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THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT

Avril Horner Barbara Comyns and Graham Greene | **Megan Marz** Digital fictions
Crispin Sartwell The plot against philosophy | **En Liang Khong** Imaginary cities

The scuba-diving philosopher

David Papineau on Peter Godfrey-Smith and other conscious animals

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In this issue

Stephen Hawking's theory of everything found no room for philosophy. Ten years ago he put forward the claims of science at their most arrogant. "Almost all of us must sometimes wonder: why are we here? where do we come from? Traditionally, these are questions for philosophy, but philosophy is dead". This prompted the *TLS*'s Professor Tim Crane to retort that philosophy is unavoidable since Hawking himself put forward philosophical views. These amounted to "bad philosophy, because he is unaware of it as a discipline and a practice with a history".

Philosophy hardly required Hawking's services as its gravedigger or sexton. Many leading practitioners have been pronouncing its death for over a century. As Crispin Sartwell reminds us in his *TLS* lead feature, some modern philosophers have attempted to murder it too – in Wittgenstein's case, twice. Sartwell's dissertation supervisor, Richard Rorty, tried to put him off his studies with the words, "It's over. And a good thing too." Yet Rorty recanted (his enthusiasm for philosophy was revived by Rawls's *Theory of Justice*, fifty years old this year and still informing political debate). Nineteen-sixties counter-culture rejected scientism too. Having cleaned the debris from the ground, as Nietzsche advised, philosophers have been rebuilding their discipline ever since. Sartwell reminds us, "the question of how I or we should live is not a scientific question" and an "inquiry into ultimate values is irrepressible".

John Gray has recently been advising humans that they could pick up some handy philosophical tips from his cat (see the *TLS*, January 15). Peter Godfrey-Smith, the scuba-diving philosopher, has found inspiration in the seas and oceans. A scientific materialist, he examines the "what-it's-likeness" of marine life consciousness. In his last work he concluded that encountering an octopus is tantamount to meeting an intelligent alien. This time, in *Metazoa*, he takes a close look at shrimps and other arthropods. Our reviewer David Papineau salutes the author's modesty, an unusual attribute for an intellectual who combines the talents of an academic philosopher with those of a scientist.

The novels of Barbara Comyns are also enjoying a revival. Avril Horner looks back on Comyns's long friendship with Graham Greene, her mentor and critic. The pair shared a "sense of wreckage and of evil in the air", says Horner (quoting Jane Gardam), and concludes optimistically that her "work speaks more clearly to readers now than it did in the mid-twentieth century".

MARTIN IVENS
Editor

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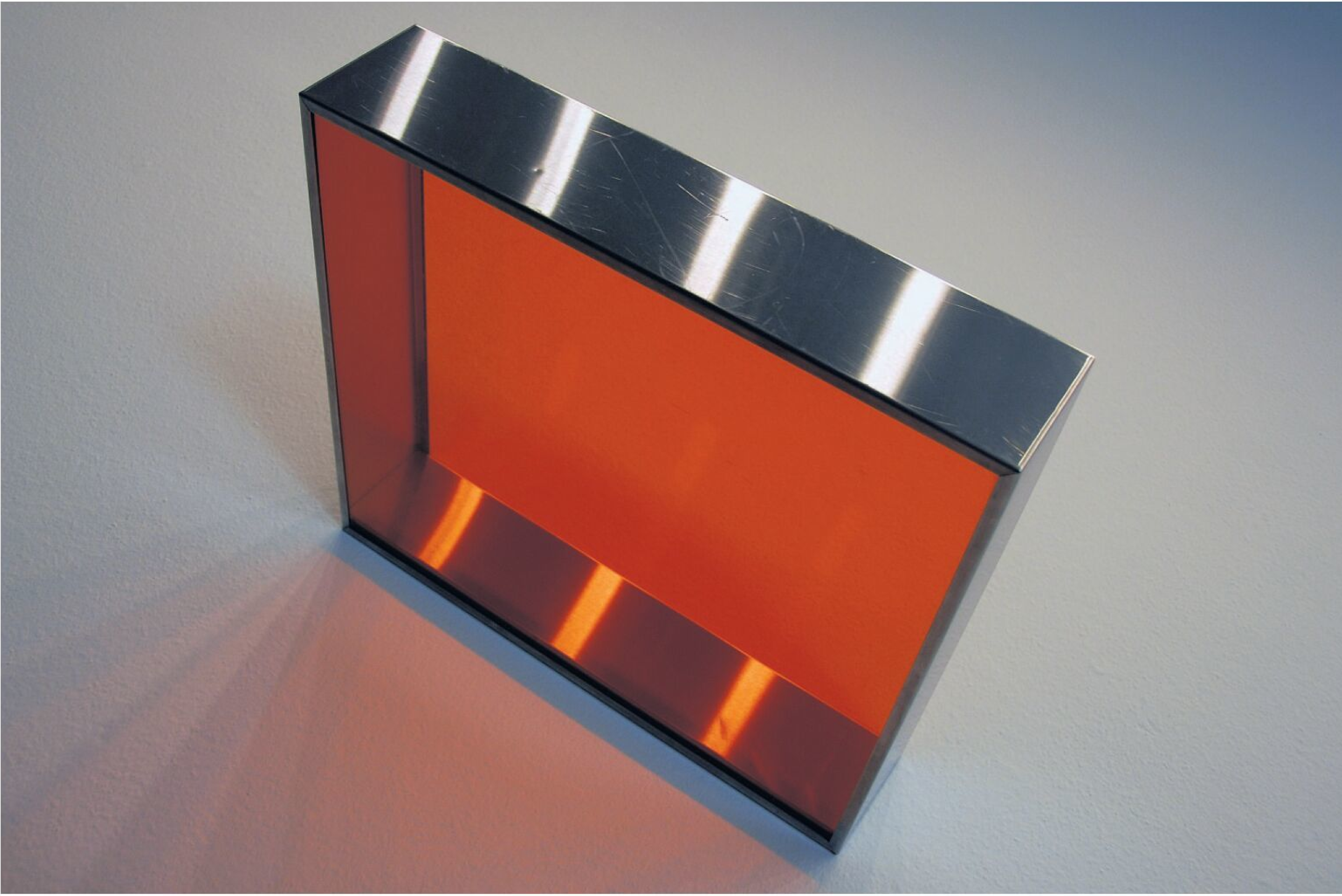

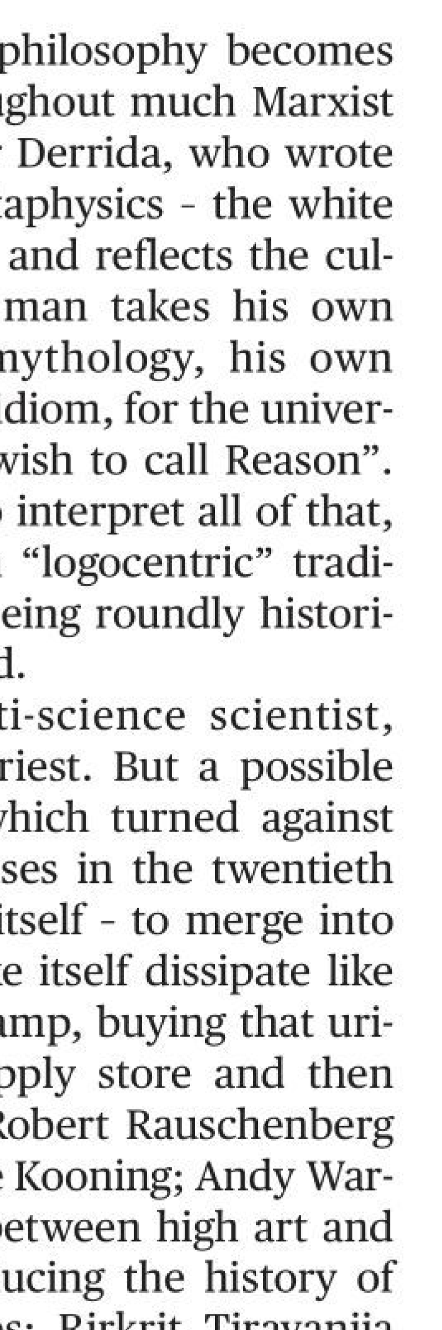

“Small Box” by Donald Judd, 1969

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Kill or cure

How philosophy wrote its own obituary, but then bounced back

CRISPIN SARTWELL

When I arrived with bright eyes and a bushy tail (as I like to think) in the PhD programme in philosophy at the University of Virginia in 1983, I tried to recruit Richard Rorty, the eminent neo-pragmatist, as my dissertation supervisor. He was interested in my proposed topic on John Dewey’s aesthetics, he allowed. But he asked me whether I was sure I wanted to get a degree in philosophy. The very word seemed to make him tired. “It’s over”, he said flatly. “And a good thing too.” He suggested that there was more future in English or comparative literature. He could probably tell that I was no scientist; a young literary critic, then. But there really should be no philosophers in the next generation. I’d never get a job.

Shortly before I met him, Rorty had written that philosophy would go the way of theology as a university department and as an area of inquiry. “Once grace, salvation, and the Divine Nature were subjects of study”, he wrote; “now the fact that they were so is the subject of study. Once theology was a pure and autonomous subject; now religion lies at the mercy of psychology, history, anthropology, and whatever other discipline cares to jump in”. Philosophy, which had spent these past few millennia trying to connect human experience to an external, transhuman reality and some sort of secure ground for our values, was interesting primarily as a historical curiosity or a genre of literature. As he wrote in “Keeping Philosophy Pure”, “if philosophy comes to an end, it will be because that picture is as remote from us as the picture of man as the child of God. If that day comes, it will seem as quaint to treat a man’s knowledge as a special relation between his mind and its object as it now does to treat his goodness as a special relation between his soul and God”.

“If that day comes” has a nice scriptural quality. The end of a subject to which he’d devoted his life was, for Rorty, something devoutly to be wished for, but it was also a historical inevitability, or it had already happened, whether any particular philosophy professor or grad student thought so or not. “No matter how dark the time, we shall no longer turn to the philosophers for rescue as our ancestors turned to priests”, he predicted. “We shall turn instead to the poets and the engineers, the people who produce startling new projects for achieving the greatest happiness of the greatest number.” No wonder he looked at me funny when I said I was interested in the nature of beauty.

Old disciplines die, occasionally, and there are no professors of alchemy or geomancy at Harvard (I think …). But disciplines rarely attempt to end themselves; it’s the sort of move that might persuade the provost to defund your department. Nevertheless, philosophy in the twentieth century took a serious crack at public self-immolation, and many of the major figures in various traditions – Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Peirce, Dewey, Carnap, Derrida, Adorno, Rorty, Ayer, Foucault – expressed extreme misgivings about the whole history of their own discipline, which had got off on a terribly wrong foot with Plato, taken a disastrous turn with Descartes, and been dispatched by Hegel, or Nietzsche, or Wittgenstein. There was, they held in one form or another, a nest of nonsense or dishonesty or oppression at the heart of the whole thing. Many of them declared that philosophy was already over, or that they were here to bring it to an end, or that it had never actually existed in the first place. Maybe it was merely a genre of literature, or a primitive proto-science. At any rate, it had certainly been exposed and superseded.

Indeed, perhaps the most widely agreed upon and clearly expressed conviction among major figures of twentieth-century philosophy in all its strands was the wrongness of their own discipline, from its origins and to its foundations.

Ludwig Wittgenstein is often considered the century’s greatest philosopher, which is a bit ironic in that he has the peculiar distinction of having killed philosophy twice, early and later on in his career, in completely different ways. “Most propositions and questions, that have been written about philosophical matters, are not false, but senseless”, he wrote in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921). “We cannot, therefore, answer questions of this kind at all, but only state their senselessness.” And *that* was his solution to all the major problems that had emerged in Western philosophy: there had never been any problems in the first place. By the time he got to *Philosophical Investigations* (1954), Wittgenstein had changed his mind about many things, but not about ending philosophy. “What is your aim in philosophy? – to shew the fly [the philosopher] the way out of the fly-bottle [philosophy].” “The real discovery is the one that makes me capable of stopping doing philosophy when I want to. – The one that gives philosophy peace, so that it is no longer tormented by questions which bring itself in question.” In both incarnations, Wittgenstein took philosophy to be an illness, a source of suffering, something to be diagnosed and treated rather than refuted.

Thus analytic philosophy developed paradoxically, by negating philosophy, and twentieth-century continental philosophy did likewise. Heidegger titled one his essays “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking”. Whether or not he meant that the task of thinking had come to an end, he certainly meant that philosophy, under the auspices of which western culture had gone badly wrong and misplaced Being, was finished; Nietzsche had administered the killing blow. In some sense, the entire tradition had been a mistake, leading us eventually into the technological nightmare we now inhabit. “What does it mean that philosophy in the present age [circa 1966] has entered its final stage?”, he asks, though that appears to be a question that begs the question.

The jettisoning of Western philosophy becomes political in many places (throughout much Marxist theory, for example). Consider Derrida, who wrote in *Margins of Philosophy*: “Metaphysics – the white mythology which reassembles and reflects the culture of the West: the white man takes his own mythology, Indo-European mythology, his own *logos*, that is, the *mythos* of his idiom, for the universal form of that he must still wish to call Reason”. I’m not entirely certain how to interpret all of that, but it’s clear that the Western “logocentric” tradition (philosophy, in short) is being roundly historicized and roundly condemned.

Now, you can’t be an anti-science scientist, exactly, or an anti-religious priest. But a possible parallel is provided by art, which turned against itself in many places and phases in the twentieth century, or even tried to end itself – to merge into the culture as a whole or make itself dissipate like a mist. I think of Marcel Duchamp, buying that urinal at the local plumbing supply store and then hanging it on a gallery wall; Robert Rauschenberg erasing a drawing by Willem de Kooning; Andy Warhol destroying the boundary between high art and pop culture; Donald Judd reducing the history of sculpture to a series of boxes; Rirkrit Tiravanija serving Thai food as a performance piece; John Cage presenting silence as music, and so on.

Perhaps twentieth-century philosophy, unbeknown to itself, participated in the high modernist impulse to erase or negate the past and start anew. The anti-philosophy avatar Wittgenstein was greeted as a genius in quite the modernist vein: as a sort of Pablo Picasso or James Joyce. That sort of thoroughly modern genius displays his (and it is usually his) super-excellent importance by erasing, overcoming, transcending the past. But other factors – both internal to the discipline and coming at it from outside – led to its dedicating decades to diagnosing and bleeding itself.

The internal pressure might be thought of as a growing sense of the discipline as having grown both overly refined and overly elaborate: a kind of aesthetic critique. Reading J. M. E. McTaggart is

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enough to make anyone reach for Occam's razor. And then again, there was the usual pressure on younger scholars (G. E. Moore at the turn of the century, Wittgenstein in 1919) to outdo their teachers. Here that took the distinctively modernist form of a sweeping negation of all that had gone before. Nor was the impulse merely Oedipal. The dadaist Max Ernst wrote that "a horrible futile war [the First World War] had robbed us of five years of our existence. We had experienced the collapse into ridicule and shame of everything represented to us as just, true, and beautiful". And so Dada turned against beauty, or art turned against art. Perhaps Wittgenstein, who served in the trenches, had a similar experience of alienation from his own traditions.

The primary external or institutional pressure on philosophy, mounting as the nineteenth century turned towards the twentieth, was the success of *science* at providing confirmable knowledge that was often concretely applicable. It's a familiar story that Aristotle took on all of human knowledge in every discipline that existed in his time, and invented some new ones as well (even "physics", perhaps), but that by the seventeenth century the "special sciences" were spinning themselves off from "natural philosophy" as matters of particular expertise. By the late nineteenth century, the term "science" coalesced around a series of disciplines and a repertoire of fairly precise empirical techniques. (Earlier in the century, the term "science" is still used quite loosely: Hegel called his own philosophy *science*, for example.) Roughly, philosophy and the special sciences traded places epistemologically: science was thought to be the primary or even the only source of human knowledge. Many philosophers agreed.

If so, the condition of philosophy in the academy around 1900 was intolerable. Kantians and Hegelians purported to explain the structure of history and consciousness in ever more profuse and obscure terms; the philosophy faculties of Oxford and Cambridge, for example, were dominated by T. H. Green and F. H. Bradley. No one could point to any sort of well-confirmed theory of anything, and as one read the work, one started to suspect that the discipline had slipped into senselessness.

In the first presidential address to the American Philosophical Association (1902), J. E. Creighton gave a typical declaration:

> If we look at the country as a whole it does not seem too much to say that philosophy does not enjoy the general recognition, even among educated men, that is accorded to many of the other sciences, nor is the philosophical teacher and writer universally conceded to be a specially trained scholar whose opinions in his own field are as much entitled to respect as those of the physicist or biologist in his special domain.

Some thirty-five years later, A. J. Ayer flatly declared in *Language, Truth and Logic* that "There is no field of experience which cannot, in principle, be brought under some form of scientific law, and no type of speculative knowledge about the world which it is, in principle, beyond the power of science to give. We have already gone some way to substantiate this proposition by demolishing metaphysics ... With this we complete the overthrow of speculative philosophy". He ends the book with this: "What we must recognise is that it is necessary for a philosopher to become a scientist ... if he is to make any contribution towards the growth of human knowledge".

"Reading J. M. E. McTaggart is enough to make anyone reach for Occam's razor

Ayer and his contemporary Heidegger didn't agree on much, even a vocabulary with which they might have communicated with one another. But they agreed that, in Heidegger's words,

> The development of the sciences is at the same time their separation from philosophy and the establishment of their independence. This process belongs to the completion of philosophy ... The sciences are now taking over as their own task what philosophy in the course of its history tried to present in certain places, and even there only inadequately, that is, ontologies of the various regions of beings (nature, history, law, art).

In the first golden age of scientism (perhaps we are now in the second), then, philosophy faced a trilemma: perhaps it is itself a science (and so needs extreme immediate reform); or perhaps it can serve as an aid or "propaedeutic" to science; or perhaps (not being suited to deliver any knowledge itself) philosophy should cease operations immediately. The first of these approaches was taken up, among many others, by the pragmatists. The movement's founder Charles Sanders Peirce wrote in "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities" (1868): "Metaphysicians will all agree that metaphysics has reached a pitch of certainty far beyond that of the physical sciences; – only they can agree upon nothing else ... Philosophy ought to imitate the successful sciences in its methods, so far as to proceed only from tangible premises which can be subjected to careful scrutiny".

The logical positivists, W. V. O. Quine and many others, meanwhile, took the approach of treating philosophy as a "handmaiden to the sciences" (in Locke's phrase). "Philosophy has long suffered", wrote Quine in "Has Philosophy Lost Contact with People?" (1979), "as hard sciences have not, from a wavering consensus on professional competence. Students of the heavens are separable into astrologers and astronomers as readily as are the minor domestic ruminants into sheep and goats, but the separation of philosophers into sages and cranks seems to be more sensitive to frames of reference." So, he argued, philosophy had better narrow its focus to clarifying the terms and projects of empirical science.

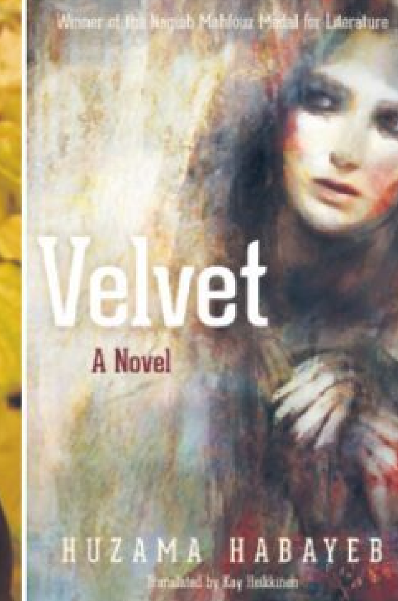
Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the nature and usefulness of philosophy, as well as the security of its spot in the academy, have often been somewhat tentative, and it has often been held by its practitioners to be in crisis. But the most remarkable thing about philosophy's century-long attempt at self-destruction was that it did not succeed – that philosophy never lost its place in the disciplinary matrix. It has never quite, as so many of these figures prophesied, been transformed from a going discourse into an historical artefact. It might not even be too strong to say that philosophy survived by destroying itself, or at least by emphatically disciplining itself for a century or so to cure itself of certain excesses, and get itself back to being fighting fit. As Nietzsche famously pointed out, to create anything at this late stage of history (1880), you have to clear the ground of a lot of debris.

Indeed, the persistent and urgent calls to end philosophy – or to reform it radically – ended up as a part of its evolving disciplinary identity; and at this stage Wittgenstein and Heidegger and Rorty take up a place in intellectual histories that connect them backwards to Plato and forward to the journal articles and conference papers of today. These figures continued philosophy by trying to negate it.

Nevertheless, I don't think the self-destructive impulse was adequately motivated. The idea of prohibiting subject matters and modes of inquiry *a priori* – ruling out in advance all the general or theoretical reflection that might ever emerge on the arts, or on politics, or on the relation of human consciousness to the world, as unempirical and

BANIPAL

Velvet: An Evening with
Kay Heikkinen & Huzama Habayeb



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"A celebration of the triumph of the imagination over the mundane"

Kay Heikkinen is a translator and academic who holds a PhD from Harvard University and is currently Ibn Rushd Lecturer of Arabic at the University of Chicago. Her translations include Naguib Mahfouz's In the Time of Love *and Radwa Ashour's* The Woman From Tantoura.

