are told how to make an amuse bouché by sandwiching foie gras between the flesh and skins of boned, confit chicken thighs, covering the whole thing in “meat jelly” and slicing it into chunks; in fact, we learn an awful lot of ways to use foie gras (Michel Richard suggests substituting it for butter when making puffed pastry).

The reader may expect an Anthony Bourdain-style expose of the aggressions of the professional kitchen here. And, to an extent, Buford delivers: in one scene, a teenage stagiaire is punished for his bad attitude by being throttled (“Silvain tightened his grip. ‘I hate you. I want to hit you in the face.’”); in another, Buford is roundly encouraged to punch a bullying colleague. But Dirt is marked more by its sense of melancholy than of scandal. In one chapter, Buford makes a pilgrimage to the ruins of a monastry and finds it has entirely disappeared; he collects the hand-written recipes books of long-dead home cooks (and one made by a prisoner of war), their daily concourses and memories recorded in neat, now-anonymous handwriting. He muses on the fading connection between culture and place, on the value of simplicity and an ancient, rustic relationship to food. The narrative is subtly haunted by the death of Bocuse, often considered the “leader of nouvelle cuisine” and immortalized in France’s most prestigious prize for cookery, the Bocuse d’Or. In Buford’s telling, however, Bocuse is better thought of as “the most prominent member of a generation of chefs when French cooking, in many forms, nouvelle and not-so-nouvelle, had a wonderful postwar flourishing, a renaissance...more than anything else, a Lyonnaise chapeau”. Dirt is an at times riotous celebration of the French kitchen, but it is also a wistful account of what can be lost and forgotten with the passing of time.
Elements of strangeness

IN BRIEF

SALT WATER
Joep Pla
Translated by Peter Bush
310pp. Archipelago. $20.

The mistral is a fierce, northerly wind that blows from France to the Mediterranean through winter. In Salt Water, a collection of maritime essays by the Catalan journalist Joep Pla (1897-1981), the trials and misadventures that plague Pla’s voyages around the Costa Brava. At sea, under the mistral’s fierce pressure, Pla braved down and howled for two days non-stop. In each essay, the reader, too, is swept up and carried along.

At sea, Pla was an itinerant writer, travelling widely in Europe as a foreign correspondent. He was a polemical figure in his native country, twice expelled by Spanish dictators for his criticism of the country’s politics—first by Miguel Primo de Rivera in 1924, for an article that questioned the Spanish military presence in Morocco; then, at the end of the Civil War, he was interned exiled to England. Already middle-aged and grown up in, for expressing outrage over General Franco’s criminalization of the Catalan language. Salt Water comprises a patchwork of tales set in unspecified times, though they were all written between 1918 and the 1940s. There are tales of fearful encounters with divers, German U-boats, smugglers, and an extended dialogue between Pla and Salvador Dalí’s father regarding a shipwreck, the only place to refer explicitly to the horrors of the Spanish Civil War on its people. Pla’s style, as translated here by Peter Bush, is glorious and precise. “The only place you’ll find an adjective”, he once wrote, “is in the pauses that result from the elaboration of a cigarette and its intermittent combustion.” That he wrote the world how he experienced it is especially clear in his descriptions of sumptuous meals enjoyed on journeys up and down the coast. Of sardines, he declares: “Sardines make me experience a liquid flow of emotions.” Of the impact of black coffee at sea: “Your mind projects itself onto the outside world, you are fascinated by everything around and a gleam comes to your eyes.”

At the peripheries of the text are Pla’s fears that the habits and language of the sea are captured and lost. The collection itself could only appear in Catalan in the 1950s, once laws on the publishing of literary texts were relaxed. “Every reflection on the sea is like a reflection on death”, he writes in one essay, “on that tremendous disintegration.” In his extensive journalistic output (his Obra completa comes to forty-six volumes, around 30,000 pages), Pla attempts to reintegrate, and preserve, his memories of Catalonia and all the beauty and complexity the region had to offer.