Huzama Habayeb is a Palestinian writer, born and raised in Kuwait where she started writing and publishing short stories, poetry, and journalistic pieces as a student of English language and literature. Velvet is her third novel, its Arabic original Mukhmal *winning for her the 2017 Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature.*

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therefore senseless – strikes me as irrational, even if the speculation had grown excessive and problematic. The questions themselves arise in some form even among children, and they concern matters that are central to the lives of all of us: the question of how I or we should live is not a scientific question, and it is not so easy, on a sleepless night or on a beautiful day, to set it aside entirely. That we are not likely to answer such questions once and for all, or test our accounts with double-blind studies or particle accelerators, does not entail that the activity is avoidable or that it is profitless. I don't think I could set such questions aside even if I wanted to, and I don't think the Derridas or Carnaps or Rortys have given me adequate reasons why I should.

The analytic philosophy of the twentieth century slowly started to revive the sort of speculation, particularly in value theory, that Wittgenstein and Quine had tried to suppress. It didn't refute the prohibition, but reconstructed the areas of inquiry on a clearer basis, using the analytic toolkit. John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice* (1971) is a good example of one sort of response; laborious, perhaps, but surely not entirely meaningless. Rawls re-opened sections of the history of philosophy, especially Kant, and soon there was a blossoming of analytic ethics in a Kantian vein, à la Derek Parfit or Christine Korsgaard.

Saul Kripke and David Lewis took the techniques of Frege and Wittgenstein along on their flights of speculative metaphysics. Arthur Danto and Nelson Goodman used them to explore questions about the nature and meaning of art. Philosophy, in very much its traditional outlines, had survived, though it had been chastened. To take another example, by the early 2000s the movement known as "speculative realism" (associated with Graham Harman) had emerged in continental philosophy, doing in a straightforward way the grand metaphysics that Derrida had apparently deconstructed. Rorty himself made a "political turn" as he went on; pretty soon he was praising Rawls and writing such moral/political tracts as *Achieving Our Country*.

The pro-philosophy backlash perhaps coincided initially with a return to the humanistic disciplines and suspicion of science associated with the counterculture of the 1960s. The positivists' scientism could not have appealed to Thoreauvian hippies, and perhaps that helped philosophy departments stay afloat even through the disciplinary self-destruction. It definitely wasn't philosophy professors' contribution to neuroscience, I feel, that kept us holding on.

I take the persistence of philosophy and its return in some form to its traditional terrain to suggest that philosophy as an inquiry into ultimate values (or something along those lines) is irrepressible: we just weren't going to be able to leave the questions alone forever, or the history of distinguished attempts to address them. So the internal reasons for philosophy's survival are not that puzzling. And even through all the science, the university never entirely stopped viewing (or marketing) itself as a repository of human values and intellectual traditions. A small philosophy department is an inexpensive way to express that.

Perhaps philosophy, like art, should congratulate itself on being, or on having been, open and critical enough to attack itself in its own entirety, even if, in both cases, many interesting and potentially useful traditional elements were jettisoned almost cavalierly. In both cases, the traditional elements have slowly been recuperated in new forms; there is a lot of painting in the contemporary galleries. The overweening scientism was uncritical and defensive, and the zeal of many twentieth-century philosophers against their own kind excessive. As to Rorty's notion that philosophy should merge with poetry or fiction, or that it should just admit that it always had been a merely literary genre: well, I find that as irritating in 2021 as I did in 1986, but I'm less worried now that the view will gain currency. It has itself become a curious artefact in the museum of ideas. ■

Agent non provocateur

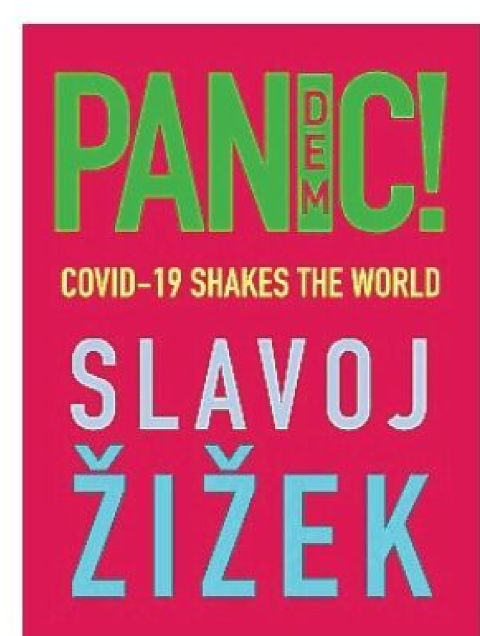
How Žižek was tamed by Covid-19

BECCA ROTHFELD

PANDEMIC!
COVID-19 shakes the world
SLAVOJ ŽIŽEK
146pp. Polity. Paperback, £11.99.

THE MOST OFFENSIVE THING about *Pandemic!*, Slavoj Žižek's hastily composed monograph, is that it is not especially offensive. Despite its cover (outfitted in shrieking magenta, with five of the title letters enlarged to spell out "panic"), its outrageous chapter names ("The Virus of Ideology", etc) and its sensationalist subtitle ("COVID-19 shakes the world"), the Slovenian provocateur's latest publication is uncharacteristically staid.

Sobriety is the last thing we have come to expect from Žižek. The jacket blurb brags that he is "the most dangerous philosopher in the west", and he is usually also one of the most entertaining. The author of countless blockbusters and star of several films, he is renowned for his stylized negativity – he once told the *Guardian* that what depresses him most is "seeing stupid people happy" – and performative dishevelment. It can be difficult to tell whether Žižek is a parodist or proponent of the dense Lacanian and Marxist theory he champions in print and in viral videos. Most likely, he is both. In one clip from Sophie Fiennes's documentary, *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006), presented by Žižek, he gestures at a bed of tulips. "My relationship to tulips is inherently Lynchian. I think they are disgusting", he snarls. "I mean, basically it's an open invitation to all insects and bees ... I think that flowers should be forbidden to children."



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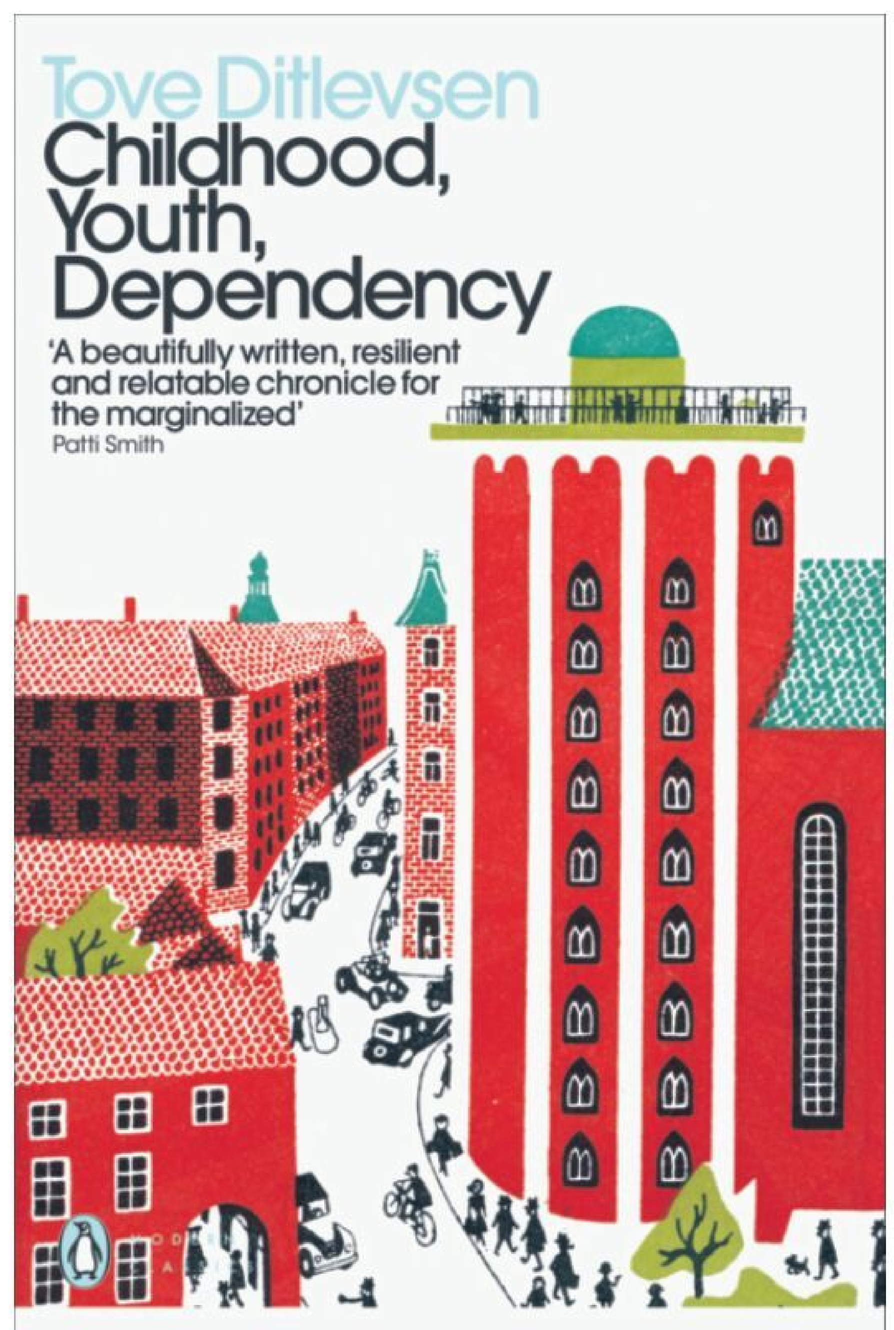
At his best, Žižek is more of a performance artist than he is a philosopher. It is therefore unsurprising that *Pandemic!* is, even by its own admission, somewhat lazily constructed. (Anyone who still harbours doubts about the extent of Žižek's opportunism may be convinced by a second flashy and brightly coloured volume, *Pandemic! 2: Chronicles of a time lost*, which is set to follow imminently.) Several passages have been "shamelessly but gratefully lifted from Wikipedia", and the footnotes contain not citations but website URLs. Between each chapter, several decorative pages have been inserted.

Yet *Pandemic!* is a salvo, its argumentation scarcely more rigorous than its organization. Its guiding sentiment, insofar as it has one, is anticapitalist. "The ongoing spread of the coronavirus epidemic has also triggered a vast epidemic of ideological viruses which were lying dormant in our societies", Žižek writes. Among these, he counts "fake news, paranoiac conspiracy theories" and "explosions of racism". He concludes that "the state should directly intervene in the same way as it intervenes in conditions of war when thousands of guns are needed". The upshot is that we – and especially those of us living in the dystopia James Baldwin once called "an adventure in real estate", namely the United States – need to adopt reforms often denigrated as "communist" by detractors.

That *Pandemic!* is digressive and derivative is only to be expected. What is unforgivable is that its conclusions are so sensibly presented. Still, it might be argued, better Žižek's newfound earnestness than the unconscionable callousness of the Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben, who has suggested, with absolute seriousness (and absolute self-importance), that we sacrifice the elderly to the virus. Žižek is right to scold in response: "Our first principle should be not to economize but to assist unconditionally, irrespective of costs, those who need help, to enable their survival".

Nonetheless, while we are overrun with commenters eager to tell us what we already know – that the economy is broken and that it is imperative for us to distribute resources more equitably in the future – comedy and camp remain in short supply. In *Pandemic!*, there are brief outbursts of vintage Žižek, as when he celebrates the closure of institutions he has always found distasteful. "Good riddance" to cruise ships, he effuses. "Amusements are turning into ghost towns – perfect, I cannot imagine a more boring and stupid place than Disneyland." Still, he ends by recommending that now is not the time to confront the "ultimate abyss of our being" so much as to watch stupid television or "structure your life in a stable and meaningful way". Is this really the same man who stood in a garden ranting about Lynchian tulips? When Slavok Žižek's is the voice of reason, the world must be very sick indeed. ■

'Childhood is long and narrow like a coffin, and you can't get out of it on your own'



Jack Johnson and Paul Robeson

Clifford Thompson begins his good review (Arts, January 22) of *One Night in Miami* with the reflection that before the 1960s "there had been a few prominent African Americans who seemed to say and do whatever they wanted (the early twentieth-century heavyweight boxing champion Jack Johnson and the singer, actor and activist Paul Robeson come to mind)". Well, not quite!

Before Jack Johnson (1878-1946) won the heavyweight title by knocking out the champion Tommy Burns in 1908, racial discrimination had held him back, and it never went away. His two marriages to white women were met with fury from white supremacists. In 1913 Johnson was convicted of violating the Mann Act by transporting a white woman (a wife to be) across state lines for "immoral purposes" and sentenced to a year in prison; released on bond, he then fled to Canada and on to Paris, where he lived in exile until 1920, when he surrendered to US marshals and served his sentence. After years of attempts to have his criminal record erased, in 2018 President Trump officially pardoned Johnson. Hardly a life in which he was able "to say and do whatever he liked".

As for Paul Robeson (1898-1976), in the 1920s his attempts to become a lawyer were dashed by lack of opportunity for Black Americans in the legal profession. His subsequent successes as an actor and singer on both sides of the Atlantic were many. At the same time his actions and writings as a political activist led to a visit to the Soviet Union in 1934, and he remained committed to activism throughout the 1930s and 40s. In 1950 the State department revoked his passport when he refused to sign an affidavit which disclaimed his membership of the Communist Party. He was a number of times called to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee, and invoked the Fifth Amendment. In 1958 the Supreme Court cancelled the affidavit ruling and Robeson left to live in Europe. At a party in Moscow in the spring of 1961 he collapsed, and subsequently tried to commit suicide. His son, Paul Robeson Jr, believed, based on substantial research, that his father's collapse in Moscow and continuing illnesses were produced by BZ, a mind-altering drug used by the CIA and MI5. Again, hardly "to say and do whatever he liked".

Bruce Ross-Smith
Headington, Oxford

Antisemitism and the left

David Baddiel (January 29) provides an unsparing account of the silence that has too often been the response of us all - not just those on the "progressive" left - to the examples of antisemitism which he lists. His argument that this results from a perception of "the Jew" as being both of "low and high status" is compelling and chilling. However, does not Baddiel himself perhaps stray into exclusionary territory when he says, in the context of other minorities, that racism directed towards them "is not mine to talk about"? Antisemitism and other forms of racism must surely be confronted and challenged by all of us all of the time. I am not Jewish but I hear what Baddiel is saying, I share his outrage and I consider that it is also mine to talk about.

Simon Roberts
Twyford, Berkshire

David Baddiel in his brilliant essay was quite soft on T. S. Eliot's antisemitism (and racism generally). He could have quoted from Eliot's letters: "Now the Jewboys of Columbo's Fleet / Were feasting at the Passover / King Bolo & His Black Black Queen / Rolled in Teakettle-arse-over", and from his poem "The Columbiad": "The only doctor in his town / Was a bastard jew named Benny" (see pp 263 and 271 of Christopher Ricks's and Jim McCue's *The Poems of T. S. Eliot: The annotated text*, Volume II, 2015). Baddiel could perhaps meet with Anthony Julius again and ask him how these horrific words can be made into art.

Sam Milne
Claygate, Surrey

Vichy France

May I endorse John Flower's fair review of Alya Aglan's *La France à l'envers: La guerre de Vichy (1940-1945)* (January 22)? Aglan illustrates very well how the disaster of 1940 sowed the seeds of civil war in France (as German invasions did in other countries). It fractured French society and created conflicting loyalties. By persecuting those deemed responsible for France's military defeat, the Vichy regime pretended to forge a united national community. It sought to ward off its obsessive fear of civil war by - perversely - promoting division. In doing so, Vichy overturned what was legal and legitimate, subverting the democratic traditions of the Third Republic. A merit of Aglan's book is its well-balanced thoroughness. She shows that not only were the French divided in their attitude to the Vichy regime and the German occupation, but the German authorities treated France inconsistently. In the economic field, for example, their placing of contracts with French firms heralded an apparent convergence of interests between the two countries. But any convergence was negated by the occupiers' ruthless requisitioning, pillaging and subsequent dragooning of French workers to support the Germans' increasingly desperate war effort against the Soviet enemy in the east. The German economic milking of France was so extensive that for many French people the prospect of famine was never far away. At one point, the economic expert of the German occupying forces, Dr Elmar Michel, anticipated a total collapse of the French economy.

Like other modern historians, such as Eric Jennings and Chris Millington, Aglan also gives due weight to the importance of the French empire to both Vichy and the Free French, neither of whom were squeamish about exploiting the indigenous populations. Those brutally subjected to forced labour by the Free French paid a heavy price for helping France to finish the war on the winning side. As the parliamentarian Gaston Monnerville remarked in May 1945, "without the empire France would only be a liberated country today; thanks to her empire, France is a victorious country". But any appreciation of the empire's contribution should not undervalue the part played by the many brave French men and women who fought with the Allies and in the Resistance.

Richard Carswell
Richmond, Surrey

Jorge Luis Borges

David Gallagher (January 29) reviews *Borges and Me*, my recent book about my travels with Jorge Luis Borges in 1971. Like Maria Kodama, the widow of Borges, Gallagher doubts that this journey even happened. He notes that Kodama claims to have been with Borges in Scotland. If she was, I don't remember her; neither do my friends, who do recall the circumstances of my journey with Borges. I drove Borges to Inverness, where he hoped to meet an Anglo-Saxon scholar who, as it happened, actually lived in Inverness, New Zealand. (I didn't want to drive him that far.) We made stops along the way - events I embellished, of course, which is why in the afterword I call this "a novelized memoir". The dialogue is invented, based on notes from my journal. After the trip, I realized that Borges was introducing me to his work as we drove, so I made this a governing motif.

Jay Parini
Weybridge, VT

France may have been the first European country to welcome Borges, in 1963, as David Gallagher avers, but Marshall McLuhan and Edmund Carpenter had published Borges's "Mutations" in their journal *Explorations* nearly a decade before that, in 1955.

Richard Cavell
Vancouver, Canada

Ernest Bevin's reputation

I am grateful to Nicholas Bird (Letters, January 29) for pointing out that Sir Roderick Edward Barclay, of the banking family, was Bevin's Principal Private Secretary. One would expect a person of that background to admire Bevin's foreign policy.

Edward Luttwak's comments supplement some research I have done concerning the Israeli war of independence. It was just that, a war of independence from the British Empire (not, primarily, or only, as often described, a war with "the Arabs"). Jordan's Arab Legion was a typical British Imperial force, with a British commander and officers. The RAF supplied not only aircraft, but pilots to the Egyptian forces, as well as other types of support. And so forth.

The reasons of state were complex. One had to do with the conflict between the British chiefs of staff and the prime minister, which culminated in a virtual coup d'état. Another had to do with plans for the siting of nuclear-capable bombers in the Negev, targeting Baku and beyond. Luttwak's information concerning Bevin's personal prejudices provides another layer to our understanding of the period.

Michael Holzman
Briarcliff Manor, NY

China and the United States

In his admirable review of the books by Zoellick and McMaster (January 29), Niall Ferguson craves more pragmatism in American foreign policy towards China. This is certainly what is needed, but that pragmatism must be based on the recognition of two basic truths. First, it is inevitable that, sooner rather than later, China will overtake the United States as the world's biggest economy. China's population is approximately four times that of the United States, so the production necessary to provide for the expected rise in living standards in China, alone, means that its GDP will outstrip that of the United States. To what extent China will devote resources to increasing its military power remains to be seen. Second, whatever policy the US adopts towards China, there is no way in which it can force China to democratize or to improve its civil rights record. In the 1950s and 1960s America refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Communist government, presumably hoping that as a result it would wither on the vine. China will change, but largely as a result of internal forces, as it has over recent decades. While continuing to be critical of China's policies we must not delude ourselves that this will have magical effects. Policies towards China must reflect these realities.

M. J. C. Vile
Canterbury

Bruce Wannell

Bruce Wannell (Letters, January 22) was an exotic and gracious visitor to the garden where I work. His seasonal appearance came with a well-informed appreciation of whatever horticultural tasks were under way and some useful suggestions. On one occasion I was plucked from a perennial border to attend his nearby piano recital. Visits ended with a generous tip pressed discreetly into my palm when I dropped him at the local train station, for the next leg of his journey. He was unforgettable.

Tim Bird
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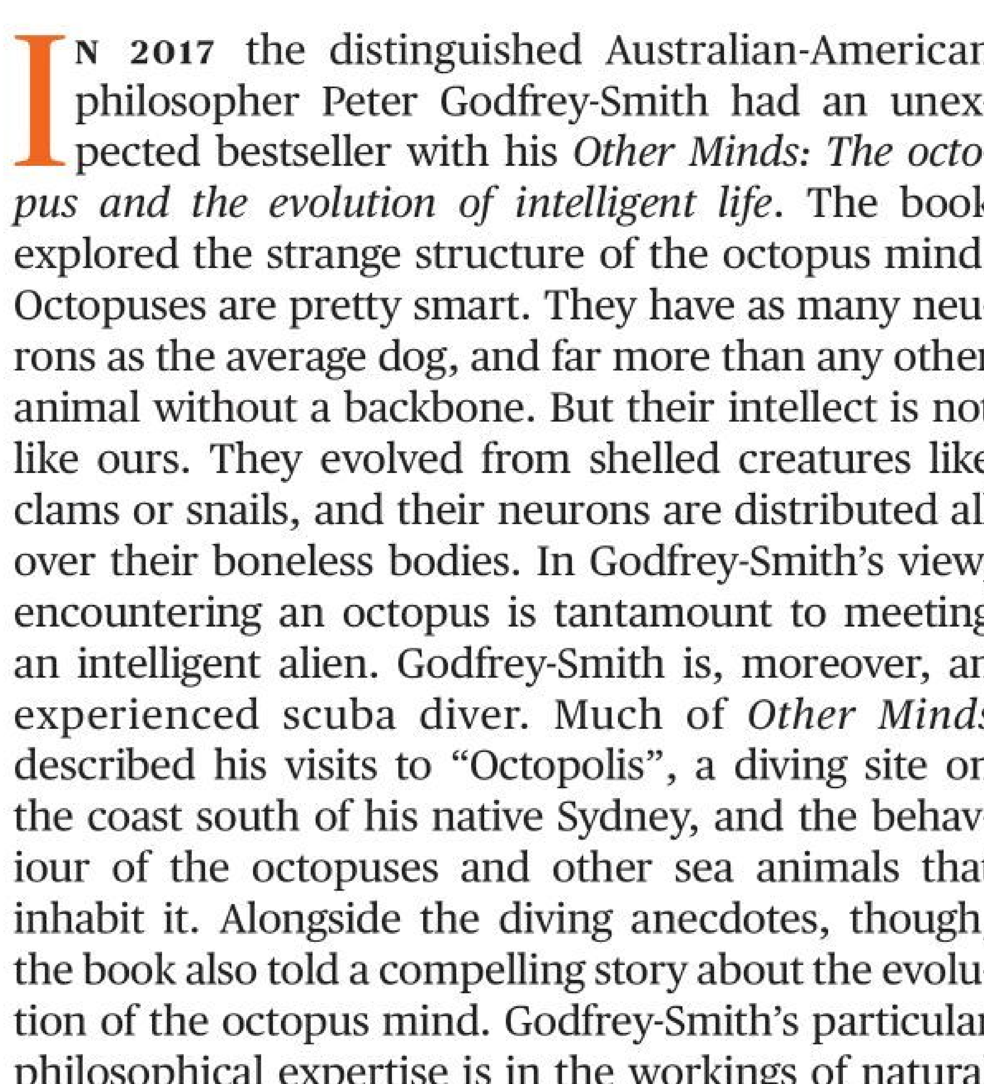
What is it like to be a shrimp?

More tales from the scuba-diving philosopher

DAVID PAPINEAU

METAZOA
Animal minds and the birth of consciousness
PETER GODFREY-SMITH
336pp. William Collins. £20.



Deep water shrimp, Atlantic Ocean

© BIOSPHOTO/ALAMY

IN 2017 the distinguished Australian-American philosopher Peter Godfrey-Smith had an unexpected bestseller with his *Other Minds: The octopus and the evolution of intelligent life*. The book explored the strange structure of the octopus mind. Octopuses are pretty smart. They have as many neurons as the average dog, and far more than any other animal without a backbone. But their intellect is not like ours. They evolved from shelled creatures like clams or snails, and their neurons are distributed all over their boneless bodies. In Godfrey-Smith's view, encountering an octopus is tantamount to meeting an intelligent alien. Godfrey-Smith is, moreover, an experienced scuba diver. Much of *Other Minds* described his visits to "Octopolis", a diving site on the coast south of his native Sydney, and the behaviour of the octopuses and other sea animals that inhabit it. Alongside the diving anecdotes, though, the book also told a compelling story about the evolution of the octopus mind. Godfrey-Smith's particular philosophical expertise is in the workings of natural selection, and he used his stories to introduce his readers quietly to a range of theoretical insights.

His new book shares the virtues of its predecessor. As before, Godfrey-Smith mixes his theoretical themes with first-hand accounts of often surprising animal behaviour. But this time his canvas has expanded. "Metazoa" is the biological term covering all multi-celled animals, from nerveless sponges to our own sapient selves. As well as reacquainting us with the octopuses, Godfrey-Smith brings on a large cast of other animal characters, including sponges with glass skeletons, hermit crabs that place poisonous anemones on their shells, and blind cave fish that steer by sonar. At the same time, his philosophical target has also expanded. This time he is aiming to understand not just intelligent behaviour, but also consciousness itself.

As Godfrey-Smith is all too aware, consciousness is not a straightforward scientific topic. At first pass, the material world delineated by modern science makes no mention of subjective conscious feelings. In Thomas Nagel's memorable phrase, materialism seems to leave out the "what-it's-likeness" of consciousness. Yet at the same time it would seem outlandish to deny on this account that consciousness exists (though it is a testament to the difficulties here that some serious philosophers do deny just this). Godfrey-Smith's response is to approach the issue obliquely. Perhaps, he suggests, the problem will come to seem different once we understand more about the origins of animals. He offers the image of a stubborn piece of land slowly succumbing to a sea of rising knowledge. Maybe we find consciousness puzzling only because our appreciation of animal life is limited.

Godfrey-Smith has no doubts about the truth of materialism. Early in the book he describes a curious incident in which T. H. Huxley – "Darwin's bulldog" – thought that a jelly-like substance raised from the North Atlantic sea floor when the first telegraph cables were laid must be the primordial "protoplasm" essential to all life. Given the state of nineteenth-century biological knowledge, it is understandable that Huxley and others supposed that living systems are made from some special active form of matter. But, as Godfrey-Smith observes, this belief in protoplasm has faded away with the rise of biochemistry. No contemporary scientists doubt that living bodies are made of just the same physical and chemical elements that compose the rest of the universe. (Huxley's jelly turned out to be nothing but a result of sea water reacting with the alcohol used to preserve deep-sea samples.)

Protoplasm might have succumbed to modern materialism, but consciousness is more resistant. It strikes most people as obvious that subjective feelings must be something more than mere physical processes in brains. Still, Godfrey-Smith is suspicious of this intuition. Along with many other contemporary materialists, he views it as a confusion arising from our ability to think about mental states in two ways, first in physical terms, and then in terms of what they feel like. In truth, he holds, the feelings aren't different from the physical brain states. That's just how it is for you when you're in those brain states.

Even so, Godfrey-Smith admits that this orthodox materialist stance remains unsatisfying. In particular, it doesn't tell us where consciousness is to be found in the universe. Which physical processes have the wherewithal to deliver consciousness? Are plants conscious? Insects? Fish? Frogs? In our own human case, it seems that activity in the cortex is necessary for consciousness. But it would seem harsh to deny consciousness for this reason to animals without a cortex, like birds, or insects – or octopuses, for that matter. This conundrum has driven a number of serious contemporary philosophers towards the panpsychist view that all matter is in some way conscious. In their view, any division between conscious and non-conscious physical processes can only be arbitrary.

Godfrey-Smith holds that we find ourselves in these theoretical tangles only because we are thinking about consciousness in the wrong way. Consciousness isn't a matter of some supercharged brain

David Papineau is Professor of Philosophy at King's College London. His new book, The Metaphysics of Sensory Experience, *is due to appear in March*

John Kinsella's recent poetry collections are Insomnia, *2018, and* Brimstone: A book of villanelles, *2020*

Villanelle of Star-Picket-Hopping Red-Capped Robin

The water tanker has been and delivered and I can risk
a good spray of the hose on a thirty-seven-degree day –
a red-capped robin plunges into the mist and frisks.

It's not a long burst into the drought garden's bisque-
longing but long enough to offset heat and dry and length of day,
the water tanker has been and delivered and I can take the risk.

And as the water dies from its spectra to form an array of asterisks
that mark moments in soil around aubergine and bok choy,
a red-capped robin emerges from the mist and frisks.

Now perched on the chiasmus of star picket with feather-licks
poking up from its tousled cap blow-dried by breeze through late sunray!
The water tanker has been and delivered and I can enjoy the risk.

All world closes in as we separate off, and the red-capped robin 'risks'
as well by hopping another picket closer, studying me,
a red-capped robin that emerged from the mist of frisks.

I hold out my finger thinking it will bond with my burlesque
of melding inner and outer selves with nature's lai,
as the water tanker has been and delivered and I can risk
a red-capped robin plunging into the mist as I frisk.

JOHN KINSELLA

Lit. Quiz: Who was Violet Fane?
New answers:
Ceylan Kosker
Violet Fane, The Literary Identities of the 19th-century Poet and Novelist.
www.eerpublishing.com

processes somehow turning the lights on. Rather it hinges on the existence of subjects, integrated beings for whom brain processes provide a perspective on the world. Consciousness doesn't demand any special ingredients. It just needs biological systems that move and act, and so depend on mental systems that distinguish their bodies from their environments and allow opportunities to be explored. Once we appreciate this, suggests Godfrey-Smith, attributions of consciousness need no longer be arbitrary. Whenever there are active animal subjects, consciousness is thrown in for free.

When did subjects first come onto the evolutionary scene? Godfrey-Smith takes us back over half a billion years to a time when primitive animal forms first began to use muscles and nerves to move around and scavenge on the dead. In the natural course of events, scavenging evolved into predation, and created a pressing further need for sense organs, the better to locate things to eat and to avoid being eaten.

The arthropods – the vast phylum that includes crabs, shrimps, spiders and insects – were the first category of animals to take full advantage of these possibilities. Their highly-jointed structures easily allow the emergence of advantageous mutations and the consequent exploitation of evolutionary possibilities. Godfrey-Smith describes a small banded shrimp he met on one of his dives. It had lost one large claw, but it still had five others, four legs, six feelers and a final pair of accessories like extendable combs.

Godfrey-Smith explains how he tried touching one of the feelers on this living Swiss Army knife, and how it responded by looking hard back at him. He writes feelingly about his interactions with this particular shrimp. He returns to the site to see how it is getting on, "implausible as it seemed to be driving three hours up the coast to visit a shrimp". By the time of his last visit the shrimp has lost a second large claw and "looked tired, very much on his own, and probably near the end of his days".

As always in describing his underwater encounters, Godfrey-Smith is careful not to anthropomorphize. He is aware that the subjectivity of distantly related animals cannot be anything like ours, and does not pretend he can get inside their minds. When he does put things from their point of view, he makes it explicit that he is fabulating. (Of another shrimp that kept looking back at him as he pursued it, he says "I imagined it saying 'WHAT? WHAT?' each time".) Yet Godfrey-Smith's efforts to capture animal subjectivity are made all the more persuasive by this fastidiousness. Keeping his distance is itself a way of conveying the distinctive mindsets of our evolutionarily distant cousins.

Consciousness may be a natural upshot of integrated subjects, but it is not to be taken for granted that all animals have a unified psychology. Octopuses, for one, have as many neurons in their wandering eight arms as in their central brains. Godfrey-Smith wonders whether we should count them as nine subjects rather than one – or perhaps as two, given that the nervous systems in the arms communicate directly with each other.

This issue of divided psychologies does not stop with the octopuses. Human patients with chronic epilepsy sometimes have the bridge between the two hemispheres of the brain surgically severed. People who have undergone this "split-brain" operation can on occasion seem to have two separate minds. In experiments that arrange for the two sides of the brain to be fed different information, the left side literally won't know what the right is doing. Surprisingly, most vertebrate animals seem to be akin to these split-brain patients, lacking the rich connections between brain hemispheres enjoyed by normal humans. Experiments on fish, amphibians, reptiles, birds and even marsupials show how behaviour guided by one side of the brain can be impervious to information available to the other. It is only we placental mammals that seem to enjoy a built-in communication channel between the two halves of the brain.

Godfrey-Smith explores this kind of mental decentralization in detail, but doubts that it has a significant impact on the existence of unified subjects. As he sees it, the different brain parts of animals are normally all guided by the same information, not least because they are interacting with the same external environments and need to control the same body. In some special circumstances, it is true, parts of animal brains work in isolation, and then perhaps we should recognize momentarily distinct centres of subjectivity. But soon enough they switch back into harmony and their overall mental unity is restored.

A related phenomenon is the rhythmic electrical waves that are known to accompany brain activity in most animals. These rhythms, familiar in humans as alpha, beta and gamma waves, add a holistic dimension to the localized signalling of individual neurons. Orthodoxy holds that these waves are of no functional significance, mere by-products of neurons doing their thing. But Godfrey-Smith is not so sure. He suggests that perhaps these electrical rhythms hold the mind together in ways that contribute importantly to the unity of subjects.

A striking feature of Godfrey-Smith's discussion of brain waves is the way he is open to different possibilities. He finds the material both puzzling and suggestive, and uses it to explore options with his readers. In fact, this is a feature that runs through the whole book. Unusually for an academic philosopher, Godfrey-Smith is rarely adamant in his opinions. He draws on a rich body of scientific investigations, but he tends to be cautious about the philosophical morals to be drawn. When there is a clear answer he says so, but as often he is tentative, indicating where his inclinations lie, but without insisting on anything.

This gentle approach won a wide readership for Godfrey-Smith's last book and deserves to do the same for this. But perhaps his exploratory style is well-suited, not just to the general reader, but to the problem of consciousness itself. Contemporary academic discussions of consciousness are increasingly running into sand. The battle lines are set, the moves are familiar, minutiae are pursued to the end, and none of it is very satisfying. Maybe it is time for a new tack. If Godfrey-Smith is right, there is no need to force the issue. Rather, a deeper understanding of the history of animal life will do the work itself. With more knowledge, he says, the problem will "transform and disappear". We shall see. Along with Peter Godfrey-Smith, I'm not inclined to insist on anything. But my own bet is that he is right. ■

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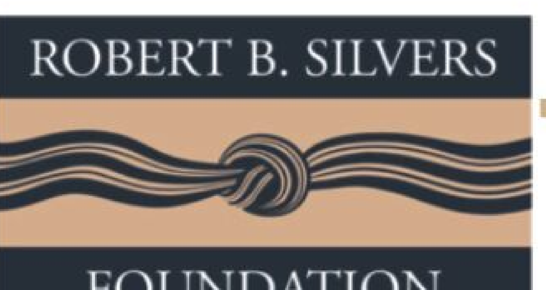

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Maxwell's house of cards

The decline and fall of a newspaper titan

CHRIS MULLIN

FALL
The mystery of Robert Maxwell
JOHN PRESTON
352pp. Viking. £18.99.

When Anthony Trollope created Augustus Melmotte, the villainous financier who is the antihero of his great novel *The Way We Live Now*, he might almost have had Robert Maxwell in mind. Like Maxwell, Melmotte was devious and domineering; he lived lavishly, though the source of his riches was opaque; and he played the game to the end.

As John Preston tells us in *Fall*, Maxwell's origins were humble. Born Ludvik Hoch, he was one of nine children of an impoverished Jewish family in the town of Solotvino, "a bleak, isolated place" on the eastern edge of what was then Czechoslovakia (the region would be annexed by Hungary and later by the Soviet Union). Aged seventeen when war broke out, he joined the underground resistance in Budapest. Arrested, he narrowly escaped execution and eventually made his way to England, where he enlisted in the British Army. His mother, grandfather and two of his sisters perished in the death camps.

In England he underwent various changes of name before finally settling for Robert Maxwell. In 1944, three weeks after D-Day, his regiment was sent to Normandy. By the end of 1944, he had been promoted to second lieutenant, and he took part in the liberation of the Netherlands and later the advance into Germany. It was here that he distinguished himself in combat, for which he was awarded the Military Cross, pinned to his chest by no lesser figure than Field Marshal Montgomery. He also displayed another side of his character: great ruthlessness, personally executing the mayor of a town where his unit had come under fire, and shooting a number of German soldiers, despite their displaying a white flag. Much later in life, he remarked to one of his sons, "I once killed boys your age. I regret it deeply".

By February 1946, promoted to captain, Maxwell was working for military intelligence in Berlin, where his flair for languages and natural talent for subterfuge, which stayed with him all his life, no doubt proved useful. He was made a British citizen that same year. Around the same time, he made contact with Julius and Ferdinand Springer, members of the German publishing dynasty who possessed a large stock of unpublished scientific papers. Maxwell arranged for the documents to be smuggled to England, where he set himself up in business as a publisher, funded, allegedly, by MI6. This was the origin of his publishing empire.

By the early 1950s, he was operating out of headquarters in Marylebone High Street which he had rechristened Maxwell House – there was more than a touch of Donald Trump about him – and his business practices had assumed a pattern that would become familiar in later years. Having borrowed £100,000, ostensibly to fund his publishing business, he used it for other purposes, with the result that, when the lender asked for the return of his money, the cupboard was bare.

Despite outward appearances, tragedy was never far away. In 1957 his three-year-old daughter, Karine, died of leukaemia. Four years later, his eldest son, Michael, was seriously injured in a car accident; he died after seven years in a coma. It was a devastating blow.

Maxwell was a hard man to keep down, however. Like Augustus Melmotte, he decided he needed to be in parliament. With characteristic bravado, he announced to a friend, "I want you to be the first person to know that I have decided to become prime minister". In 1964, he was duly elected Labour MP for Buckingham, but what someone referred to as his sledgehammer personality did not go down well with colleagues. His political career peaked at Chairman of the House of Commons Catering Committee, and in 1970 he was defeated.

At about this time, he accepted a generous offer for the purchase of his publishing business, Pergamon Press, from a computer leasing company in the US. When the new owner eventually got his hands on Pergamon's books, he discovered that he had been comprehensively swindled. A Board of Trade inquiry followed and, in July 1971, concluded that Maxwell was "not a person who can be relied upon to exercise proper stewardship of a publicly quoted company". This verdict had no force in law, however, and remarkably the regulators took no further action. Within four years Maxwell was back in control of Pergamon.

There was no limit to his ambitions. Above all, he wanted to own a national newspaper. In 1969 he went head-to-head with Rupert Murdoch in a bid to take over the *News of the World*, and soon afterwards he attempted, unsuccessfully, to buy the *Sun*. Ten years later, Maxwell tried to acquire Times Newspapers, only to be once again outwitted by Murdoch. It was not until 1984, when he bought the Mirror Group, that his dream was realized. From the outset, his ownership of the *Mirror* would be a white-knuckle ride for all concerned. Using the paper as his platform, he managed to inveigle his way into the company of some of the most powerful people in the world, including Margaret Thatcher, Mikhail Gorbachev and George H. W. Bush. When he died, they all paid tribute.

Robert Maxwell and Mother Teresa, 1988

> **Maxwell craved acceptance from an Establishment that, not without reason, did not trust him**

His remains were flown to Israel, where he received what was, for all practical purposes, a state funeral. He was buried in a plot he had purchased three years earlier on the Mount of Olives where, according to Jewish lore, he would be among the first in the queue for resurrection. It was only a matter of days, however, before his legacy began to unravel. From under the noses of accountants and trustees Maxwell had looted the *Mirror* pension fund to the tune of some £350 million. In total he had accumulated debts of more than double that sum.

Where did the money go? In part on grandiose projects and new acquisitions – with great fanfare he had acquired the *New York Daily News* shortly before he died. Much was also spent on funding his extravagant lifestyle – Rolls-Royces, helicopters, private jets and a 55-metre super-yacht. It was from this yacht in the small hours of November 5, 1991, as his creditors were closing in, that he disappeared overboard into the waters of the Atlantic, just off the Canary Islands, from where his body was recovered a few hours later. The miracle is that he had managed to keep so many balls in the air for so long. The strain must have been enormous.

Many books have been written about Maxwell, but this is as near as we may get to the definitive version. John Preston has had the co-operation of three of Maxwell's children, in particular his son Ian. His much put-upon wife, Betty, died eight years ago, but not before she had published her own poignant memoir of life with the great swindler. A wide range of other sources has been tapped, ranging from chauffeurs and valets to most of those still living who fell under his spell. Even Rupert Murdoch, one of the few men to get the better of Maxwell, was interviewed.

The basic facts are, of course, well known, but the author – whose previous hits include a well-regarded account of the fall of Jeremy Thorpe – has managed to get beneath his subject's skin. Maxwell craved acceptance from an Establishment that, not without reason, did not trust him. He was lonely and insecure, and, for the most part, treated those around him monstrously. Very occasionally the mask slipped. "I have got no friends. No one I can turn to", he remarked to one of the few employees who dared challenge his behaviour. "I sometimes feel I can't go on." Above all, he was haunted by the memory of what had happened to his parents and siblings. His son, Ian, once walked into his bedroom to find him bent over a television with his nose inches from the screen. He was watching a documentary about Jews being unloaded from cattle trucks at Auschwitz and divided into those deemed fit for work and those who were destined for the gas chamber.

> "What are you doing?", asked Ian.
> Slowly Maxwell straightened up and turned round.
> "I'm looking to see if I can spot my parents".

There were some who got the measure of him. The former *Mirror* Editor-in-Chief Mike Molloy recounted an exchange with a psychiatrist friend, several years before the end, who remarked, "He's mad. I've got people inside who are less crazy than him". The psychiatrist then asked a series of pointed questions and remarked, "He'll probably die unexpectedly. Perhaps in some sort of explosion". On being told that Maxwell was intent on building a great heritage for his children, he replied presciently, "He'll leave nothing to them. Just ashes".