Lamorna Ash

AI NARRATIVES
A history of imaginative thinking about intelligent machines
STEPHEN CAVE, KANTA DIHAL, SARAH DILLON, EDITORS

Homer described self-sailing ships and robotic “golden handmaidens”, and many of our assumptions about intelligent machines echo Aristotle’s characterization of them as slaves. This volume of essays moves from antiquity to the present, examining how the western imagination has dealt with AI in myths, apocryphal tales, literature, films and speculations about the future. Particular attention is paid to how narratives influence cultural expectations and the development of technology itself. Al narrates, the editors suggest, help us to navigate the real risks and benefits of artificial systems and to articulate concerns about the impact of AI. While Charles Dickens and Anthony Trollope celebrated mechanical creativity, Thomas Carlyle believed the machines would “confiscate his greatness.” Pessimism prevails. Auguste de Villiers de l’Isle-Adam, Wyndham Lewis and Albert Robida envisioned automated societies in which humans are dehumanized and disempowered, while E. M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) and Paul W. Fairman’s novel I, The Machine (1968) depict a machine governing mankind.

As technology has advanced, fears of human obsolence have intensified. Narratives such as Michael Isikoff’s The President’s Surveillance System (1986), with its automated computers, and Len Deighton’s Billion Dollar Brain (1966), with its computer-controlled spy network, reflect the accelerating rate of technological change. At the same time, the labour market, communication networks and global politics, as well as its impact on individuals. William Gibson’s novel Neuromancer (1984) was one of the first to depict humans as pawns in a large, incomprehensible scheme run by AI. Cyberpunk has since established itself as the genre most preoccupied with the nature of “cyberspace”, the dispersed networks and flows of financial information that shape behaviour and, ultimately, society.

Now algorithms shape reality, aiming for ever-increasing efficiency, monetizing data and reducing individuality to datasets, while ubiquitous surveillance reinforces feelings of powerlessness by seizing control of personal data at the same time as overwhelming us with other information. Far from holding the key to emancipation, sinister and supreme AI seems to replicate patterns of dominance. Essays in the collection explore a long line of works that challenge such stereotyped accounts, whether by moving away from the trope of the solitary white male genius creator or by drawing analogies between machines and human slaves. Karel Capek’s R. U. R. (1922), Ridley Scott’s Blade Runner (1982) and Jo Walton’s Thessaly Trilogy (2014–6) all depict AI rebellion against humans as just one possibility.

Drawing on diverse perspectives, this compelling collection shows how AI narratives have prompted critical reflection on human-machine relations, moving beyond the reductive dichotomy that pits visions of happy humans against visions of defeated humans ruled by machines. By invoking such concepts as equality, rights and social justice, the essays investigate what it means to be human in an increasingly automated world.

Audrey Borowski

GENERAL

I MARCHED WITH PATTON
A firsthand account of World War II alongside one of the U.S. Army’s greatest generals
FRANK SISSON WITH ROBERT W. LISE

Frank Sisson did not march shoulder to shoulder with General George Patton during the Second World War. Yet corpo- rals rarely spend much time in the presence of 3- and 4-star generals. So any marching with Patton was more rhetorical than actual. In his fascinating diary shows, the nearest young Sisson came to the famous general was when his jeep or limousine sped past the author’s artillery positions on a few occasions. Sisson fought in France, Belgium and Germany. Though his patriotism is never in doubt and he is quick to note the utter destruction his and other US artillery units visited on the Wehr- macht, he also shows sympathy for French and Belgian citizens and acknowledges the hardships of war inflicted on German civilians. As his unit passed through Cologne, he couldn’t help being moved by starving Germans. He and his driver circled back to a farm they had passed and engaged a large patch of rabbits with their rifles. They distributed the game to civilians whose gratitude was immediate and, he believes, sincere. “They could figure out that our war was with the Nazis, not them.”

But the general’s presence, no matter how brief, always had an elevating effect on Sisson’s morale. This despite the fact, as Sisson is at pains to mention, of Patton’s sometimes outlandish behaviour or profanity. He gives all the details of the famous occasions when Patton exploded, but often shows sympathy for wounded soldiers, Patton approached a soldier who appeared to be un injured, and embraced whereas other men was wounded. When the soldier replied that he was nervous, adding “I guess I can’t take it”, Patton slapped him on the cheek, collared him to the tent’s entrance. “Don’t admit this son of a bitch”, he bellowed at the staff. “I know about General Patton had been hearsay, but I had nothing but the best thoughts about him”, Sisson writes. His almost child-like faith in his hero can be better understood in light of the fact that he had lost his own father at the age of fifteen and was compelled to drop out of high school and take a welding job to help support his family. Sisson chose Patton as his hero, fully aware of the man’s flaws but convinced of his ability to lead in battle and bring his troops home. Towards the end of the war, Patton remarked, in terms of which Sisson would no doubt agree, “You can’t run an army without profanity and it has to be eloquent profanity. An army without profanity couldn’t fight its way out of a pass-soaked paper bag.”

Christopher Timmers

SCHOLARS

INKY FINGERS
The making of books in Early Modern Europe
ANTHONY GRAFTON

Anthony Grafton’s latest volume opens with Joannes Boe- mus, the author of a well-regarded ethnography, printed in 1577, and “a scholar of modest attainments”. Grafton himself — our leading historian of Renaissance intellectual life — is no Boeinus. A more fitting paralle might be found in those eminently accomplished characters about whom he has taught us so much — Joseph Scaliger, say, or Leon Battista Alberti. In contrast to their writings, Boeinus’s tome was a scions-and-paste job, the sort of reworking of available material that we might dismiss, until we remember that the book in our hands, Inky Fingers, has a similar quality: it comprises essays that Grafton has previously published, supplemented by an introduction and two new chapters.

Yet, just as Grafton guides us to consider the art in Boeinus’s reuse, so his articles gain a freshness in being collected together. As Grafton has shown in earlier collections, such as Defenders of the Text: Traditions of scholarship in an age of science (1991), he has an alchemist’s flair for converting disparate elements into something higher: brought together, they provide a vision of the practices of our scholarly forebears. One theme that runs through this book is the establishment of intel-
RECOMMENDATION

ALLAH
God in the Qur'an
GABRIEL SAUL REYNOLDS

In this somewhat frustrating book, Gabriel Saul Reynolds asks, “Is the God of the Qur’an the same God we find in the Bible?” His answer starts by invoking the horror of the Islamic State burning a man alive in a cage, a provocative way of contextualizing the problem, namely the way the Qur’an characterizes Allah as both merciful and wrathful - to my mind, not as theologically problematic as Reynolds makes out.

Reynolds is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Like most non-Muslim scholars writing on Islam for a general readership, as a Roman Catholic he feels compelled to tread lightly. He begins by contrasting the Qur’an and the Bible as texts. Unlike the Bible, which is presented as something like a single, epic narrative, the Qur’an frequently shifts between unrelated themes, sometimes abruptly. Even when it does tell a story, the Qur’an’s allusive and elliptical style is such that only a reader with a great deal of prior knowledge is likely to understand it - prior knowledge which, as Reynolds is rightly keen to emphasise, is deeply rooted in Bible stories.

Reynolds covers a lot of ground: Qur’anic prophecy, anthropology and eschatology, divine mercy and punishment, vengeance and wrath. His conclusions are that the Qur’anic Allah offers conditional, not universal forgiveness; that there is a tension between Allah’s promises to believers and his absolute divine sovereignty, giving him the right to punish and reward people as he sees fit; that the fate of unbelievers isn’t entirely clear, since the flames of hell are possibly therapeutic (but then again, maybe not, who knows?); and that, though human sin makes Allah angry, he is ultimately in charge of everything, up and including, the way interpretations, the very occasions of human sin that he abhors. But how is this different from the Bible? By always placing maximum emphasis on the enigma of the Qur’anic chiascuro, Reynolds seemed to be suggesting that, in all these questionable ways, Allah is double-minded in a way that the Judeo-Christian God is not.

Rather surprisingly, then, Reynolds makes a 180-degree turn and devotes the final part of the book to the many ways in which Allah is in fact quite similar to the God of the Bible after all. Through careful analysis of Qur’anic rhetoric, he subtly argues that the Qur’an’s paradoxical and even contradictory ways of presenting Allah as both vengeful and merciful is best understood in pastoral terms, as a spur to religious conversion and moral improvement. Vengeful passages in the Bible, not least Christ’s warnings about sheep, goats, and angelic winnowing forks. The book left me wondering, how can its arguments have consistently pointed in a direction opposite to its eventual conclusion? Did it just need editing?

Thomas Small

FICTION

MY HEART
A novel
SEMEZDIN MEHMEĐINOVIC
Translated by Celia Hawkesworth
240pp. Catapult. £27.

My Heart begins with the narrator’s heart attack and closes with his wife’s stroke. Between these, he travels through the desert of the American Southwest with his son, taking pictures of the night sky and learning how alone they both are in the world. It is a testament to Semezdin Mehmedinovic’s writing that an autobiographical novel composed of such melancholic fragments is heart-breaking without ever being bleak.

Mehmedinovic emigrated to the United States with his family after enduring the siege of Sarajevo. They were settled in Arizona, then moved to Virginia. In Bosnia, he had been a writer, editor and filmmaker. Once in the US, he continued writing in his native language, while his son Harun established himself in photography and film. Theiris a refugee success story by any account, but My Heart reveals the small fears and losses that thread through a life in exile.