The only real mystery about Robert Maxwell lies not in the manner of his death; whether he jumped or fell does not matter much. No, the mystery lies in how he managed to fool so many powerful and intelligent people for so long – and in an age when it was much easier to check the facts than it was in Augustus Melmotte's day. ■

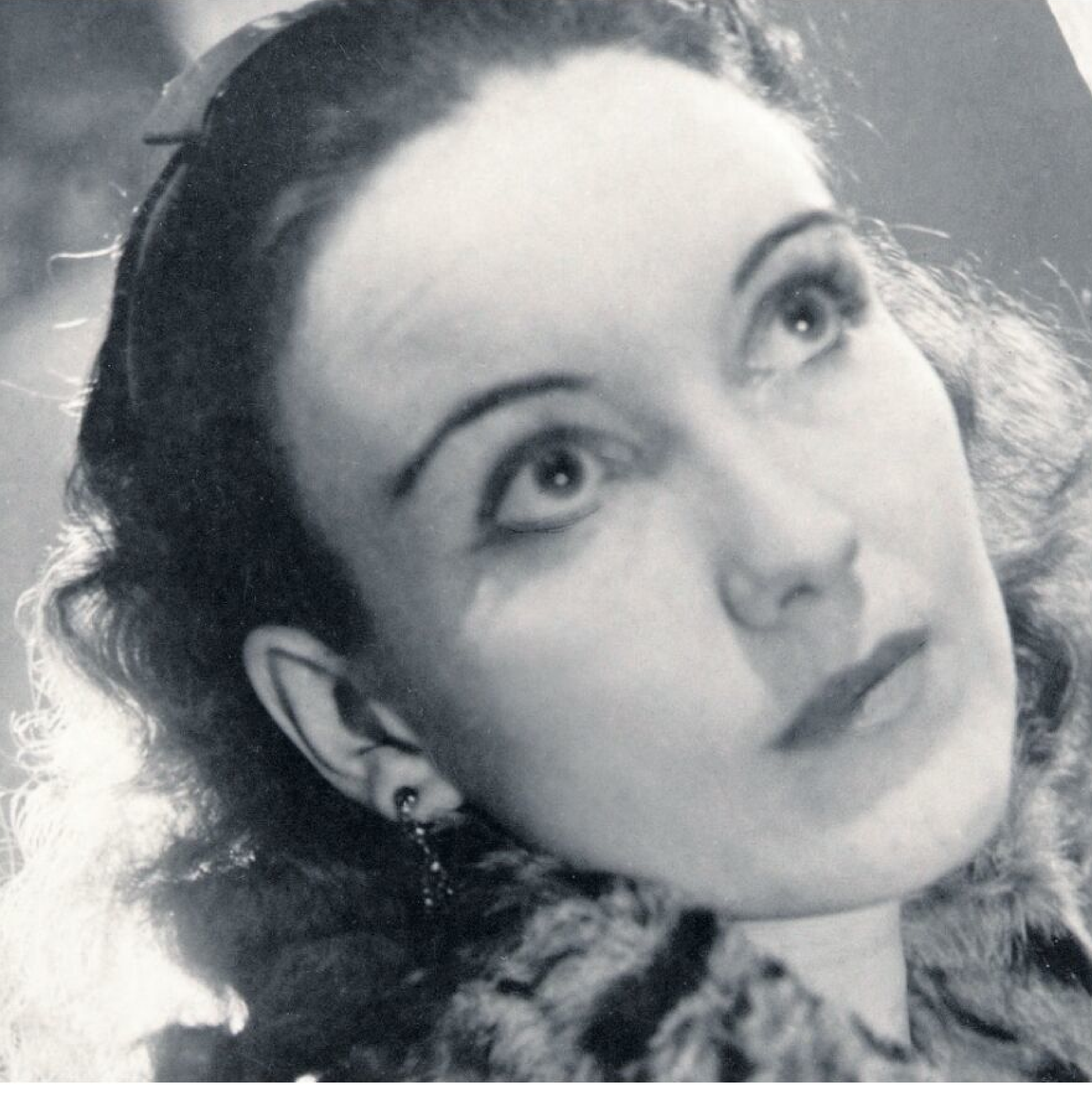
Chris Mullin's latest novel, The Friends of Harry Perkins, *was published in paperback last year*

COMMENTARY

The legend and the crazy novelist

Graham Greene's role in Barbara Comyns's writing career

AVRIL HORNER



Barbara Comyns

IT IS WELL KNOWN that Graham Greene encouraged aspiring writers; many of his published letters testify to his kindness and energy in promoting new talent. He discovered the Indian novelist R. K. Narayan, persuaded Hamish Hamilton to publish his first book, and oversaw his writing career thereafter. He championed Brian Moore and Muriel Spark when they were unknown. But he was also capable of taking authors to task if he thought they had been slapdash. In 1943, after reading the manuscript of *Titus Groan*, Greene wrote to Mervyn Peake, telling him that he frequently wanted to wring his neck "because it seemed to me that you were spoiling a first-class book by laziness".

Barbara Comyns was another of Greene's protégés. He became her friend, mentor and critic; he had faith in her work when she was unknown and advanced her career whenever he could. Their friendship and their correspondence lasted for over forty years; neither of these has been documented until now.

Barbara Comyns, then Barbara Pemberton, met Graham Greene in 1944 through Richard Comyns Carr, whom she married a year later. The two men worked together in Section V of MI6, which was overseen by its Deputy Head, Kim Philby, and soon became good friends. By this time Greene was an established author, having published eleven novels, including *Brighton Rock* and *The Power and the Glory*. Barbara Comyns liked him very much and admired his books. She and Richard stayed in touch with him after he resigned from Section V in June 1944, and always invited him to their London house parties. Whatever the reason for Greene's resignation (and several have been offered), he remained sympathetic to Philby after he was exposed as a double agent who had worked for the Russians as well as MI6 since 1934. Comyns and her husband also stood by Philby, who left a desk, a dining table and four early Victorian chairs with them for safe keeping when he moved to Beirut in 1956. Graham Greene, Richard Comyns Carr and Barbara Comyns were bound by several ties, including friendship, a love of literature and loyalty to Kim Philby (about whose spying activities Comyns assumed a disingenuous air when interviewed in later years).

Trained as an artist, Comyns had always aspired to be an author. While working as a housekeeper in Hertfordshire, in the early 1940s, she had recorded her memories of growing up in Bidford-on-Avon, mainly to entertain her two children; the result was *Sisters by a River*, which she put away in a suitcase when it was finished. Encouraged by a friend, Comyns sent the book off to several publishers, who all rejected it, although extracts from it were published in the magazine *Lilliput* between 1945 and 1946. As a result, Comyns was taken on by Katherine Clutton of the literary agency Hughes Massie, who contacted several publishers on her behalf. These publishers included Eyre & Spottiswoode, where, after the war, Greene had been given the task of expanding the fiction list – and so it was Greene who accepted a revised version of *Sisters by a River* for publication in 1947. (It was Clutton, meanwhile, who gently dissuaded Barbara from adopting the pen name "Clover Weston", which she and her colleagues thought "not the kind of name that gets itself taken seriously"; "What about 'Barbara Weston'? Or Barbara something else?") Unlike some later critics, Greene had no problem with Comyns's use of a faux-naive narrator or the air of menace that permeated her first book.

Comyns's writing could be too frank for some. Greene liked her second novel, *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, but, taking her out for lunch in January 1948, he suggested that some amendments might be necessary. (He was by then a director of Eyre & Spottiswoode.) He was right. In March 1948, Ruby Millar of Eyre & Spottiswoode wrote to Comyns to pass on the editorial board's call for "two slight expurgations" in the novel's description of childbirth. "I hope you will agree to let them stand because it is a pity to invite adverse criticism on a book which in the main says something about the horrors of confinements amongst the poor which honestly needs saying", she added. *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*, which offers a harrowing picture of what it was like, as an ordinary woman, to have a baby in a London hospital in the 1930s, was published in 1950 to warm reviews.

Comyns's new agent, John Johnson of E. P. S. Lewin, managed to place her third novel, *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*, with The Bodley Head, who published it in 1954. A comic macabre novel about suffering and survival, inspired by a mass poisoning event in Pont-Saint-Esprit in 1951, it divided readers. Some reviewers admired it and hailed Comyns as an important writer. John Betjeman hated it, however, and his acid comments in a widely syndicated review badly damaged sales. By now, though, Comyns knew that her books divided readers; so long as there were some good reviews as well as bad ones, she was not too downcast.

Disaster overtook Comyns and her husband in 1955, when Richard Comyns Carr was sacked from MI6, probably because of his friendship with Philby. Unable to find work in England, he and Barbara moved to Spain in 1956, spending two years on Ibiza and then sixteen years on the mainland. Comyns continued writing while Richard gradually established himself as a respected economic journalist.

When, in the late spring of 1957, Greene was made a director of The Bodley Head, he urged Max Reinhardt, its Managing Director, to keep an eye on this "crazy but interesting novelist whom I started when I was at Eyre & Spottiswoode". Early in 1958, she sent him *The Way We Live Now*, a novel based on their time on Ibiza; the title is perhaps a nod to Trollope, one of her favourite authors. Greene tried to persuade The Bodley Head to publish it, but without success. The firm also rejected her latest novel, *The Long White Dress*, around the same time. Presumably they had been put off by the mixed reviews and relatively poor sales of *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead*. Deeply disappointed, and unaware that Greene had praised her work to Reinhardt, Comyns sent him a copy of *The Long White Dress*, asking for advice. Greene read it and immediately wrote to Alexander Frere, the Chairman of William Heinemann:

> I have just finished reading the novel I spoke to you about by Barbara Comyns and apart from a short rather romantic passage near the end I think it's an extraordinarily good book – wild and Gothic and vivid, the best she has done yet. ... I am sending it to you herewith. I don't like the title which means nothing, and I would suggest changing it to *The Vet's Daughter* as the whole crazy atmosphere is about life in a veterinary surgeon's home.

Frere soon offered to publish the novel under the new title, and Comyns wrote immediately to Greene thanking him for his help in promoting her book: "I do not know how to say how grateful I am without sounding gushing". When Heinemann published *The Vet's Daughter* in February 1959, she was thrilled to see a tribute on the back cover from Greene. It is still used on most editions of the book:

> The strange off-beat talent of Miss Comyns and that innocent eye which observes with childlike simplicity the most fantastic or the most ominous occurrence, these have never, I think, been more impressively exercised than in *The Vet's Daughter*.

Now considered by many to be her finest novel, *The Vet's Daughter*, a strange mixture of fantasy and reality, comedy and horror, vividly charts the cruelty that can take place behind closed doors. Graham Greene's faith in the book was rewarded by the many enthusiastic reviews it received. On the back of its success, he urged John Johnson to approach Heinemann with *The Way We Live Now*, which he had already recommended to Frere in 1958 ("The whole thing is done with enormous humour and I found [it] very enjoyable"). The book was published in 1960 as *Out of the Red, Into the Blue*.

Following an affectionate interchange of letters between Graham Greene and Richard Comyns Carr in the late 1950s, in which they urged him to come and stay with them in their flat in Barcelona, Barbara and her husband then lost touch with their friend for ten years. This is not surprising: hailed during the 1950s as one of the best authors of his generation, during the 1960s Greene was extremely busy with writing, travel and public engagements. His personal life shifted its axis, too, as he moved to France permanently. In 1966, he bought a flat on the Côte d'Azur in order to be close to Yvonne Cloetta, who would remain his partner until his death in 1991.

After that long silence, Comyns was surprised in September 1969 to receive a letter from him, written from Paris. "Where are you and what are you doing?" Greene asked.

> It is with horror that I notice that *The Skin Chairs* was published seven years ago. I hope you haven't stopped writing (perhaps I have been out of England and failed to get your latest books) and please remember anything you write will be of interest to your old friend. I am connected with The Bodley Head and if anything has gone wrong with your relations with Heinemann please let me know.

Barbara replied at length, signing off with "Of course, we often read about you. You really have become 'a legend in your lifetime'. I was touched at your writing out of the blue like that". She also expressed her frustration with Heinemann and her woes over her latest book, *The House of Dolls*, which had failed to find a publisher. Its rejection had depressed her, and she confided to Greene that she felt "sort of sick if I even think about it. I destroyed the M.S., but still have the last rough draft and would re-write it and make it longer, but not much longer or it would be spoilt". She took some time writing the letter, worried that it might be too long and effusive. "I'd rather not know famous people – I never know how to treat them", she wrote in her diary in October. Greene responded quickly, asking to see the book. Comyns revised it yet again and, six weeks later, on December

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COURTESY ESTATE OF BARBARA COMYNS

8, 1969, posted it to Greene. "Oh I do hope he likes it and it will be published after all the disappointment", she wrote in her diary that day.

Soon after Christmas, Greene wrote again:

> I am sorry. I don't care for *The House of Dolls*. It doesn't seem to me up to the standard of your other novels. To my mind something has gone wrong with the distancing – and it doesn't seem quite as cool. Of course this doesn't mean that a publisher could not be found because it's a great deal better than most novels which are published. Would you like me to forward the typescript to an agent?
>
> A happy New Year and don't curse me too hard for causing you all this trouble.

For January 10, 1970, the day she received Graham Greene's letter, Comyns's diary reads: "Feel very sad. I was sure he would like it. He must wish he had left well alone and hadn't got in touch with me. Nothing to look forward to now". She told John Johnson that she had completely lost faith in it and wanted it shelved. She also wrote to Greene thanking him for his comments: "I am so glad you said it plainly and didn't wrap it up. Naturally I feel a bit sad but I'm sure you are right about the book. It is difficult to judge one's own work until one reads it again years later. … I certainly don't curse you. I'm far too grateful for your past help and for reading the book". Apart from his criticism of her technique, Greene might not have liked the book's subject matter – older women of modest means who turn to prostitution to make ends meet – which perhaps appeared trivial or distasteful to him. Or, like many male authors, he might have mistaken comic writing by a woman for frivolity. But beneath the wry comedy, Comyns was exposing the poverty that faced many older women in the mid-twentieth century, especially those without pension or husband. In any case, she saw the failure of *The House of Dolls* as the end of her writing career. "I've written all I have to say", she wrote to a friend.

It was Carmen Callil's decision to reprint six of her books in the Virago Modern Classics series during the 1980s that finally restored Comyns's faith in her writing. The Virago edition of Antonia White's *Frost in May* – a book Greene had persuaded Eyre & Spottiswoode to reprint in 1948 – caught his eye, and he wrote to Callil in September 1980 recommending Comyns. (He discreetly omitted to mention *The House of Dolls*.) Unaware that Callil had already decided to publish *The Vet's Daughter*, he warmly recommended Barbara's work:

> I read your article on the Virago Press in the *Times Literary Supplement* with great interest ["Virago reprints: redressing the balance", September 12, 1980]. Can I persuade you to investigate the novels of Barbara Comyns? When I was a publisher just after the war I published her first two books, *Sisters by a River* (a very funny book described by Elizabeth Bowen as 'a curiosity of literature, a blend of the gruesome and the comic') and *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths*. This was at Eyre and Spottiswoode in 1947 and 1950. When I ceased to be a publisher I got Heinemann's to take on her books and they published an excellent one *The Vet's Daughter* in 1959 and *The Skin Chairs* in 1962.
>
> Perhaps of all these books, *The Vet's Daughter* is the best. …
>
> PS If you have difficulty in obtaining the books either from Heinemann or Eyre & Spottiswoode I will bring them to London on one of my visits.

Callil replied with the news that Virago would be releasing their edition of *The Vet's Daughter* in 1981 and other novels by Comyns after that. Perhaps Callil was aware that Comyns was despondent and had lost confidence in her work: in early October 1980, when she sent the author the mock-up for the Virago cover of *The Vet's Daughter*, she enclosed the two letters she had received from Greene, and suggested that Comyns might want to write to thank him for his support.

Greene's letters were clearly immensely cheering for Comyns; she had assumed, after his cool response to *The House of Dolls*, that he was no longer interested in her work. Here, though, was proof that he thought she was a writer of the first order. "I was so surprised and pleased", she told Callil. "I thought he must have forgotten about my books by now. Actually, he did write to me once or twice while we were living in Spain, but the last letter must have been at least nine years ago." The next day she wrote to Greene to thank him for recommending her books to Virago and explaining why she and Richard had decided to return to England (inflation and the sinking pound). Perhaps wounded by James Michie's comment, made in 1979 to John Johnson, that hers was "a frail, highly individual talent which could just flourish in publishing conditions ten years ago, but which, I fear, would have a small sale and some respectful reviews in hardback nowadays, and no paperback sale", she added: "I write very little now partly because I feel I don't fit in with the eighties. I find most of the novels published very unsatisfying and very imitative: they appear to be written with an eye on what will please the critics". Greene objected. "I don't see why you have stopped writing because you don't fit in with the eighties", he replied. "Nor do I. But you have never fitted in to any particular period and that has been one of the spells in your books."

This letter gave Comyns the encouragement she needed to start thinking about another novel. In late 1982, at the age of seventy-five, she began what was to be her last book, *The Juniper Tree*, which was published by Methuen to enthusiastic reviews in 1985. On the back of its success, two of her earlier unpublished novels finally found a home: *Mr Fox*, written during the 1940s, and *The House of Dolls*, written in the 1960s. Both were published by Methuen, in 1987 and 1989 respectively. The novel that Greene had not liked now attracted widespread acclaim.

Comyns died in 1992, a year after Greene. In the *Independent*'s obituary, Ursula Holden praised her as "a true original" whose death marked "a loss to English writing". Jane Gardam described her novels in the *Guardian* as "idiosyncratic, episodic, vivid, funny, slightly sinister", and suggested that she shared with Graham Greene a "sense of wreckage and of evil in the air". Comyns was, indeed, an original: her novels are mordantly witty and occasionally deeply chilling; they explore the horrors of grinding poverty and emotional cruelty while celebrating the beauty and the comic incongruities of life. Perhaps she is currently enjoying a revival because her work speaks more clearly to readers now than it did in the mid-twentieth century. But Greene had always seen the value of her work, and, during her long friendship with him, she had seen both sides of his mentoring: he was a kind adviser whom she trusted and who advanced her career more than once but he was brusquely frank about the work he thought less than her best.

Their novels are very different. For Greene, evil was a metaphysical matter; for Comyns, evil was cruelty behind closed doors. But they shared a commitment to plain writing (her favourite novelist was Daniel Defoe) and a deep interest in suffering and unhappiness, whether caused by abuse or grim poverty, as in Comyns's novels, or by guilt and crises of faith, as in Greene's. Above all, though, it is that "sense of wreckage and of evil in the air" that distinguishes the work of both novelists and kept them deeply interested in one another's writing careers for so many years. ■

This essay draws on the following sources: interviews with Barbara Comyns's son; unpublished letters and diaries held by her granddaughter; Penguin Random House Archives, Rushden, Northamptonshire, Heinemann files; John J. Burns Library, Boston, Massachusetts Box 15, Folder 3, MS1995-003, Graham Greene Papers; Kim Philby, My Silent War *(1968); Norman Sherry,* The Life of Graham Greene, Volume Two: 1939-1955 *(1994) and* The Life of Graham Greene Volume Three: 1955-1991 *(2004); Richard Greene (ed.),* Graham Greene: A life in letters *(2007); and Richard Greene,* Russian Roulette: The life and times of Graham Greene *(2020).*

"Comyns's novels are mordantly witty; they explore the horrors of grinding poverty and emotional cruelty while celebrating the beauty and the comic incongruities of life

Eight books in brief….

Leave aside the school punishment known as Lines and there is not really an activity which you might call *writing sentences*.

~ Prose Improvements

There is no more a reading cure than a talking cure, just the possibility of interludes of remission.

~ I Have Done This in Secret

Gender is an adjectival rather than nominal aspect of people's selves and rarely uncomplicated.

~ The Best I Can Do

Real imaginative achievements are closer to the banal than the fantastic.

~ Materials and Medium: an Aesthetics

Most heroes are local heroes and temporary ones too, more suitable for writing about in history books than parked on a plinth, their only devotees pigeons and dogs.

~ Between Remembering and Forgetting

It's an odd kind of intellectual life to poke around in the textual remains of a dead man, pulling out bits with a *See, he was right!*

~ Silence is So Accurate

It is part of being human that often enough we don't quite know what we are doing.

~ Nabokov's Dream

Authors - dead ones excepted - are obliged to promote their own work.

~ Sample Essays

Blackwells.co.uk for orders

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Hard not to be a criminal

Reviving Barbara Comyns

CHRISTOPHER SHRIMPTON

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BARBARA COMYNS
214pp. Daunt Books. Paperback, £9.99.

MR FOX
BARBARA COMYNS
176pp. Turnpike Books. Paperback, £10.

HOUSE OF DOLLS
BARBARA COMYNS
160pp. Turnpike Books. Paperback, £10.

"The Queue At The Fish-shop" (detail), by Evelyn Mary Dunbar, 1944

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Barbara Comyns's novels are full of horrors. Some are of a common order, in the form of mothers, husbands and lodgers; others are more exotic, such as plagues, floods and bombing. The typical Comyns protagonist, a young woman with an absent husband and small daughter, weathers these storms elegantly, skipping from one situation to another with a hopeful heart.

Comyns (1907-92) had an interesting life. As a child she communicated with her deaf mother through notes left around the house. As a young woman she studied art and married a struggling painter. She supported her husband and young children through a series of odd jobs: artist's model, poodle breeder, piano restorer, antiques trader. When that marriage fell apart she spent the war years with a roguish black marketeer named Arthur Price. Then, in 1945, she entered into a more conventional marriage with the civil servant and intelligence operative Richard Comyns Carr (see pp10-11). With charming innocence they honeymooned in the cottage of Richard's Whitehall colleague, Kim Philby ("a delightful man. So funny"). Later Richard lost his job and they relocated to Spain for fifteen years.

Comyns's peripatetic life can be felt in her work. *Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead* (1954), *Mr Fox* (1987) and *House of Dolls* (1989) – all newly reissued as part of a year-long revival of her work – are set in a gothic bohemia where grotesque characters and surreal situations are inflicted on someone quietly dreaming of a different life.

Who Was Changed and Who Was Dead was Comyns's third published novel, following *Sisters by a River* (1947) and *Our Spoons Came from Woolworths* (1950). The story begins "about seventy years ago" in an unnamed village in Warwickshire. One summer morning the villagers awake to find their homes flooded. Ducks float cheerfully through the drawing-room windows quacking their approval; but the hens grow depressed and commit suicide in the murky water. The sun shines brightly and there is a strong smell of mud.

Such is the strange world Ebin Willoweed discovers as he rows his boat around the submerged garden of his mother, a landowner off whose benefaction he is resentfully living. Ebin, a quondam journalist, has three sensitive children – Emma, Hattie and Dennis – and their quietly eccentric lives are disrupted first by the flood and then by a mystery plague; the villagers soon lose their heads and turn on one another. But – and this is characteristic of Comyns – it doesn't take a plague for the characters to behave oddly. Grandmother Willoweed is a grotesque straight from Dickens; dressed all in black and armed with a hearing trumpet she stuffs herself with foie gras and charcoal biscuits. Characters lash out at their pastoral surroundings, with tortoises especially hard done by: "Impatiently she kicked a tortoise that happened to impede her"; "Plates were thrown across the luncheon table and a tortoise through the window". Comyns operates without any formal expectations. The fairy-tale structures can easily be discarded and the charms can wear off at any time, giving the stories a thrilling unpredictability. Emma, who is throughout a charming and innocent elder sister at pains to care for her siblings, transforms in the final few pages into a distant snob, wheeling her pram around Kensington Gardens and rarely visiting her sister or father. For Comyns anything can turn nasty.

Mr Fox takes place during the early days of the Second World War. Young Mrs Caroline Seymore owns a leasehold house whose rooms she rents out. When war is announced the tenants leave and men in bowler hats arrive asking about rates. Making the first of many quick changes, Caroline takes her three-year-old daughter and moves in with Mr Fox. No fan of the taxman himself, and sporting a fine red beard he can shave off as a disguise, Mr Fox is a wartime black-marketeer-in-waiting (and likely based on Comyns's former lover). What follows is a delightfully hectic novel of sudden departures.

The war is hardly mentioned yet its disruption and destruction is everywhere palpable. Bombed or abandoned Kensington townhouses go cheap; golden syrup is highly prized. For a time Mr Fox and Caroline do a nice line in grand pianos. As Caroline complains: "With all these new laws it was awfully difficult not to be a criminal". Everyone we meet is either a crook or useless. There is the maid who is always wheedling sugar, or lino, or a truss from her hospital-bound employer, and there is the ridiculous Czech artist who jealously protects the clay in his garden. In Crankford Caroline cooks and cleans for a highly-strung vegetarian family who allow themselves only one bath per week.

Mr Fox is always there. With his ration book and a ready plan he is oddly dependable. The other men in Caroline's life come and go. The father to her child, an ineffectual poet named Oliver, disappears to fight Franco; a man whom she bonds with after discovering his childhood furniture in her new house, Mervyn Dark, turns out to be a prig, and makes his excuses after learning of her black market activities. People are prone to sudden changes: Mervyn resembles a raven ("his nose was large and haughty"), yet when he smiles "he became one of the most handsome men I'd ever seen. But it only lasted a second and he became all grave again and I almost thought I must have imagined that change". Comyns's wartime Britain is drab and grasping in a familiar way but also unnerving and predatory.

> **"As well as a somewhat wide-eyed alertness to the wonderful and monstrous, there is a certain cut-throat logic**

Amy Doll, the main character in Comyns's last published novel, *The House of Dolls*, runs a brothel. Well, not exactly. She has four respectable female lodgers, widowers and divorcees, who, what with the rising cost of living, have been forced to take on one or two paying gentlemen. They are a little eccentric but no bother. When they are entertaining Amy turns the wireless up; when a policeman walks by she holds her breath.

In many ways this is Comyns's most straightforward novel; there are fewer flights of fancy. We rarely leave the little house in South Kensington where the ups and downs of the inhabitants provide antic entertainment. Particularly amusing is Berti and Evelyn's constant one-upmanship, with each burnishing increasingly outlandish backstories: "I remember our butler, er, old Leathers, standing in the hall with tears running down his cheeks the day my father died". There are gothic touches (fake eyelashes are like "dead moths"; a dead blue bird is left in a restaurant as a tip) and also surprising tenderness in Berti's vivid childhood memories of sharing hot dripping toast with her towel-tousled brother in the scullery.

Amy's daughter Hetty is distinct from the other, tamer characters. She has the childish amorality characteristic of Comyns's fiction and busies herself in a separate, more idyllic corner of the novel. Quietly, but with a purity of purpose and destructive zeal, she skips school and spends her days in the overgrown garden of a derelict house in Holland Park, making mosaics from broken ceramic with a simple-minded gentleman she names Glover. It is all purest Comyns: quirky, inventive and with an undercurrent of destruction. "She took a small yellow saucer from her school satchel. 'Look, the dove's beak; you remember, we decided on yellow.' She flung the saucer into the road and watched a passing taxi crunch it to smithereens." Later, the house is finally overrun by builders and the mosaic trampled underfoot. In describing Hetty and Glover's parting for lunch, with no goodbyes but the knowledge that, their game ended, the pair will never see each other again, Comyns lights on the curious hard-heartedness of childhood friendship.

Indeed, Comyns often sees the world through childish eyes. When Mr Fox suddenly cuts his beard off we are told, "Jenny cried when she first saw him and kept saying, 'Mr Fox has cut his chin off'". As well as a somewhat wide-eyed alertness to the wonderful and monstrous, there is a certain cut-throat logic. Isn't it horrible that someone could make so many lovely Christmas puddings and then suddenly die, as Dr Hatt's wife does in *Who Was Changed*?

All three novels skitter with restless energy. In fact, it often feels as though Comyns is writing off the top of her head: characters change in appearance, in motivation, or disappear entirely. Near the end of *Mr Fox* Caroline learns of Oliver's death: "Oliver was such a shadowy person to me I could hardly remember how he looked". Ditto the reader, who must rifle back to page sixteen, when he was last mentioned, to recall that he is her late husband and the father of her daughter. The prose is equally unkempt, with sentences that run on without looking back – much like her fleet-footed protagonists. Indeed, this is all of a piece: the pleasure in reading Comyns comes from her pure, runaway imagination.

In life Barbara Comyns was something of a free spirit, and her novels flow in a similarly unrestrained manner: they are honest yet dreamy, full of innocence and experience. There are horrors in them, yes, but they rarely last, nothing does. Reassuringly, anything can happen. ■

Christopher Shrimpton is a writer based in London

Flying colours

The remarkable Frank Whittle

DAVID EDGERTON

JET MAN
The making and breaking of Frank Whittle, genius of the jet revolution
DUNCAN CAMPBELL-SMITH
448pp. Head of Zeus. £30.

Frank Whittle invented the turbojet, and he made it work. Jet engines function by compressing air, burning kerosene in it, and using the flaming jet to power an aeroplane, and, through a turbine, the compressor. In principle brilliantly simple, in practice very difficult, the technology was especially suited to speeds and altitudes too fast and high for propellers and for piston engines. As a very young man Whittle had seen the interconnection of these points, and had sketched the whole concept.

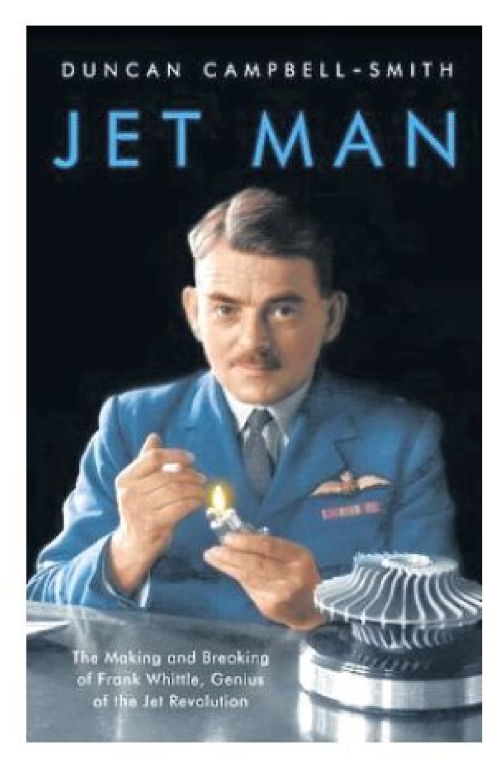
Whittle was able to make a jet engine work on a bench in 1937. A Whittle (as Churchill called it) went up into the air in May 1941 powering a small prototype aeroplane, and another Whittle-derived engine powered the first British jet fighter in service in 1944. Whittle achieved all this in his early and mid-thirties. By 1948, at the age of forty-one, he was knighted, was a fellow of the Royal Society, and an Air Commodore in the RAF (equivalent to Brigadier). He also received an ex-gratia award from the British state of £100,000 (many millions today).

Yet, and this is a central theme of this excellent biography, Whittle was broken by the inventive and political effort involved. The last five years of his RAF career were spent losing bureaucratic battles, in long spells in RAF and US psychiatric hospitals, and in tours of the UK and the US, where he was lauded as the greatest British inventor of the age. Nineteen forty-eight was also the year he was forced to retire from the RAF, and after that only had advisory jobs. He was then lost not only to the British jet industry, but also to the air force. Had it not been for the jet he might well have emerged from the war as a distinguished fighting commander.

Only past retirement age, when he emigrated to the USA to teach engineering at the US Naval Academy, and marrying again, did he find happiness and indeed a new round of global fame and recognition, which included the Order of Merit.

As well as having a happy ending, the story had a happy beginning. Whittle, a working-class child born in Coventry in 1907, became at the age of sixteen an apprentice technician in the new Royal Air Force. He was lucky to be recognized for his extraordinary mathematical and engineering talent, and was allowed to proceed to become an RAF officer. He excelled, became a brilliant pilot, and later instructor. He inspired loyalty and admiration, and the strong support of superiors.

It was as an RAF officer that he came up with his ideas, which were encouraged. Senior officers ensured he was sent to Cambridge to take a (first class) degree in engineering in two years, and was allowed to stay on for a year as a research student. Through those years, 1934-7, Whittle was working on his jet engine, forming a spin-out company, from both the RAF and Cambridge, with City backing, and that of young former RAF officers. In 1937 he was seconded to his company (which had in effect an Air Ministry shareholding). He never returned to normal RAF service.



The ins and outs are complicated, but before the war an order was made for a flying prototype, and in 1940-41 plans were made to have operational jets in 1942. That was not to happen, owing to a frustrating mixture of lack of support from key engineers within the Ministry of Aircraft Production, problems at the Rover car company, which was making the Whittles, and the generally problematic position of Whittle and his company in the greater scheme of the ministry and the private aircraft industry. However, the charge that the British state was indifferent to his jet, much repeated since, is clearly false. By 1945 the UK had multiple jet projects and was ahead of everyone else.

This excellent biography is wonderful at evoking Whittle's extraordinary creative ideas, his mathematical ability, his charm, the support he received, his lack of political nous, as well as the sometimes appalling treatment he received. It is a warm portrait of a recognized genius who was perhaps too stuck in bourgeois convention to succeed. The book hints at unrequited passions but is more coy about his politics – we are told repeatedly that he was a socialist, but not, alas, what that entailed. This was perhaps the least significant feature of the most extraordinary RAF officer there has ever been. ■

David Edgerton is the author of The Rise and Fall of the British Nation, *2018*

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Unreal cities

Urban architecture in video games and anime films

EN LIANG KHONG

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VIDEO GAMES EXERT a powerful pull in this age of the pandemic. Their fantasy urban landscapes provide us with a stage for travel; their mechanics exploit action and emotion to weave intricate stories that no other artform is capable of telling. They allow us to go deeper, to be cast adrift, to dive into texture. And under successive lockdowns, and with museums and galleries shuttered, what else is there for an art critic to do but fire up the PlayStation?

Konstantinos Dimopoulos takes us to forty-five video game cities in *Virtual Cities*, from the holy Clock Town of *The Legend of Zelda: Majora's mask* (Nintendo, 2000) to the whaling economy of Dunwall in *Dishonored* (Arkane Studios, 2012), and including the Free City of Novigrad in *The Witcher 3: Wild hunt* (CD Projekt Red, 2015), whose disease-infested lands I have been wandering while the country outside transformed into a plague island. Dimopoulos is a game urbanist and designer. In this Herodotean travelogue, the lore of spaces that "uniquely exist somewhere between art, engineering, urban planning, literature, game design and architecture" unravels through brief treatises on spatial design alongside illustrated maps in ink by Maria Kallikaki.

A game's designer starts from nothing. The weather, atmosphere and pull of gravity must be questioned as the player advances across a city; the built environment exerts directional force. The challenge is to design unreal, often impossible places, in which players can not only suspend their disbelief but feel their way through the space. In the medievalist-steampunk *Thief: The dark project* (Looking Glass Studios, 1998), for example, in which the player sets out to commit a series of robberies, the game's maps are unreliable; instead, we learn to navigate as a thief would, building our knowledge of the city through recognizable landmarks and eavesdropping on conversations. *Thief* was the first PC game to deploy the physics of light and sound within the world of the game in order to push its players into tactics of evasion and misdirection (a pioneering piece within what has come to be known as the "stealth" genre). Shadows provide temporary shelter; moving across carpet is a safer bet than risking the clatter of stone flooring; in the process, you begin to think in terms of verbs – creeping along is sure to attract less attention than running through.

In the horror role-playing game *Dark Souls* (FromSoftware, 2011), Dimopoulos visits the city of Anor Londo – a beaming citadel perched on a clifftop, whose Grand Cathedral riffs on the Duomo di Milano. Here the player is drawn into a "medieval, armoured version of parkour" while dodging arrow bolts, demons and cursed knights. The heavenly glow that warms the city's spires works a deceptive charm, as violence roils beneath its façade: "even sunlight itself cannot be trusted".

Meanwhile, the blood-soaked crumbling city of Yharnam in *Bloodborne* (FromSoftware, 2015) pulls its eldritch sublime from the horror of H. P. Lovecraft and Bram Stoker, and flourishes of Romanian gothic architecture. Yharnam is built according to an "alien spatial logic", Dimopoulos writes; its "spires upon spires upon spires don't make practical sense, but definitely feel geomantic in purpose and thoroughly inhospitable". The fabric of the city is implicated in the game's own ebb and flow, which flits between balletic bursts of combat and a gnawing sense of dread.

Stefan Riekeles's *Anime Architecture* is a portfolio of the dense cityscapes of Japanese anime: imagined worlds busy with glittering high-rises and highways, decaying aqueducts and sewers, teeming with androids and mega-corps. Riekeles's eye is fixed not on these films' zany protagonists – murderous bikers and cyborg assassins – but beyond, on the intricate architecture and moody skies of the background artwork, only ever glimpsed fleetingly. "The drama is just the surface of the film", the creator of *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), Mamoru Oshii, explains. "The backgrounds are the director's vision of reality."

From search beams that carve across the night sky to sunrays breaking over the bay, the Neo Tokyo of Katsuhiro Otomo's *AKIRA* (1988) – risen from the ruins of a mysterious explosion – is imagined as a dramatic play of light and darkness. For what is cyberpunk but a palette of noir smeared through with neon? Home to rival motorcycle gangs, Neo Tokyo's arcades and alleyways bristle with references to *Blade Runner* (1982) – the threatening outline of an army laboratory recalls the pyramid headquarters of the villainous Tyrell Corporation – as well as the urban schemes of the architect Kenzō Tange. Its colour chart is filled with dark hues, to fit the film's nocturnal character: washes of midnight blue fill cloud cover, shaded backlots, a power cut in the old town. One image board prepared by the film's art director Toshiharu Mizutani shows a night view of Neo Tokyo as seen from military helicopters approaching overhead: an eerie cluster of reddish towers blazing through the dark skyline.

At other points, the city's verticality maps the architecture of class. Mizutani's production backgrounds, painted onto superimposed celluloid acetate sheets and paper, are often set at low angles, in flooded back streets, gazing up at luminous violet skyscrapers in the distance. In a rubbish-strewn alley, pawn shops and ramen bars cast a pink hypnagogic glow: the impaired line of sight of a wounded man, as he stumbles along. Multiple photographic exposures of the scene create increasingly blurred vision, as he rapidly loses more blood.

Often, these cities come to appropriate the "real world". Oshii's *Patlabor* (1989) imagines a Tokyo of the near future, at the close of the century, in which rising sea levels have triggered a monumental project of land reclamation, carried out by giant piloted robots. He tasked the film's artists with drawing up a recognizable yet defamiliarized Tokyo. Detailed studies of the Tokyo Metropolitan area

Ghost in the Shell*, cut no. 477, by Hiromasa Ogura; from *Virtual Cities

© 1995 SHIROW MASAMUNE/KODANSHA

En Liang Khong is Director of Digital at ArtReview. *He was formerly senior editor at* frieze *magazine*

were made following extensive excursions by boat across the city's forgotten imperial waterways. The city's panoramic sprawl was captured in high-contrast location photography by Haruhiko Higami, purposefully taken in black-and-white so as not to influence the director in his choice of colour. The film's elegiac preparatory sketches are drenched in green, evoking the tones of the city shimmering in the summer heat. The air hangs heavy, as the tired timber of abandoned housing kneels before a looming citadel of steel and glass.

In Oshii's sequel *Patlabor 2* (1993), the production backgrounds envelop Tokyo in mordant gunmetal, as the city finds itself at war, following a military takeover and declaration of martial law. Here, a foreground based on real-world location photography, turned into tightly composed pencil-on-paper tankers and cranes, is layered over a background of fantastical turrets to meet the director's demand for "a past full of presence and a future like a mirage".

That evocation of the past glimpsed inside the future can be felt once again in Oshii's dystopian epic *Ghost in the Shell* (1995), set in the fictional New Port City, an aseptic hub of artificially augmented assassins and brain-hackers. Here, Oshii turned to the sprawl of Hong Kong – its streets stacked with floating billboards – as inspiration for his imagined metropolis: photographic stills taken on successive trips flow directly into the film's backgrounds, redrawn and painted, where the real becomes surreal. The production boards prepared by Hiromasa Ogura and Shuichi Kusamori plot a city pierced by canals and suspended highways, mapping the film's own cerebral philosophies, in which the human self becomes hazy, reeling on the edge. "Water symbolizes the subconscious", Riekeles writes of the film's backdrops, "with its surface acting as the threshold into consciousness, into the light of day".

New Port City takes root from a tension set up by the old town, its spaces filled with the traces and histories of past residents, and a new district of surgical high-rises. The melancholy of these divided spaces underpins the film's own flickering, glitching mind. "The two never achieve fusion", the layout designer Atsushi Takeuchi says. "It feels as if the inhabitants of the old town cling onto their lives under the pressure of modernization". In one startling double-spread, Riekeles details the careful crafting of a production background, built up from individual layers of paint on paper and celluloid, to accentuate the cityscape's spatial depth: in animation, each layer moves at a different speed, the transparent foreground layers fastest. The mood is one of high claustrophobia, with the sky only glimpsed as a vertiginous crack of light running through an architecture of high density.

If the urban infrastructure of *Ghost in the Shell* and *Patlabor* is at war with itself, then the fortress of *Tokyo-3*, in Hideaki Anno's *Neon Genesis Evangelion* franchise (which first ran as a television series in 1995), repurposes the city as an absurd tool of war in its own right. Buildings retract to reveal cannon turrets and launching pads for giant militarized robots. "Tokyo 3 is a machine that only pretends to be alive", Riekeles writes, "its sole purpose is to serve as a battlefield". Anno's model-set-like urban designs were heavily influenced by the miniaturized diorama aesthetics of Japanese *tokusatsu* films, distinguished by mechanical and optical effects deployed mid-shot rather than in post-production. It's a cinematic genre – exemplified by Ishiro Honda's *Godzilla* (1954) – in which monsters and superheroes, played by actors in costume, lay waste to a toytown city while locked in combat.