It is easy to think of migration as a new beginning, but what happens when the immigrant nears the end? Do immigrants die the same kind of death? Mehmedinovic conveys the quiet worries prompted by growing older in a strange land: being treated by medical staff who casually mispronounce one’s name, dealing with intractable insurance companies in a foreign language, forgetting the good supply of one’s new city. “Even in death it’s important to be at home”, he concludes, conscious of the paradox implied by wanting to be somewhere familiar even when one no longer exists.

The travel diary at the book’s core is punctuated by rough line drawings, recalling W. G. Sebald’s use of photographs to meditate on memory and forgetting. At times, Mehmedinovic reminisces about friends in Sarajevo; at others he reflects on the gradual closing of American society towards foreigners over the past twenty years. The narrator and his son visit a familiar apartment, in Phoenix, hoping for a moment of recognition among neighbours. There is none: “We can’t trace the house where once lived, but it doesn’t remember us.” Mehmedinovic captures his most evocative snapshots in words, as when he looks out from the crowded kitchen: “There is no room for the weeds, those slow-moving in all directions, all with their heads bowed, as though they are looking for a lost earring in the desert.”

Celia Hawkesworth’s English translation beautifully renders Mehmedinovic’s limpid style. This is unpretentious writing that offers small flashes of an ordinary life with a healthy sense of their insignificance. When a physician tells the narrator he is having a heart attack, he at first refuses to believe it, as it does not fit an account by Christopher Hitchens. A尼亚 Refulgio’s translation of the Spanish text is “comical”, he thinks as the medics bundle him into an ambulance. “I’m dying thinking about Christopher Hitchens!”

Irina Dumitrescu

FORENSICS

HOW TO SOLVE A MURDER
True stories from a life in forensic medicine
DEREK TREMAIN AND PAULINE TREMAIN

During the half-century of its existence, the University of Sheffield forensic cinema department of Guy’s Hospital Medical School was associated with some of the most horrifying events to befall the nation. Its experts investigated countless homicides, terrorist atrocities and disasters, from the mass murders perpetrated by John Christie and Harold Shipman to the Brighton bombing and the King’s Cross fire. It has also given rise to a surprisingly rich literary tradition. The forensic pathologist Keith Simpson, who founded the department in 1946, published two books based on his experiences, including the bestseller Forty Years of Murder (1978), which retold a selection of his cases with the verve of a Len Deighton thriller. The work of one of his successors received similar treatment in the grisly but readable Dr Iain West’s Casebook (1997); more recently, Richard Shepherd’s superb autobiography Unnatural Causes (2018) revealed the mental scars he suffered as the result of performing thousands of post-mortems on the bodies of those who had met violent deaths.

Derek Tremain, who spent thirty-five years at Guy’s, knew all these figures and assisted in some of their most celebrated cases. Arriving in 1964 as an unqualified fifteen-year-old in the position of chief scientific officer, becoming an acknowledged expert in wound analysis and other forensic techniques, a member of a mobile police forensics unit and a brain buckets he met his wife Pauline, then secretary to the pathologist Iain West. How to Solve a Murder is the joint memoir of this unconventional workplace, and the macabre sights and smells that surrounded them. This was not an occupation for the weak of stomach becomes clear in the opening chapter, in which Derek recalls the late-night reconstruction of a human head mangled beyond recognition by an express train - “painstakingly stitching together the remaining pieces of skull, strip, like a grisly patchwork quilt”. Readers who make it through this grimly fascinating vignette may be reassured to know that the ensuing 300 pages contain nothing worse.

Indeed, some of the book’s most surprising passages are observed through the eyes of a child. I did not know, for instance, that single-celled algae known as diatoms often provide crucial forensic evidence. These microscopic organisms are virtually undefined in large bodies of water; when inhaled by a drowning victim they are seen in the bloodstream to the internal organs, where their presence may prove the cause of death. Derek also explains, with exemplary clarity, the innovative techniques he developed to analyse bullet wounds and the injuries left by conventional weapons. The book’s engaging narrators, but the story they tell is fragmentary and ultimately unsatisfying. Whereas Simpson and Shepherd wove their memoirs into a series of complete detective stories, in How to Solve a Murder the references to actual murder cases are almost incidental. Despite some minor errors, How to Solve a Murder is a minor entry in that distinguished subgenre, the Guy’s Hospital forensic memoir.

Thomas Morris

MARCH 26, 2021

TLS 25

IN BRIEF

LECTURAL AUTHORITY, BOTH OF AN INDIVIDUAL, SUCH AS JEAN MABILLON (WHOM GRAFTON DISCUSSES IN ONE OF THE NEW ESSAYS), AND OF A TRADITION OF LEARNING, SUCH AS THE DISCIPLINE OF PALaeOGRAPHY, WHICH MABILLON FATHERED.

THE PROCESSES OF SELF-PROMOTION DESCRIBED HERE, DRAWING ON CONSENSUS WITH SOME COLLEAGUES AND CONFLICT WITH OTHERS, MAY SOUND FAMILIAR, DEPRESSINGLY SO, GRAFTON ALSO DRAWS OUR ATTENTION, HOWEVER, TO ELEMENTS OF STRANGENESS: ISAAC CASANOBON AS A BELIEVER IN GHOSTS; THE LINING OF A COW’S EMBRYO USED AS TRACING PAPER; GRAFTON’S FIGURES ARE NOT “PURE” SCHOLARS, IN THE SENSE THAT THEY SIT ISOLATED WITHIN A SINGLE TRADITION OF KNOWLEDGE. ON THE CONTRARY, THEY DEVELOP THEIR THINKING THROUGH INTERACTIONS WITH THOSE WE MIGHT THINK OF AS NON-SCHOLARS, WHO BECAME ESSENTIAL TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF THEIR AUTHORITY.

MABILLON’S PALAEOGRAPHY, FOR EXAMPLE, IS REVEALED TO HAVE BEEN INFORMED BY HIS READING OF THE RENAISSANCE WRITING MASTERS. REPRISING A TOPIC CONSIDERED IN THE CULTURE OF CORRECTION IN RENAISSANCE EUROPE (2012), GRAFTON DESCRIBES IN THE BOOK’S TITLE HOW AUTHORS’ TEXTS WERE DEFINED BY THE BATTLE AND CONVERSATIONS OF THE PRINTING SHOP.

THESE ESSAYS ARE A SALUTARY REMINDER TO DISCARD ANY MENTAL IMAGE OF EMINENT SCHOLARS IN THEIR GARRETS (AND TO LOOK BEYOND OUR PRESENT PREDICAMENT, IN WHICH MANY OF US ARE SOLITARY AND CONFINED TO ZOOM). SCHOLARSHIP, GRAFTON TEACHES US, IS A WORLD THAT TEEMS, WHERE GENIUS IS CREATIVE BY BEING COLLABORATIVE.

DAVID RUNDLE
Moons under water
Exploring the unexpected depths of space

ANDREW H. KNOLL

ALIEN OCEANS
The search for life in the depths of space
KEVIN PETER HAND

"T"hey that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; These are the works of the Lord, and his wonders in the deep." The Psalmist understood: there is both mystery and majesty in Earth's great waters, and enduring fascination for those who explore their farthest reaches. From Odysseus and Ferdinand Magellan to James Cook, William Beebe and Jacques Cousteau, maritime explorers, both real and fictional, have long captured our imaginations. But what if the world we wish to probe is 400 million miles away? And hidden beneath kilometres of ice?

Enter Kevin Peter Hand, with a maritime tale like no other. Hand's oceans lie beneath the icy surface of moons that orbit Jupiter and Saturn, far beyond the life-sustaining heat of the Sun. The story of how these distant seas came to light reminds us that, as for Cook and Magellan, we live in a golden age of exploration.

Galileo discovered the four largest moons of Jupiter in 1610, but the detection of all seventy-nine Jovian moons, not to mention some eighty-two that orbit Saturn, had to wait for twentieth-century technology to reveal them. Light turns out to be a fine long-distance chemist; different materials emit, absorb or reflect distinct wavelengths, enabling us to fingerprint their composition. Beginning in the 1980s, spectral analysis of Europa, the smallest of the Galilean moons, identified H_2O on its surface. Satellite images soon confirmed the moon's icy face, and ensuing measurements of Europa's gravity demonstrated that this surface is only skin deep, extending downward 80-170 km to a rocky interior. Finally, studies of magnetism indicated that the lower part of Europa's watery mantle is liquid. Together, then, light, gravity and magnetism revealed a subsurface ocean deep within the solar system.