The shrunken aesthetic injects an alien quality to the imagined city, forever on the verge of disintegration: "a certain kind of energy emerges when things are compressed", Anno has said of his miniature sets. Rewatching these films in recent months, I wondered what their expressive sense of alienation achieves. Are anime's post-apocalyptic imaginaries a critique, or act of submission? I am struck by the ways in which they are both, their landscapes like half-memories, rising to the surface. ■

"The heavenly glow that warms the city's spires works a deceptive charm, as violence roils beneath its façade

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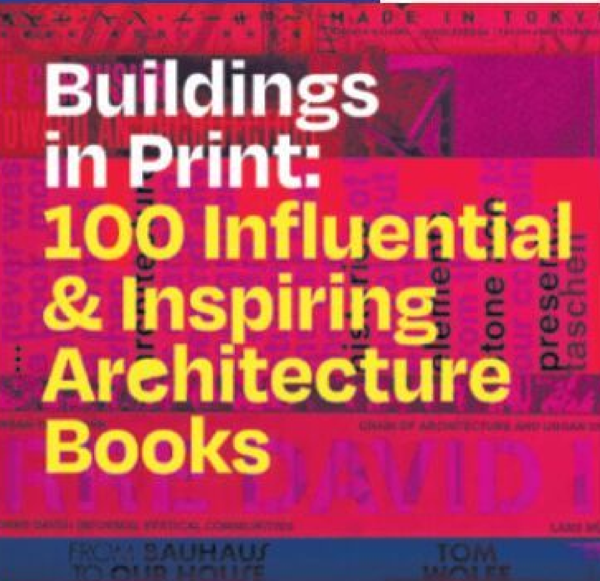

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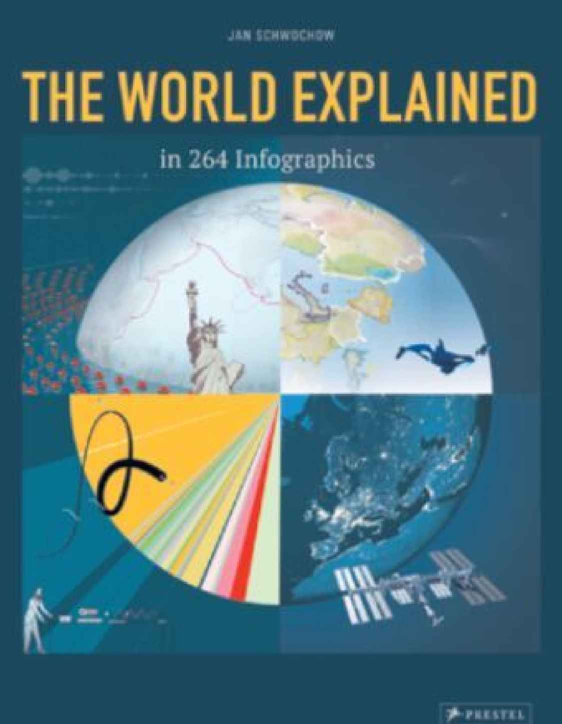

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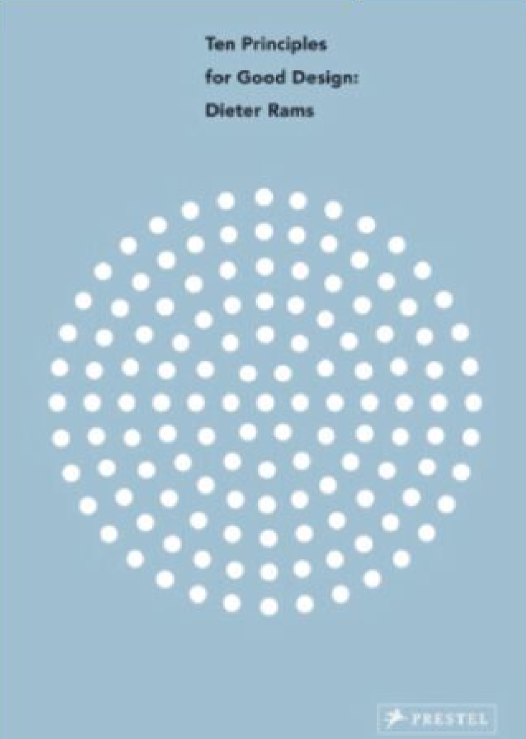

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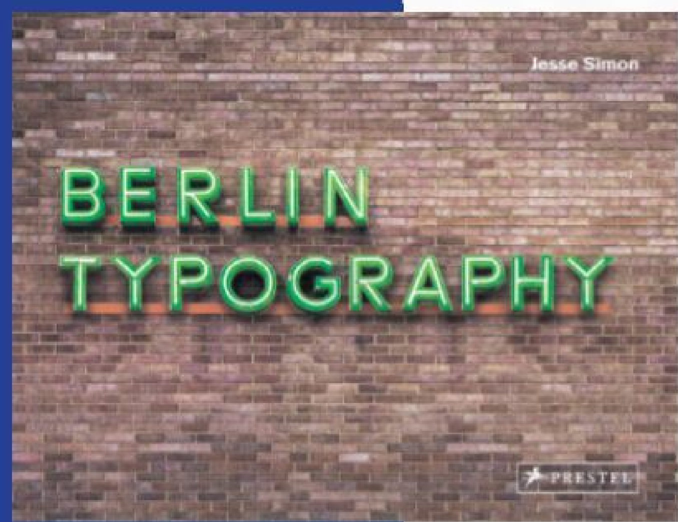

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LAUREN OYLER
272pp. Fourth Estate. £12.99.

Everyone now knows better than to imagine what was formerly called "cyberspace" as some other realm, distinct from "real life". And yet, being "somewhere inside the phone", as Patricia Lockwood calls it, does feel different from "the places where we all used to live".

Lockwood's talk "The Communal Mind", published by the *London Review of Books* (February 21, 2019), was set in this new room of reality's house – and treated it as just that: a specific, actual, yet non-geographic place boasting its own atmospheres, personalities, rules and idioms. Her new novel, *No One Is Talking About This*, an expanded version of this talk, calls it "the portal", "this floating sphere", "the communal stream of consciousness" – a whole series of settings you can climb or drift into.

"Previously", Lockwood writes, both in her essay and here, "communities were imposed on us, along with their mental weather. Now we chose them – or believed that we did." The new mental weather is her great subject, and her descriptions of it in this book are highly evocative:

> Winter still, and a once-in-a-lifetime moon, but she had to go outside to see it. Since that was out of the question, she watched the moon rise up slowly in the portal, shining down with its awful benevolence in the backyards of beloved strangers. Blood, and Super, and Blue, and always the first time in four hundred years, and looking, everyone rushed to say it, looking like a very thicc [curvy, sexy] snack.

This passage, with its characteristic layering of registers, is one of many fragments that make up the book's patchwork. (The use of the African American vernacular "thicc" riffs on a running consideration of non-Black people's predilection for cultural appropriation in "the new language" of the internet: "Was it better to resist the new language where it stole, defanged, coopted, consumed", asks our narrator, "or was it better to text *thanksgiving titties be poppin* to all your friends on the fourth Thursday of November ...?") In other fragments, the nameless "she" remembers zooming in on photos of the feet of a poet walking barefoot across America to raise awareness of climate change; is "forced" multiple times per week "to picture that terrible thing, a baby hitler"; wonders why she "elected to live so completely in the portal"; is admonished by her husband, who hasn't and doesn't; tries to hate the police, though her father is a policeman; and on and on, the shards scattering in countless directions, and often reflecting one another. "Why were we all writing like this now?" another, fragmentedly, begins.

It is never clear who is voicing the "we" that shows up here and elsewhere. Is it the woman whose experiences the fragments describe? Is it the narrator who describes her? The communal stream of consciousness? The instability mimics the main character's feeling that "her pronoun ... traveled farther and farther away from her in the portal, swooping through landscapes of *us* and *him* and *we* and *them* ... Mostly, though, it passed into *you*, *you*, *you*, *you*, until she had no idea where she ended and the rest of the crowd began". Some passages address this second person: "Callout culture! Were things rapidly approaching the point where even *you* would be seen as bad?"

The bewildering and exhilarating time she spends in the portal, much like any time spent abroad, alters her relationship with home. Then the reverse happens. In the first half of the novel – having attained fame for "a post that said simply, *Can a dog be twins?*" – she travels the world to speak about the internet and meet her fellow portal residents; in the second, she is wrenched away by news that her sister's unborn baby has a life-threatening genetic condition. Suddenly, a trajectory arises from the plotlessness. The baby is born, and for the six months before the baby's death – a period longer than the doctors had expected – our narrator lives with her family.

Consumed by the urgent necessity of life with the child, she wants to stop people on the street and say, "Do you know about this? You should know about this. No one is talking about this!" But of course, as many people online might tell anyone who posted these sentences, people are talking about such things everywhere. And yet, as so often, you have to live it to truly understand it. The brutal and beautiful joke is that the communal mind of the portal, which "you only entered ... when you needed to be everywhere", is as limited by its specificity as any other mind, any other place.

The unnamed narrator of Lauren Oyler's new novel, *Fake Accounts*, might scoff at Lockwood's attempt to find a literary form that mirrors the internet's dispersive flow. She has quit her blogging job and moved from New York to Berlin, ostensibly to recover from the sudden death of a boyfriend she had been planning to dump, having recently found out he was an anonymous Instagram conspiracy theorist. One day, as she pushes the buggy holding the German twins she now babysits, she listens to an interview with a female author. The writer's books are "written in ... short sections, simple, aphoristic sentences, more of an essay than a novel at times". She is annoyed. "This trendy style was melodramatic", she thinks, "insinuating utmost meaning where there was only hollow prose, and in its attempts to reflect the world as a sequence of distinct and clearly formed ideas, it ran counter to how reality actually worked."

But a couple of pages later, she begins writing in fragments herself. "Maybe if I wrote like this I would better understand", the forty-page section begins – and after the first sentence comes the first dinkus. The fragmentation, however, isn't in earnest. And it has, presumably deliberately, little effect on the story: the narrator continues half-heartedly to mourn; to reflect on politics, social dynamics and literature; to wander around Berlin; to refresh various websites; to disclose fake personal histories on a series of first dates; and generally to lie to everyone she meets. But doesn't she nevertheless interrupt the flow of prose in just the way she's been complaining about? Well, Oyler – or her narrator – has already thought of that: "At some point you have to admit that doing things ironically can have very straightforward consequences". This sentiment might be the book's motto. On the one hand, the entire project is a dodge: we never really get to the core of the narrator's motivations because she has built up so many defences. On the other, it is a critique of such dodges. Whether it satisfies you will depend on your appetite for characters whose hollowness is, in the style of Bret Easton Ellis's Patrick Bateman, both satirical and unsettlingly charismatic. Oyler's narrator is far less violent than Bateman, but she is almost as likely to instrumentalize others, including her audience.

> **"Oyler's narrator constantly has in her sights the angles from which she might be open to attack**

Perhaps because she has such a talent for pinpointing others' weaknesses, she constantly has in her sights the angles from which she might be open to attack. Again and again she pre-empts anticipated objections. You think she might not be such a great person? She's aware of that, thanks, and the idea that people can be "good" or "bad" is, in any case, pablum. You think she's only adding to a string of "searching bourgeois-white-person narratives"? She full knows that both doing this and perfunctorily acknowledging it are tired clichés. Her own disclaimer is not "a tick on a checklist". It is, rather, "a point to be made in itself. Nothing was wrong. I had no problems. And yet I had problems". These sentences game out the situation in every possible direction: she mocks herself, her impulse to mock herself, the cultural forces that give rise to that impulse, the idea that she might have real problems, and the idea that she might not. She is always a step, or several, ahead of her imagined readers.

All of this – the hyper-awareness of an imagined audience, the instrumentalization of other people, the deceptive self-presentation – seems to have something to do with the internet. The narrator is always online. (Oyler's very detailed and specific descriptions of using popular devices, apps and websites are among the best I have read.) And while she finds it just as easy to lie in person, the fact that online fakery propels the plot (up until a denouement best left unspoiled) suggests that the internet is the engine of her inventions. Oyler adds another layer to this conceit by introducing a fictional, anonymous Twitter account that appears to allude to a real-world corollary, implying – truthfully or not – that at least one of her characters may live beyond the covers of her book. If Patricia Lockwood pulls us down a strange and wonderful rabbit hole, Lauren Oyler plays us in a fun but disconcerting game of multidimensional chess. ■

Megan Marz is a writer living in Chicago

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Different duties

The clash between Christian love and patriotism in a time of war

BRYAN KARETNYK

SACHIKO
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432pp. Columbia University Press. Paperback, £22 (US $28).

Urakami Cathedral near the Nagasaki peace park

URAKAMI LOOMS LARGE in the imagination of Japanese Roman Catholics. After Christianity was outlawed by the shogunate in the sixteenth century, this northern suburb of Nagasaki became a stronghold for those *kakure-kirishitan*, or "hidden Christians", forced to practise their faith in secret. The early years of persecution, bloodshed, torture and martyrdom set a cruel and tragic precedent for the centuries that followed. Yet the modern era offered Urakami an even crueller fate: at 11:02 on August 9, 1945, it became ground zero for the atomic bombing of the city.

Although a native of Tokyo, the Catholic writer Shūsaku Endō (1923–96) returned time and again throughout his literary career to the city that he would eventually name his "heart's hometown", perhaps most notably in his acclaimed masterpiece *Silence* (1966). *Sachiko* (1982), which has now been translated into English for the first time, is the last in the author's great chronicle of so many generations of pain suffered by Japanese Christians there. In this moving novel, Endō dramatizes the experience of the Nagasaki community as Japan embarked on its path of imperial expansionism and war during the early years of the Shōwa era.

The primary narrative follows the eponymous heroine, a young Catholic girl, and the vicissitudes of her relationship with her childhood friend Shūhei, who together come of age in the 1930s amid the increasingly hostile society of an authoritarian police state, witnessing at first hand the proliferation of ultranationalism and the resurgence of religious persecution. As the "Amen bunch" are ever more reviled by their fellow countrymen for their supposedly traitorous faith in the "enemy religion", Endō presents a touching study of the spiritual and moral dilemmas faced by a community forced to confront the very meaning of patriotism and Christian identity during a time of war.

The novel's range is both surprising and ambitious. Not only do we watch as Sachiko and Shūhei struggle with their faith, but a parallel narrative follows the fate of the historical figure Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan missionary who, in 1931, founded a monastery on the outskirts of Nagasaki, and whose journey leads the story from Japan to Auschwitz. From the interaction of these two narratives emerges the spiritual core of the novel, a message of Christian love encompassed in a line taken from the Gospel of John – "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends" – which echoes throughout, always being reappraised and reinterpreted. Having spent her childhood pondering these words after receiving a postcard inscribed with them from Father Kolbe, Sachiko is made to reckon with what it truly means to love and sacrifice as her family attempts to drive her and Shūhei ever further apart. Shūhei, too, frustrated by the complicity of a Church that preaches love but tacitly assents to war, must ultimately reach his own interpretation, forced to choose between Christian pacificism and national duty.

Above all, however, it is Father Kolbe who stands as the measure of love and sacrifice. Even in his final days at Auschwitz, this saintly figure reaffirms the ideal before ultimately transforming Christ's words into actions. "This is not yet hell", he tells a terrified young man shortly before he undertakes the biggest sacrifice of all, volunteering to be killed in someone else's stead. "Hell is ... a place where love has utterly died out."

The considerable pathos and emotional force of the novel derive more from Endō's masterly structuring – which produces astonishing parallels, intensifying the moral ambiguity as the entwining stories march towards the Nagasaki bombing – than from the characterization, which can occasionally appear flat against the kaleidoscopic historical backdrop. It is telling, for example, that after more than 400 pages, the sporadic appearances of Father Kolbe leave a stronger impression than Sachiko herself is able to exert. In one sense, this was Endō's intention. In his afterword, he describes his hope that women of his generation will see in Sachiko their own reflection. She is his Everywoman of Nagasaki. But to produce such an elusive heroine runs an obvious risk, and while Sachiko's curious lack of agency may achieve Endō's immediate aim, in the long run it inevitably, perhaps needlessly, robs the novel of essential colour and depth.

Fortunately, where Sachiko pales, the minor characters linger on: the undercover policeman, who, with a perpetrator's sense of guilt, wonders at his contribution to empire-building; the two guards at Auschwitz who laconically ponder the existence of God and whether punishment awaits them for their murders; the airman on board the B-29 bomber, who experiences terrible anguish as the last-minute decision is taken to let the bomb fall over the city where he grew up. Such figures stand not only as admonitions to those who would insist on any notion of moral absolutism but also as haunting glimpses of humanity amid man's most inhumane acts. ■

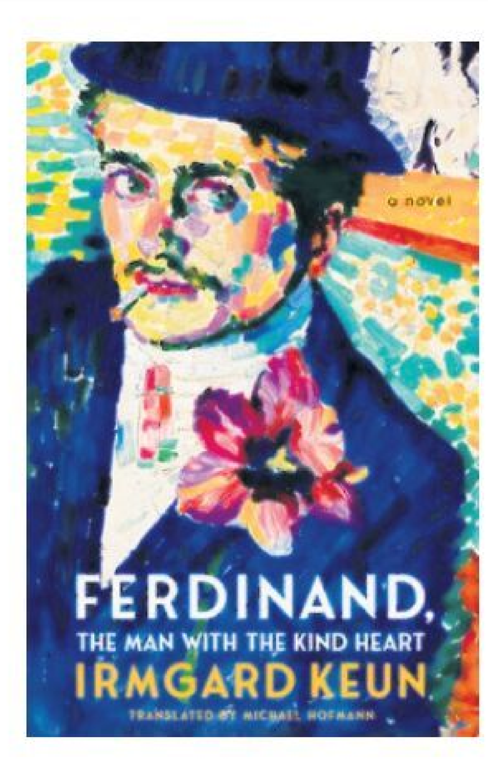
Bryan Karetnyk is a Wolfson Scholar at University College London. He is the editor and principal translator of the anthology Russian Émigré Short Stories from Bunin to Yanovsky, *2017*

Cogs and buttons

A novel of postwar Germany failing to confront its recent past

TADZIO KOELB

FERDINAND
The man with a kind heart
IRMGARD KEUN
Translated by Michael Hofmann
242pp. Penguin Classics. Paperback, £9.99.



UNSPOKEN WORDS make up the disconcerting non-centre of Irmgard Keun's *Ferdinand: The man with the kind heart*, first published in Germany in 1950 and now brought to English readers for the first time in a crisp translation by Michael Hofmann. Keun, once a bestselling novelist, was sentenced to death by the Nazis. Having escaped, she snuck back into Germany at the height of the war under a false name. Although she lived on until 1982, *Ferdinand* was her final novel.

The story is set in Cologne during the *Besatzungszeit*, the postwar Allied occupation (Belgian troops were stationed in the area until 2002). Ferdinand, the narrator, is poor, hungry and trying to find his fiancée another suitor. Before the war, he ran a little bookstore that has since been reduced to rubble; now an ex-PoW, he dreams up tabloidesque copy for his friend Heinrich, and acts as an agony aunt for Liebezahl, whose proto-Goop-like retail empire will sell anything people can be convinced they need, from colour therapy to "astrological scents".

What occurred between these two situations is never discussed. We likewise know nothing about the wartime activities of Ferdinand's brother (once an author, now suspiciously a bellhop in Brazil); of his fiancée's father, the recently "de-Nazified" Herr Klatte; or of Ferdinand's former army sergeant.

Nevertheless, certain phrases work their way to the surface: Herr Klatte is "an amiable enough dictator"; Heinrich has the look of someone "trying to rescue thousands upon thousands of others' bodies". Ferdinand himself is described as "a mass murderer" by his cousin Johanna, who believes anyone would be if provided "a little button" to do the job without fuss. "Maybe you'd feel some compunction the first few times, but you'd get over it." It seems impossible any reader could miss the implication; the same goes for the chapter entitled, rather too playfully, "The Party of Broken Glasses".

Keun's characters all admit readily to their "small" crimes – theft, chicanery, romantic dishonestly. Ferdinand's cousin Magnesius is a profiteer, his landlady sells black-market goods, and the Klatte women spent the days after the war stealing from their evacuee neighbours. Some of their victims attend a party Herr Klatte throws when he is downgraded from Nazi to "Mitläufer" (fellow-traveller), part of an ecosystem of political classifications that ultimately allowed some war criminals to retain their positions.

Ferdinand recounts all this and judges not: is it lest he be judged? Like the novel itself, he seems driven to rehearse the anxieties of postwar Germany while desperately trying to present it as a place that is close enough to normal to be gently amusing. Never mentioned are the camps, the SS, the actual fighting. The closest Ferdinand comes to a political statement is when he describes how "German dictatorship has, in the way of lower life-forms, procreated by simple fission, and is now called democracy".

Ferdinand's silence about any character's war experience allows us to assume either the best or worst: readers can imagine them as unwilling cogs desperate to avoid being crushed by the Nazi war machine, or as the most willingly brutal camp guards, lucky to have escaped the trials at Nuremberg. If we choose the first, we risk being dupes; if we choose the second, we risk being like those we would condemn, tarring a whole nation with one brush. What might be called a redistribution of guilt seems to have left everyone in Ferdinand's circle a little culpable, but never overly so. Ferdinand's story consists of a dam of social niceties and hidden pasts, through cracks in which run only tiny rivulets of truth. Some readers might find in them the promise of a deluge, but Irmgard Keun never commits herself either way. ■

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Reason and reverence

Faith and science in the nineteenth-century novel

ANGELIQUE RICHARDSON

THE DIVINE IN THE COMMONPLACE
Reverent natural history and the novel in Britain
AMY KING
297pp. Cambridge University Press. £75.