Unlike Earth, where solar radiation and greenhouse gases maintain liquid water, the subsurface sea of Europa is heated by tidal friction imposed by Jupiter's massive gravitational pull. For astrobiology, this opens up possibilities different from the circum-solar habitable zone based on our own existence. And Europa is not alone; other moons in the outer solar system may also harbour ice-cloaked oceans. Most promising, from a biological perspective, is Enceladus, a Saturnian moon whose subterranean water jets from fractures that reach out from the surface and also passes for a while on Titan, not a leading candidate for extraterrestrial life, but perhaps the most intriguing moon of all, with rivers of liquid methane shaping a landscape of waterfalls. The subsurface liquid ocean is well-told and well, if necessarily, in the language of physics. That may challenge those who don't remember school lessons about gravity and centripetal force, but Hand is a patient explainer, offering insightful analogies that illuminate the critical points.

Our hard-won physical understanding of these distant oceans testifies to the human instinct for exploration. Hand's real interest, however, lies in the possibility that they might host life with alien organisms. Hand rehearse the recipe for life, drawn from our experience on Earth: carbon, nutrients, water, sources of energy. There is no reason to believe that our planet exhausts all biological possibility, but for Europa and Enceladus, this provides a reasonable checklist. Light can't penetrate beneath the surface ice of these moons, so any life they might support would depend on chemical reactions and metabolism. Hot fluids from seafloor hydrothermal systems could, in principle, both power biogenesis and sustain a modest biota in the deep seas of Europa and Enceladus. Eutrophike-like organisms are far and away the most likely candidates for life in these oceans, or anywhere else for that matter, but Hand enthusiastically considers the possibility of complex organisms, even aquatic civilisations. The argument is informed, engaging and utterly speculative - more Captain Nemo than Carl Sagan.

In his final chapter, Hand figuratively returns to Earth, summarising existing plans and eventual possibilities for continued exploration of Europa, Enceladus and other distant moons. It will be a long time before humans drill through their icy armour to sample underlying waters, so planetary explorers must ask whether surface features might provide clues to what lies beneath. Red patches that line fractures in European ice preserve salts and possibly organic molecules. The surface that reaches out from the ice appears to be covered by occasional fissures. And at Enceladus, satellites can swoop in to sample geysers, allowing a direct glimpse of interior waters.

For Kevin Hand, there is not just a likeness between the exploration of Earth's oceans and voyaging through the solar system. There is continuity: in history, in approach and in spirit. And so, for those of us engaged in the study of the cosmos, or descending in the atmosphere with Beebe, Alien Oceans provides an appealing guide to seas undreamt of until now.

Where time stands still
Debating physics at the event horizon

RICHARD LEA

BLACK HOLE SURVIVAL GUIDE
JANNA LEVIN

IN THE HALF CENTURY since John Wheeler popularized the use of the term “black hole” to refer to those mysterious astronomical objects, they have become a familiar part of our cultural landscape - a handy metaphor for missing finances or emotional dysfunction, and a convenient trope in science fiction. But black holes are far stranger than Hollywood's inaccurate inventions, as the astrophysicist Janna Levin explains in Black Hole Survival Guide.

At first, black holes were a purely mathematical construct, Levin writes, “unverified for decades, unaccepted for decades, absurd, malign and of some great genius of the twentieth century”. Albert Einstein was among the doubters, declaring in 1939 that the singularities - the infinite curvatures of space and time - found at the centre of black holes “do not exist in physical reality”. The discovery of exotic objects such as quasars and pulsars in the 1960s made them seem more plausible, and the evidence for their existence began to mount, last year in the haunting picture of the supermassive black hole at the centre of the nearby galaxy M87. Shepherd Doeleman, the director of the radio telescope network that captured this image, said the scientists had “seen what they thought was

unseeable”. But you can't really see a black hole - a black hole is a region where the curvature of spacetime is so strong that light itself cannot escape. The object at the centre of the picture is only visible as an absence, a dark smudge in the middle of a glowing ring of superheated gas.

We now understand black holes to be the simplest macroscopic objects in the universe, perfect spheres that can be characterized by just three numbers: mass, charge and spin. But the extreme curvatures they inflict on spacetime put them on the front line of the confrontation between the two great theories of contemporary physics: general relativity and quantum mechanics.

Levin begins with the elegant account provided by general relativity. As you approach a black hole, the curvature of spacetime increases until even light bends back on itself and cannot leave. The point at which this happens is known as the event horizon, a one-way barrier through which nothing can return. Time blends with space at this boundary, so that from a distance time at the event horizon appears to grind to a halt. Things are very different closer by. Time continues to flow normally for observers near to the horizon, while clocks far away from the black hole seem to race. Crossing the horizon would be “undramatic”, Levin explains. “You should feel no pain. You won't crash into any surface.” And once you have crossed the boundary the curvature increases to continue without limit.

You plummet towards the singularity at the centre, ripped apart by the rapidly varying geometry of spacetime until “your fundamental bits spray towards the cut in spacetime and cease to be.”

Like Einstein, we should treat singularities with great caution. They imply are less a description of physical reality than a signal that something is wrong. “The mathematics”, Levin writes, “is telling us that the physical description of general relativity is broken there.” The centre of a black hole exists in the world of the very small, a world ruled by quantum mechanics. Perhaps black holes open up into another part of the universe, a kind of black hole - or perhaps everything that falls in is trapped in some unknown state of quantum matter. But since general relativity is incompatible with quantum mechanics, no one knows.

Quantum mechanics causes problems at the event horizon as well. Black holes are not entirely black, but are steadily emitting radiation, as Stephen Hawking showed in the 1970s by considering pairs of virtual particles at the event horizon. According to quantum mechanics, this radiation would carry information about the black hole's interior, while according to general relativity a black hole cannot let anything go, Levin explains, “Not ever. Not even information.” After outlining attempts to resolve this paradox that suggest the universe is a hologram, or that the event horizon is actually a blazing firewall, Levin describes a recent approach that offers a way out of the impasse: “When you fall inside the black hole, wormholes ensure that you are also outside the black hole. Your information falls in but is escaped. You will perish. But your information will survive beyond the hole”. So, “the physical potential to reconstruct your body and your thoughts and your memories - you also survives.” Perhaps a new theory of everything that unites general relativity and quantum mechanics will offer a little more clarity. For all Levin's lyricism, the black hole remains opaque, a mysterious smudge surrounded by her glowing, circling prose.
In next week’s

CRAIG RAINER

The comedy of Anna Karenina

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TTL CROSSWORD 1369 BY PRAXITELES

ACROSS
1 Author of The Broken Road and The Master Builder? (5)
2 Roth’s description of emancipation? (7, 2)
3 Wren’s construction, a gracious signal to the French (4, 5)
4 One seen in epic as Caesar-killer (5)
5 Compositions performed by a first violin to audience? (6)
6 Get hair hidden under this? (8)
9 Ramshackle place in which to compose sea songs? (10)
11 Enthusiast has Gainsborough initially, then Sergeant (4)
12 Reportedly first person to refer to vision (8)
13 Sparkly religious leader seen in railway junction (6)
16 Prolific symphonist with a life in films (5)
20 “A kind of _ lumber-room, full of old chairs and tables, upside down” (Bleak House) (10)
22 How long it took Virginia to write? (5)
24 Headgear suppliers having dodgy ski wagers about end of slalom? (9)

DOWN
1 Called up three sections of military bodies perhaps (9)
2 Sergeant went swiftly back in two directions (5)
3 “In Heaven, / Where honour due and reverence none _” (Paradise Lost) (8)
4 Issue of Homer turning up in basilica (4)
5 Constable’s article on film star Will and author John (3, 3, 4)
6 Islands featuring in endless game (6)
7 What peepers have in the long grass, according to Sitwell (9)
8 Crime drama in which you’ll see a wizard, a queen and king (5)
9 A Constable, good chap, one, say, turning up to arrest woman (10)
10 God-like angels lie about (3-6)
11 G&S including strange crooked peaky blinders (9)
12 Constable’s to track one of Yates’s company (8)
13 Girl, one occupying topsy-turvy cabin (6)
14 Constable to quiver about losing book (5)
15 Holmes’s sister, climbing solo (5)
16 Burly actor-singer (4)

SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1365

The winner of Crossword 1365 is Nic Blackwell, of Coventry

The sender of the first correct solution opened on April 16, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40.
Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1369, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF.
Bright stars

Have you read 14,000 book reviews? Books in the Media has. Set up by the industry magazine the Bookseller in 2018, this “new reviews curation and aggregation service” has been reading the reviews published in some forty-two publications every since. It reviews the reviewers, and converts their opinions into ratings out of five stars. A “weighting” is then applied, “based on the influence and reach of the publication” in question. A book’s aggregated “final star rating” may also rise if it is “shortlisted for a major award or selected to appear on a national media slot such as Radio 4’s Book of the Week”.