HUMAN FORMS
The novel in the age of evolution
IAN DUNCAN
290pp. Princeton University Press. £30 (US $35).

"When the Sun rises do you not see a round Disk of fire somewhat like a Guinea O no no I see an Innumerable company of the Heavenly host crying Holy Holy Holy is the Lord God Almighty", wrote William Blake, the visionary son of a hosier, in 1810. Nature maps the divine. Both Amy King's *The Divine in the Commonplace: Reverent natural history and the novel in Britain* and Ian Duncan's *Human Forms: The novel in the age of evolution* provide histories of the nineteenth-century novel as it developed alongside emergent scientific understanding. Both have Darwin at their centre. But their Darwins are radically different, King's being empathetically historicized, Duncan's largely a construct of postmodernity.

So while both of these books focus on the novel, King's quiet historicism allows her (and us) to see the continuities, residues and renewals of faith and affirmation because of, not in spite of, science. Looking back half a century, for example, Darwin could recall in his *Autobiography* how he had been charmed and delighted at Cambridge by reading the works of the theologian William Paley, including his *View of the Evidences of Christianity* (1794), *Principles of Moral and Political Philosophy* (1785) and *Natural Theology* (1802). Alongside Euclid, "the careful study of these works ... was the only part of the Academical Course which, as I then felt and as I still believe, was of the least use to me in the education of my mind". King's research shows how, as novels sat with bestselling natural histories at railway kiosks, natural theology, natural history and realism were parallel and often entwined practices, rooted in philosophical empiricism and in reverence for the everyday, the exceptional of the commonplace, and for a nature that is both material and luminous.

King's range is rightly wide, as she relates Gilbert White's social ecology of Selborne, published in 1789, the year of revolution, to Jane Austen's *Emma* (1815) and Mary Russell Mitford's *Our Village: Sketches of rural life and scenery* (1824–32). Seashore natural histories and canonical Victorian novels alike could celebrate the divine in the commonplace. King's study includes the working-class, dissenting palaeontologist Mary Anning, the daughter of a carpenter, who, in 1812, at the age of twelve, chiselled out the Lyme Regis ichthyosaur that was sent off to the British Museum, and managed to keep her family off parish relief but was not eligible to join the Geological Society of London. George Eliot's rendering of the lowly paid Reverend Amos Barton in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), struggling to support his family, and Janet Dempster, brought back from self-despair and fortified with divine hope, are acts of reverent empiricism.

The characters of Elizabeth Gaskell's last novel, *Wives and Daughters* (1864–6), subtitled *An Every-day Story*, also take their place among King's varied cast: Lady Harriet draws natural analogies, Lady Agnes has a hand in botany, Lord Hollingford funds scientific expeditions, and Hamley, expeditionist and evolutionary savant, "finds out queer things sometimes" and, as Gaskell told the *Cornhill* editor, "would work out for himself a certain name in Natural Science" and is "tempted by a large offer to go round the world (like Charles Darwin)".

Avoiding "treading unnecessarily on any plant", Hamley is a better environmentalist than Philip Henry Gosse who, King might have noted, appears to feel no remorse in *Evenings at the Microscope: Or, Researches among the minuter organs and forms of animal life* (1859) as he injures a sea-urchin in a "forcible act of ejectment". But Gosse stands out among the natural historians for this ecological violence, and he later protested, in *Land and Sea* (1865), against an invasion of the Torquay shores "by crinoline and collecting jars", foreshadowing current concerns over the environmental impacts of tourism. King's natural historians, natural theologians and writers share a reverence and an empiricism that, she argues with passion and persuasion, are common to both natural history and the novel, serving each other in equal measure. White's Selbourne is the natural world around the parish, part of a human community as, conversely and reciprocally, humans are part of the natural world, animals in their living habitat.

Mary Anning by an unknown painter, before 1842

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Duncan has a grander narrative but something is lost in the sweeping, virtuoso performance that is *Human Forms*. This book argues, via some unfounded assumptions, for a massive shift into the secular which necessitated a greater demarcation between humans and animals. While Buffon and Cuvier had indeed posited and puffed human – in practice, European – exceptionalism, Darwin brought humans into nature in new ways. Duncan knows this, but might have considered that Darwin did so by showing not only that humans were moved by emotions, instincts, impulses and unconscious habits as much as reason, but also that reason and morality were part of the territory of animals too. This new natural history ushered in not the unregulated free-for-all that Duncan would have, in which humanity was lost, but the makings of a kinder world in which animal consciousness had a place.

For Thomas Hardy, writing in 1910, Darwin's main effect had been to enlarge "the application of what has been called 'The Golden Rule' beyond the area of mere mankind to that of the whole animal kingdom". Darwin had remarked in *The Descent of Man* (1871) that he was the first to approach the question of the moral sense "exclusively from the side of natural history". "Besides love and sympathy", he observed, "animals exhibit other qualities which in us would be called moral." In a further challenge to binary assumptions, often retrospectively overlaid, natural history and theology were finding common ground, seeking not proof but exemplifications of God in nature, as many of the priests working with Darwin in a combined spirit of inquiry (and the Reverend Farebrother in *Middlemarch*, 1871–2, who combines his calling with entomology) testify. In this enterprise they were followers, not always knowingly, of the theologian and philosopher Thomas Aquinas, for whom Christianity was not about origins but the love that sustains.

In November 1859, before the *Origin of Species* was out, Darwin sent a copy of the book to the Reverend Charles Kingsley, who was a supporter of Chartism and one of the earliest advocates of Christian Socialism. Kingsley wrote rapidly back, remarking: "That the Naturalist whom, of all naturalists living, I most wish to know & to learn from, should have sent a sciolist like me his book, encourages me at least to observe more carefully, & think more slowly." He was, he declared, reading it with "the clear intuition" that if Darwin were right, "I must give up much that I have believed & written. In that I care little. 'Let God be true, & every man a liar'". Kingsley found himself now freed from two common superstitions:

> I have long since, from watching the crossing of domesticated animals & plants, learnt to disbelieve the dogma of the permanence of species.
> I have gradually learnt to see that it is just as noble a conception of Deity, to believe that he created primal forms capable of self-development into all forms needful pro tempore & pro loco, as to believe that He required a fresh act of intervention to supply the lacunas wh. he himself had made.

Darwin incorporated this last sentence into the second and later editions of the *Origin*; in these he also added "by the Creator" to the following sentence, after "breathed": "there is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed onto a few forms or into one". On self-developing forms Kingsley continued, "I question whether the former be not the loftier thought", concluding: "Be it as it may, I shall prize your book, both for itself, & as a proof that you are aware of the existence of such a person as Your faithful servant." Reciprocally, in the *Descent* Darwin would observe that ethical behaviour, originating in the social instincts that humans shared with

animals, was guided by "the approbation of our fellow-men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings"; the social instincts "with the aid of active intellectual powers and the effects of habit, naturally lead to the golden rule, 'As ye would that men should do to you, do ye to them likewise;' and this lies at the foundation of morality".

The challenge to fixity, to essentialism, that Darwin's theory of evolution necessitated was also seen as both the harbinger and foundation of liberation by good feminists (including John Stuart Mill and Mona Caird) and socialists (including Karl Marx, Eleanor Marx, for whom there was "no more a 'natural calling' of woman than there is a 'natural' law of capitalistic production", and Engels). It was also embraced by Kingsley, who wrote in solidarity to Gaskell, being taken to task for allowing the eponymous subject of her dissenting *Ruth* (1853), an orphan who works in a sweatshop, to have a child outside of marriage: "May God bless you." Joy in the mystery of the minute, the extraordinariness of the ordinary, permeates the work of this (for the most part) thoughtful theologian and reformist (as it does King's study). Kingsley enjoined his readers in *Glaucus: The wonders of the shore* (1856), dedicated to his beloved Eliza Grenfell (whose family had sought to keep her from him, for he was poor and she was rich), "doubt not that in these tiny creatures" – "the zoophytes and microscopic animalcules which people every shore and every drop of water" – "are mysteries more than we shall ever fathom".

For Duncan, although he is a literature scholar, a particular version of science comes out on top and is both dominant and causal. There is no sense in *Human Forms* that the literary works that are often pleasurable and responsible in equal measure could have played a valuable role in constituting scientific or even philosophical discourse, even as Darwin had read Milton and Wordsworth and boarded the *Beagle* with a wondrous sense of the sublime, and drew on novels as sources in his scientific writing. It is misleading to claim that organic time and all that is organic were suddenly breached by modernity – on or about November 1859 – and, however much such claims fit the story Duncan wants to tell, as he attempts to bring to history the nightmare of ahistory, Darwin was neither anti-realist nor anti-history.

Deterred from a career in medicine by bearing witness to surgical pain, and subsequently distracted from the priesthood by beetles, Darwin was a reverent, observant historian, concerned, as he made clear in the *Origin*, with "the changing history of the organic world" and with "slow and gradual modification". He does not undo or dissolve the individual life, as Duncan insists – after all, it is anarchic eccentricities, individual differences, coping in and adapting to new environments, that push evolution forwards. Tennyson may have formulated nature in *In Memoriam* (1852) as "careless of the single life" but for Darwin individuals and ethics moved to centre stage: "No two individuals of the same race are quite alike. We may compare millions of faces, and each will be distinct." If the individual seemed to falter under the weight of natural selection, it was vital to its processes, increasingly so as sexual selection entered the evolutionary drama.

Duncan argues for a new racism following Darwin – "scientific racism and other biological determinisms ... flood the cultural field", but he might have been clearer that Darwin, abolitionist, anti-essentialist and anti-determinist, played no part in this and actively opposed the misapplication of his ideas in this way. In the *Descent* he observes that races "graduate into each other" – "it is hardly possible to discover clear distinctive characters between them" – just as science has come to understand that the concept of race is not scientifically justifiable. More radical, and true to Darwin, would be an acknowledgement of this position. *Daniel Deronda* (1876) may indeed show "a latent obstinacy of race" but it eschews essentialism for a biology that is expressive and immediate, challenging easy dichotomies between feeling and intellect, much as *The Mill on the Floss* (1860) concluded that inheritance was mightily puzzling, with anarchic and progressive consequences for gender.

Duncan sets much store by biological inheritance, in doing so largely doing away with environment, but Darwin's theory of heredity, pangenesis, was a theory of blending which held environment as integral to development, as his voyages around the world and his observations of his children and his pets had affirmed. Pangenesis, while wide of the mark in many ways, looked forward to twenty-first-century epigenetics which understands the overriding importance of the environment. Darwin had challenged Galton's crackpot eugenic ideas, which also did away with environment, writing in the *Descent* that if we were "intentionally to neglect the weak and helpless", we would lose "the noblest part of our nature", intensifying his argument in the second edition, of 1874. The following year, he wrote to Galton to tell him that he differed widely from him, attributing more and more to environmental influence every year – as his *Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication* (1868) and *Expression of the Emotions* (1872) made clear. Galton, as it happens, was busy eschewing faith for efficiency, with its attendant atrocities.

G. H. Lewes in 1852, in his radical weekly *Leader*, had emphasized an increasing dependence of higher organisms on their environment, while his partner Eliot provided ever bulkier Victorian environments in which her characters might develop. In *Adam Bede* (appearing in three volumes in February 1859), King reminds us, it is Hetty's realization that she is part of the natural world that brings her to herself at a time of deep distress; it is also a moment in which Eliot brings us to Christ's suffering, to "an image of great agony, the agony of the Cross".

In March 1859, Gaskell declared in a letter to her friend Charles Eliot Norton, the American scholar and reformer, "Oh! for some really spiritual devotional preaching instead of controversy about doctrines". In *Sylvia's Lovers* (1863), she writes in the Quakers, who for King stand in as a metonymic figuring of natural theology, at the centre of innovative science from the late eighteenth century onward. Quakers were drawn to the moral and theological dimensions of natural history and its emphasis on the sensual experience of the physical world, as Blake, in "Auguries of Innocence", sees "a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower".

Eliot seems as much influenced by Kingsley as by her own sea-side studies (with Lewes at her side), as she enfolds microscopic creatures into *Middlemarch*, her study of the growth of sympathy – or, at the least, the emergence from moral stupidity into which each of us is born, coming to apprehend equivalent centres of self, the consciousness of others. An aptly applied scientific metaphor of a water drop viewed with a variable lens puts Mrs Cadwallader's matchmaking activities in their proper perspective: "whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom".

Eliot takes her lead from Darwin, increasingly seeing the sociality of morality in the animal economy as she depicts not a loss of the human but their new integration into the wider natural economy. King liberates her from the dogmatic charge and straitjacket of atheism and returns her to the social and aesthetic milieu she inhabited, in which realism is infused with the natural theology from which it developed. "The Coming Race", her last story, is a prescient and humanitarian story warning against artificial intelligence, not an embracing of dissolution. As King notes, the journal *Catholic-Presbyterian* registered its respect without claiming her for orthodox religion, finding her to be "a singular combination of the theologian and the novelist" and "a formidable theologian".

"The challenge to fixity, to essentialism, that Darwin's theory of evolution necessitated was also seen as both the harbinger and foundation of liberation

Hardy falls outside the scope of both of these studies. Duncan mentions him only as the endpoint of a sweeping characterization of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, in which protagonists strive to enter the accelerations of modernity, while King relates him to Eliot and Jane Austen as a chronicler of relationships in rural communities. But Hardy sheds light on the questions that both studies address. In his *Apology to Late Lyrics and Earlier* (1922), he observed that "poetry and religion touch each other, or rather modulate into each other; are, indeed, often but different names for the same thing"; urging a "joining hands with modern science", he remarked that religion "must be retained unless the world is to perish". In *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, meanwhile, the same unfeeling rationality that blocks Angel Clare's acceptance of the Church blocks his acceptance of Tess. Hardy refers, in his diary, to the "crass illiteracy" of those that considered him an atheist, writing of "the religion of emotional morality and altruism that was taught by Jesus Christ" and of religion as "being expressive of nobler feelings towards humanity and emotional goodness and greatness".

For Darwin "theology & science should each run its own course". In 1879, he declared to a Scottish clergyman: "It seems to me absurd to doubt that a man may be an ardent Theist & an evolutionist", giving Asa Gray and Kingsley as examples, adding, "I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God." In his *Autobiography*, he observed that the "impossibility of conceiving this immense and wonderful universe" to be the result of "blind chance or necessity" was a "source of conviction in the existence of God", and one he connected "with the reason and not with the feelings".

King can be slow to get off the ground, a little too iterative, in a study satiate, at times, with self-description. But she writes an accepting, accommodating and open book and a tale for our times, a reflection on the compatibilities, co-existences and reciprocities of faith and science, that strikes a chord as we seek new emotional and spiritual connection with nature. These reciprocities are regularly and reductively overlooked by new atheisms which, purporting to be reasonable and progressive, are militaristic, often Eurocentric, Islamophobic and fundamentalist, and enact new imperialisms. It would be more responsible, and historically accurate, to wrest religion from the right, and, most urgently, in the US, from the Republican Party.

Duncan posits that the history of the species and of the individual were newly insignificant to the natural history ushered in by nineteenth-century transformists and palaeontologists. But were they, and how much of a break with the past was it really? If Jo in *Bleak House* is a historical phenomenon, as Duncan suggests, and his depiction a break with a realist character system, he is also surely an instance of an only-too-human tragedy at the heart of the British Empire, rather than the extreme and singular case Duncan declares him to be. In this moment of apparently scientific historicization, Duncan seeks, curiously but unsuccessfully, to enact a new exclusion, to expel Jo from history. Nature is broken, Duncan writes, but was it so broken then as now – a consequence not of philosophical ideas but of a failure of actions and responsibility? *Bleak House* is a novel about the poignancy of social injustice and exclusion; about Jo, at once supremely individual and a reminder of countless more like him, dying thus around us every day, immortal diamond.

Ultimately, the best of the late Romantics and Victorians bring to us the transformative power of love – the active love, as George Eliot puts it, "for what is not ourselves". A love which might, for example, turn to the suffering of the tortured body of a political prisoner, or a revolutionary on the Cross. There was less dissolution, and more humanity, more devotion, in Darwin, a greater emphasis on the Golden Rule than the grand narrative of postmodernity might care to acknowledge. ■

Driven to distraction

Literary achievement amid a 'merry-go-round love life'

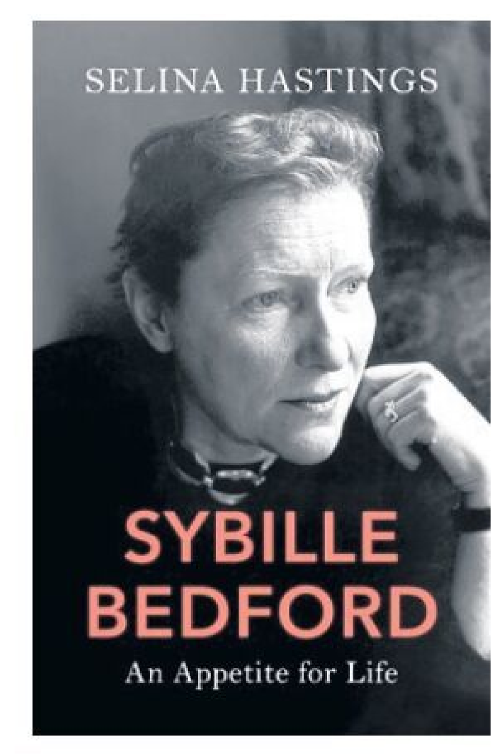
RUTH SCURR

SYBILLE BEDFORD
An appetite for life
SELINA HASTINGS
432pp. Chatto and Windus. £25.

AGED SEVENTY-SEVEN, John Betjeman regretted that he had not had enough sex. Aged eighty-seven, Sybille Bedford wished she had written more books and spent less time in love. Both remarks were made casually in interviews, but Betjeman's is more believable. Bedford pursued romantic relationships with other women throughout her long life (she died in 2006 aged ninety-four). Usually these were easily available, but in rare periods of loneliness, she actively sought new lovers. In her seventies, she went occasionally with friends to the lesbian Gateways Club on the Kings Road, conveniently close to her flat in Old Church Street. Later, as Selina Hastings primly explains, "she began attending a much less sophisticated venue, where the girls made themselves available by the hour". Even in advanced age, Bedford struggled to make writing her priority. Nevertheless, she produced four novels – the first, *A Legacy* (1956), is a family saga set in late nineteenth-century Germany and feted as a masterpiece on both sides of the Atlantic, the fourth, *Jigsaw: An unsentimental education* (1989), was shortlisted for the Booker prize – as well as a substantial corpus of innovative courtroom reportage, travelogues including *The Sudden View: A Mexican journey* (1953); a 300,000-word hagiographical biography of her mentor and father-figure Aldous Huxley; and a volume of autobiography, *Quicksands: A memoir* (2005). So the conundrum for her biographer is: how did Bedford achieve all this despite being so distracted?

Hastings treats Bedford's appetites with reserve. She is professional in her biographical approach and admirably non-judgemental. She describes the spinning "sexual carousel" at the centre of Bedford's life, providing an inventory of the lovers, most of whom remained friends. After a while, the names, faces and locations start to blur. Hastings accepts Bedford's own explanation of her merry-go-round love life in a letter dated 1957: "I suspect the foolish truth is that I have never grown up, and did not do so because I always missed having a real mother and father: parents in fact, a family. I don't know whether even now I am ready for a life with one other adult". Bedford did know both her parents. She was born in Charlottenburg, Berlin to Maximilian Joseph von Schoenebeck – a Bavarian baron who died when she was fourteen, but not before he had bequeathed her his love of wine – and his German Jewish socialite wife, Elisabeth Bernhardt. Lisa, as Bedford's mother was known, became a morphine addict and a burden to her daughter before she died in 1937. Bedford also had an older half-sister, Katzi, from her father's previous marriage.

Bedford's father left his estate to her and Katzi, but in 1933 her inheritance was confiscated after she criticized the Nazis in Klaus Mann's literary review for German émigré writers, *Die Sammlung* ("The Collection"). She obtained British citizenship in 1935 by paying Walter Bedford, a homosexual attendant at a gentleman's club in St James's, £100 to marry her. Aldous Huxley and his wife Maria gave a cocktail party for the newlyweds to which Leonard and Virginia Woolf came, and after which Sybille and Walter never saw each other again. Before the outbreak of war, the Huxleys moved to America, and Sybille followed them with her wealthy lover Allanah Harper, on the last ship to leave Genoa in June 1940.