Go on, say it: such a reductive system drains the complexity out of the literary conversation, and is just an ignored, Leave it to the Booksellers, distributors and publishers to play with (what consequences could that possibly have for writers’ reading lives? What might these newfangled star ratings (what will they think of next?) have to tell us, if anything, about the state of contemporary book-reviewing?

Thanks to Books in the Media, we mildly reply, we now know that The Victorians by Jacob Rees-Mogg is a 14/10-star book — an unexpected insight. At the other end of the scale, Gail Honeyman’s novel Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine earns its five stars on the strength of three raves and three “prizes”. Do not sneer because its selection as a Radio 4 Book at Bedtime counts as a prize. Take a sideways glance instead at the authors of those three reviews. Survey their track records, as presented in Books in the Media: between them, they have barely ever written anything other than a positive review, in just over 200 attempts. What are the odds?

The stench of a critical rat grows high at this point. Is Books in the Media suppressing thousands of hatchet jobs; or is it simply that most littérateurs lack teeth? The four-star review seems ubiquitous: one degree either side is acceptable; but bold are those who stoop to the lower reaches, at the risk of irritating a publicist or a writer with a twitchy Twitter account. Risk avoidance is the name of the game. One prolific reviewer recently tweeted that he receives his books as proof copies and only asks to review the ones he likes. Hence the consistency of his work, which constitutes an unremittable ode to the brilliant, the beautiful, the remarkable, the rare, the exceptional and even the odd masterpiece — all over the past twelve months. We could not easily find, on Books in the Media, a second Rees-Mogg (which should be bookseller-speak, as well as voter-speak, for a stinker); we cannot sincerely recommend the experiment. Books in the Media discourages such researches: it lists “Top 10s” only. Accentuate the positive, if you please.

To Dirk Bogarde’s biographer John Coldstream we owe the information that this is a year of “multiple Bogarde anniversaries”. The actor was born on March 28, 1921. It is fifty years since the release of the film Death in Venice, in which he played Thomas Mann’s doomed composer Gustav von Aschenbach. It is sixty years since Victim, the first English-language film to use the word “homosexual”, and sixty years since a dubious cult favourite, The Singer Not the Song. Twenty years before that, Mr Coldstream writes, Lance-Corporal Derek van den Bogerade, of the Royal Corps of Signals, made his debut as a published poet, in the TLS.

Attributed to “Derek Bogerade”, “Man in the Bush” appeared in the issue of August 30, 1941 — well before he became known as an elegant memoirist and novelist, but not long before he saw all too much of the horror of war, as an intelligence officer, around Europe and the Pacific. This poem works on a more modest scale. Its narrator, pressed against a tree, observes his enemy, and waits for the moment to give way to the “cautious sun”. The enemy is a single soldier, and the poem seems to reflect what the biographer calls the poet’s “predilection for camouflage”.

I saw him move behind that green bush.
I must wait until he moves again...
Man in the Bush;
does your arm ache as you watch me?
And so the poem — which is to be republished in full on the TLS website next week — inches forwards, as rain starts to fall and a pigeon footles about (“I think it was / a pigeon footless / in the dark”). That pigeon flies off. “This is the first man I have killed...”

A second poem appeared two years later in the Poetry Review, September 1943, in a selection of “More Poems from the Forces”, by which time Bogarde had become a lieutenant in the Queen’s Royal Regiment. Following the tense stand-off of “Man in the Bush”, he writes in “Steel Cathedrals” of a different kind of waiting game: “It seems to me, I spend my life in stations. / Going, coming, standing, waiting. / Paddington, Darlington, Shrewsbury, York. / I know them all most bitterly.” It ends: “The station clock with staggering hands and callous face, / says twenty-five-to-nine, / A cigarette, a cup of tea, / A bun, / And my train goes at ten”. A third poem, a tribute to Bogarde’s agent Robin Fox, is known to date, neatly enough, from 1971, but that seems to be that. He must have had other things to do by then.

Despite the advertising, Authors, Did we say last month (February 19)? enough had been said about “authors’ names and faces appearing in advertisements and on the processes those adverts advertise”? From New York, Elizabeth Powers directs us to the blog of the London Review of Books, and a post from 2007 about the tea shop where John Ruskin opened on Paddington Street, in Marylebone, in 1874. That short piece sent us back to Foro Clavigero, in which Ruskin describes his philanthropic scheme “to supply the poor in that neighbourhood with pure tea, in packets as small as they chose to buy, without mak-}

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