In America, two people who shared neither Bedford's sexual tastes nor her great appetite for fine food and drink were crucial to advancing her writing. The first was the war correspondent Martha Gellhorn. "Meeting Martha was like being exposed to a fifteen-hundred-watt chandelier", Bedford wrote, crediting Gellhorn's "dazzlingly robust verbal style" with setting her own writing free. Their friendship grew tetchy over the years, but lasted until 1983, when Gellhorn rang to say: "Sybille, you are too boring ... I'm fed up with you". Particularly boring, from Gellhorn's point of view, was Bedford's obsessive gastronomy and oenophilia. Gellhorn, Bedford observed, best liked eating Toblerone. The publisher Robert Gottlieb, meanwhile, who eschewed publishers' lunches and always ate a sandwich at his desk, was the first person to recognize the literary and commercial value of *A Legacy*. His promotional efforts resulted in Bedford's novel becoming a *New York Times* and *Herald Tribune* bestseller. Afterwards Gottlieb offered her a contract for *The Best We Can Do* (1958), her book about the trial of a British GP, Dr John Bodkin Adams, accused of murdering his elderly patient. This was the first of the high-profile trials Bedford covered; others included the *Lady Chatterley's Lover* obscenity trial, the trial of Dr Stephen Ward after the Profumo Affair, "the Auschwitz trial" of twenty-two former concentration camp guards which began in 1963, and the trial of Jack Ruby, who killed Lee Harvey Oswald, President Kennedy's assassin.

Hastings never says if she met Bedford, and on the page does not seek a rapport with her subject. Unlike Bedford, who was a barrister manquée, Hastings does not take the biographer's task to be building a case for the defence. The result is a methodical and dispassionate life of an intensely passionate person. ■

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Hilarious and strange

Putting the work of Dennis Cooper in its colourful context

RONA CRAN

WRONG
A critical biography of Dennis Cooper
DIARMUID HESTER
320pp. University of Iowa Press. Paperback, $39.95.

DIARMUID HESTER'S CRITICAL BIOGRAPHY of Dennis Cooper – punk poet, transgressive novelist and multi-media artist – begins in suburbia, under a spindly palm tree. John Baldessari's photograph "Wrong" (1967) gives its name to both Cooper's first collection of experimental short stories and Hester's biography. It is a deliberately amateurish image of a man standing with his back to that tree on an identikit street somewhere in California. A mischievous riposte to the notion of "bad" photography, Baldessari's "Wrong" also speaks to larger aesthetic issues of convention and aberrance: its "wrongness" suggests a David Lynchian social critique of "the usual life events that American society in the postwar era deemed worthy of note". Cooper saw it in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, aged about sixteen, and found it "hilarious and strange"; it reverberated with him "emotionally" as it hinted, in Hester's reading of the encounter, at the "corruption underneath suburban America's pleasant, conservative veneer".

"Wrong" is a fitting point of departure for a book about Cooper. It evokes the enmeshment of the humour, art, broad political critique and punk aesthetic that characterizes the author's work, as well as his biographer's approach to writing about it. Hester frames his book as part of a "conversation about Dennis Cooper's work, the cultural contexts he has created, and the ones through which he has moved". It touches on themes of friendship and care, adolescence and time, sociability and subjectivity, disappearance and erasure, algorithmic writing and "self-scrapbooking", mechanical representation and ventriloquism, fandom and hero worship, escape and systems of control. There are lively readings here of Cooper's poetry, prose and multi-media work, as Hester engagingly puts them in dialogue with numerous subcultures, social environments and avant-gardes – the mimeograph revolution, the Lower East Side poetry scene, LA punk poetry, New Narrative, Queercore, Polari, AIDS activism, zine culture, anarchism and the blogosphere. Cooper is shown to be a key node in a sprawling and "acephalous" cultural network that includes Sade, Rimbaud, Emma Goldman, William Carlos Williams, Frank O'Hara, Amy Gerstler, William S. Burroughs and Kathy Acker.

Wrong is also a conversation with Cooper's work, and with Cooper himself, its genesis lying in Hester's long-time involvement (as a lurker, reader, listener and commenter) with the "sprawling participatory artwork and queer subcultural hub" that is Cooper's blog. (Google notoriously deleted the blog in 2016, temporarily ditching a decade of his writing.) As Cooper has written about the unloved, forgotten, or mistreated, and about queer subcultures or the upending of hierarchies, so does Hester, enthusiastically affirming an affinity with his subject. His final chapter, for example, explores Cooper's HTML novels and feature films, concluding with the film *Permanent Green Light* (2018). Made in collaboration with the director Zac Farley, the film is "a moving testament to the importance of friendship" in Cooper's work.

The same might be said of *Wrong* itself, which radiates different configurations of friendship. Friendship has not only been a theme throughout Cooper's career but a "vital feature" of it, from his George Miles Cycle of novels (inspired by the childhood friend and sometime lover whom he lost to suicide) to his ill-fated bond with the literary impostor JT LeRoy, to his collaborations with the French artist Gisèle Vienne. But friendship also shapes the style and argument of *Wrong*. Rather than being hagiographical, it is predicated on the intimate act of paying close attention to someone else, and is suggestive throughout of what Hester calls "a relational mode that emerges out of and is maintained by mutual trust and respect, that is characterized by reciprocal support and not dependency".

Wrong is bright with Cooper's personality, and with Hester's. The transgressive nature of Cooper's work (notably its recurrent violence, often perpetuated by or against teenage boys) has meant that it has long been dogged (or perhaps buoyed) by controversy. But even if readers feel a "fundamental estrangement" from Cooper's work, *Wrong* offers a warm (and radical) embrace. Cooper emerges as tender and kind, as sometimes hurt, as someone who fundamentally likes people, and as someone knowable – unlike, say, Burroughs, with whom he is sometimes compared (and who tended to perform his misanthropy off as well as on the page). *Wrong* is also refreshingly, eminently readable. As Joe Brainard said of Cooper's second collection of poems, *Tiger Beat* (1978), "I like it a lot". ■

Rona Cran is writing a book called Everyday Rebellion: Poetry and resistance in New York City, 1960-1995

Leader with a hinterland

Restoring the reputation of a recently maligned politician

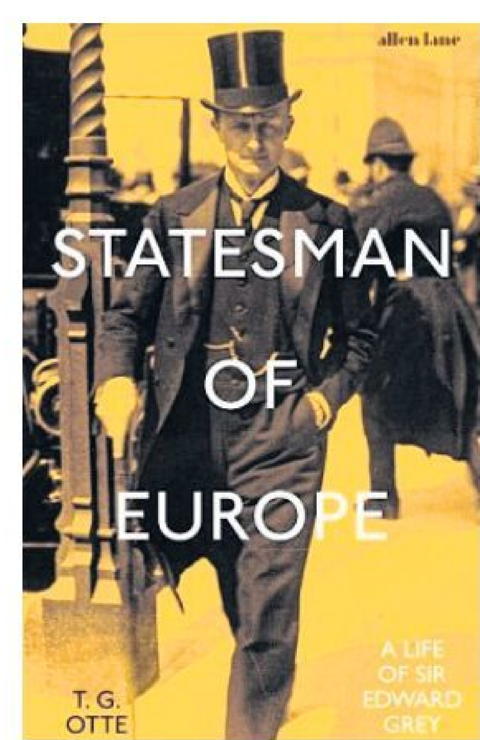
MARTIN PUGH

STATESMAN OF EUROPE
A Life of Sir Edward Grey
T. G. OTTE
752pp. Allen Lane. £35.

Sir Edward Grey has suffered a surprising neglect by biographers. After the publication of a modest crop of books by his near-contemporaries in the 1930s, he failed to attract a good modern biography until that by Keith Robbins in 1971. Yet despite the destruction of some papers in a fire at Fallodon, his Northumbrian home, a great deal of primary material survives, as T. G. Otte's new biography shows. In Professor Otte, Grey has found a sympathetic, first-rate biographer who enjoys an outstanding record of published work on late-Victorian-Edwardian foreign policy and, unlike many academic biographers, also gives appropriate consideration to the personal life of his subject even when this takes him beyond his comfort zone. With endearing honesty, Otte admits "the fact that I have never cast a line over the chalk streams of Hampshire and that the attraction of tennis will forever remain unfathomable has perhaps made it easier to keep a critical distance". Unlike today's one-track politicians, Grey was evidently a man with a hinterland; he found as much appeal in fishing, ornithology, tennis and the countryside as he did in politics. In his fourth year at Winchester – already a lackadaisical scholar – he caught seventy-six of the wary Itchen trout including one weighing nearly four pounds, a triumph curtly dismissed by the headmaster: "Yes, yes, Grey caught a fish!"

Despite showing no interest in politics at Winchester or Balliol, Grey was adopted as Liberal candidate at Berwick in 1885 aged twenty-three. He was advised by the historian Bishop Mandell Creighton that he should make speeches lasting fifteen minutes, include one major point and "have the strength of mind to sit down when you have reached it". Against the feudal influence of the Dukes of Northumberland, he held the seat until retirement in 1918, though he enjoyed the support of the Trevelyans and other branches of the Grey family. Remarkably, he appears to have had little or no party organization, while the Tories, according to my research, established up to sixteen Primrose League "habitations" in the area with between 2,000 and 3,000 members, many of whom were, admittedly, not voters before 1918.

For readers who see him solely in terms of the drift towards the First World War, this account of Grey's domestic politics offers a valuable corrective, for he was far more progressive in his outlook than his image as a detached country gentleman suggests. Admittedly, Grey does not fit easily into any obvious political movements or intellectual traditions; he has not usually been linked to the New Liberalism, though he was supportive of "National Efficiency". As early as the 1880s he advocated payment for MPs, full manhood suffrage, votes for women and proportional representation. A consistent supporter of Irish Home Rule, he rightly saw that in the long run the Irish could not be coerced by London. Although representing a largely rural constituency, Grey was much influenced by the industrialization of Northumberland and by the growing assertiveness of the labour movement. In 1898 he was elected to the board of directors of the North East Railway Company – the only one to recognize trade unions. He favoured compulsory purchase powers for local authorities to enable them to acquire land for social housing, allotments and improved schooling. He considered that property ownership was over-represented in parliament and was, in any case, not a good qualification for a political career. During the 1909-10 crisis over the peers' rejection of the "People's Budget", he rightly saw that the abolition of the veto powers of the House of Lords was not really a solution. He advocated a more radical reform of the anomaly of a hereditary chamber by replacing the existing House with fifty peers plus 200 elected by proportional representation at a different time from the House of Commons.



Martin Pugh's most recent book is Britain and Islam: A history from 622 to the present day, *2019*

The centenary of Britain's entry into the First World War provoked some journalists and politicians, largely ignorant of the subject, to disparage Grey's conduct of foreign policy on the assumption that by neglecting to warn Germany that Britain would fight he was culpable for war in 1914. Otte delivers a convincing rebuttal of such claims. From 1905 onwards, Grey skilfully managed the two alliance systems, maintaining British leverage by avoiding too firm a relationship with either. The problem lay with Russia, weakened by her defeat by Japan in 1905 so that the Franco-Russian Alliance did not effectively balance the Central Powers; hence the entente with Russia of 1907, which was one of his notable successes. By the last four years of peace, however, Russia had recovered her military and naval strength such that Germany would soon be at a disadvantage and thus had a strong motive for backing Austria, her one firm ally, in Balkan disputes. Grey managed the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, via the London Conference, thereby preventing a regional conflict turning into an international one. But this could not be repeated in 1914 because Germany felt obliged to back Austria before the balance tipped further against her. T. G. Otte analyses these diplomatic intricacies in a magisterial account that is unlikely to be bettered. ■

Love in a very cold climate

How the world was changing while buried under heavy snow

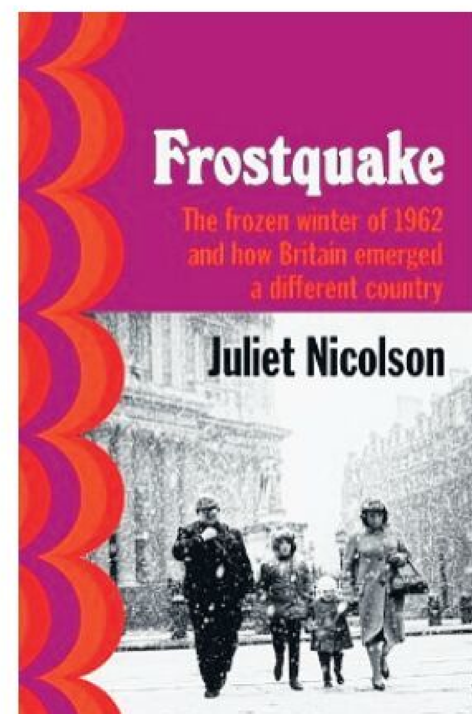
GILLIAN TINDALL

FROSTQUAKE
The frozen winter of 1962 and how Britain emerged a different country
JULIET NICOLSON
368pp. Chatto and Windus. £18.99.

In our current state of rolling crisis, this book about an earlier crisis year is irresistible. The preternaturally cold and snowbound winter of 1963 (not really '62, as the subtitle of *Frostquake* oddly claims) is enshrined less now in memory than in popular legend. And while the Great Freeze did not in itself cause social change (we were too cold to do anything but go to the pub to keep warm), it turned out to be something of a catalyst on multiple fronts. The dawning international awareness of the evils of pollution, the growing success of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the general acceptance of the new birth-control pill, the heyday of television satire (*That Was The Week That Was*), the meteoric rise of the Beatles and, most of all, the slow-burn scandal of the Profumo affair – all these developments and more characterized that fateful year.

Juliet Nicolson's survey is in many ways wonderfully comprehensive. She has gathered newspaper items from all over the British Isles, though this inevitably results in more shock-horror stories (a milkman found frozen in his float, family members dying in a stalled car) than it does in conveying the week-in-week-out dreariness of trudging past the mounds of grubby, unmelting snow that had buried the cars. Nicolson has drawn into her net many topics that have no obvious link with the Great Freeze but which turn out to be significant pointers to the changes that were then coming. Her exegesis early in the book on the prime minister Harold Macmillan's traditional assumptions, and his private pain about his wife's long-term affair with Bob Boothby, may not seem especially relevant to plummeting temperatures – until you realize in a late chapter that all this was part of the slow approach of a major scandal once the winter was over. The Secretary of State for War thought he could get away with lying to the Commons that "there was no impropriety whatsoever in my acquaintanceship with Miss Keeler" and the excessively honourable Macmillan chose to believe him. The end result was that a well-known osteopath-to-the-rich killed himself before hearing the verdict in his trial for living on immoral earnings, and a harmless "good-time girl" went to prison, but the governing-class trick of closing ranks successfully to protect its own was at an end for ever.

So several cheers for Nicolson's wide-ranging book. But in her enthusiasm for some topics there are odd misses in other fields, perhaps because she herself experienced most of that winter as a child in what seems to have been an adequately warm Chelsea house with an old-style Nanny. There is hardly a mention of frozen loos, and none of queuing with a jerry-can for paraffin that shopkeepers had to ration. Although she rightly records the shocking work-to-rule actions of the power stations' staff in the depths of the cold, she seems unaware that most homes then had no radiators and were dependent for heating on what were universally known as "oil stoves". One puzzled reference to a "paraffin lamp" in a bathroom not being much use indicates this gap in her grasp of 1960s living.



Gillian Tindall's most recent book, The Pulse Glass: And the beat of other hearts, *was published in 2019*

Inevitably some of the examples of changing times on which she embarks had their origins much earlier, but poetic licence is acceptable to create the wider picture. The result of the Wolfenden Report of 1957 was brewing – but slowly. Mary Quant's success with waistless dresses was already three years old by 1962, but Nicolson is right about the way Quant's black tights opportunely replaced stockings just as the freeze arrived. She is also right that those few months marked the Beatles' rise from local to international fame, though there is no mention that it was the final disappearance of National Service that made their careers possible, and perhaps we didn't need a whole chapter on them. There is also a little too much on some now-forgotten Chelsea figures, and far too much on Sylvia Plath: her questionable adoption as a feminist icon only came years later.

Nor is there one mention of the great local authority rebuilding saga. It was then wrecking urban landscapes all over England, but was at last being fervently opposed by voices such as John Betjeman and Anthony Armstrong-Jones. Those of us who lived through the decade have our own early 1960s: that was mine. ■

Time to try the impossible

Fighting words in the USSR and Putin's Russia

BENJAMIN NATHANS

THE CULTURE OF SAMIZDAT
Literature and underground networks in the late Soviet Union
JOSEPHINE VON ZITZEWITZ
264pp. Bloomsbury. £85.

PUSSY RIOT
Speaking punk to power
ELIOT BORENSTEIN
152pp. Bloomsbury. £45.

Members of Pussy Riot perform in front of the Kremlin in central Moscow

"I DIVIDE ALL WORKS of world literature into those written with permission and those written without it", announced the poet Osip Mandelstam in 1930. "The first are rubbish; the second – stolen air." A bracing thought: must writers really choose between trash and thievery? Mandelstam's stolen air cost him his life, and *The Fourth Prose*, in which these words appeared, remained unpublished in the Soviet Union until 1989. But not unread: manually typed copies circulated among the intelligentsia via the technique known as "samizdat" ("By Myself Publishers", a play on the names of Soviet publishing houses). The practice of copying and sharing uncensored homemade texts is probably as old as censorship itself. In the USSR, and in the Soviet satellite countries of Eastern Europe, works disseminated outside the state's publishing monopoly eventually formed an entire textual counter-world, representing a staggering range of topics, genres and points of view. By the late 1960s, samizdat had become the oxygen of the intelligentsia, which, according to the dissident Ludmila Alexeyeva, "could no longer imagine life without it".

As a chapter in the history of the written word during the era of its mechanical reproduction – an era dating back to the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century and currently exhibiting extraordinary dynamism thanks to technologies of digitization – samizdat holds a special allure. The poet Anna Akhmatova called it a "pre-Gutenberg" medium, a return to a scribal culture signalling the new Dark Ages ushered in by Soviet rule. But as Josephine von Zitzewitz shows, samizdat was less a throwback than a creative variant of the modern literary ecosystem, with its elaborate web of authors, editors, publishers, printers, critics, booksellers, librarians and, not least, readers. This human network, rather than the texts themselves, takes centre stage in *The Culture of Samizdat*. Drawing on questionnaires completed by over a hundred former participants as well as interviews and memoirs, von Zitzewitz offers a wealth of empirical information on how people created and sustained circuits of clandestine literature from the 1960s to the USSR's implosion in 1991.

Samizdat produced not just new things to read, but "readers of a new type", as one contemporary put it. It turned reading into an act of transgression, of belonging to the world's edgiest and most secretive book club. By the 1970s, moreover, samizdat had developed its own alternative ecosystem of clandestine lending libraries (the largest were in Odessa and Moscow), samizdat journals devoted to reviewing the latest works of samizdat, and underground conferences of samizdat writers and readers. Von Zitzewitz interprets these as symptoms of "professionalization", but it is hard to see how that term applies to an activity from which almost no one earned a living, and for which there were no gate-keeping mechanisms to determine who qualified to take part.

More interesting is the way samizdat networks could simultaneously embody the ideals of both socialism and capitalism. Imagine an economy of textual goods freed from the profit motive, where buying and selling are replaced by giving and lending. Alternatively, imagine a market economy in which the supply of written works is perfectly responsive to reader demand, without mediation by publishers, advertisers or retailers – because readers themselves control the means of reproduction and dissemination. "If you are a reader of samizdat and you can type", noted the poet Natalya Gorbanevskaya in 1977, "you become a publisher of samizdat."

What would have happened to samizdat culture had the Soviet Union lasted long enough to enter the internet age (see: China)? Counterfactuals aside, it was the abolition of censorship in 1990 that caused samizdat's demise, on the eve of the internet's arrival and the USSR's collapse. Under Vladimir Putin, the Russian mediascape has come to look very different from that of the Soviet era. The state applies outright censorship selectively, preferring indirect influence to ensure Kremlin-friendly programming on television and radio while occasionally arranging the intimidation or murder of investigative journalists who ask inconvenient questions. Although Putin's plan for a "Sovereign RuNet" (Russian internet) threatens to gradually isolate Russia behind the equivalent of China's "Great Firewall", the internet remains for now the leading platform for free expression. It is where over 100 million viewers, most of them Russians, have watched Alexei Navalny's recent exposé of the prodigious corruption that allegedly produced Putin's billion-pound palace on the shore of the Black Sea, and where the feminist collective Pussy Riot posts performance art videos that "speak punk to power", in Eliot Borenstein's felicitous phrase.

Borenstein's slender book is good news for anyone wishing to defend the burgeoning genre of "Very Short Introductions", "Brief Histories" and "Shorts" against the charge of dumbing down their topics. In just over a hundred sparkling and witty pages, he takes readers inside the remarkable evolution of Pussy Riot, and especially the careers of its most visible members, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, from their pre-feminist Actionist roots to their guerrilla theatre performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, leading to prison sentences, global celebrity and, after their release in 2013, decidedly non-punk advocacy of prison reform and human rights in Russia. Along the way, *Pussy Riot* offers crisp insights into Russian feminism, performance art in the media age and the problem of anonymity in a world in thrall to celebrity.

> "The poet Anna Akhmatova called samizdat a 'pre-Gutenberg' medium, a return to a scribal culture signalling the new Dark Ages ushered in by Soviet rule

"The only performances we'll participate in are illegal ones", an anonymous member of the group once declared, as if having inhaled Mandelstam's stolen air. On February 21, 2012, four Pussy Riot members dressed in brightly coloured tights and tunics, their faces masked by balaclavas, entered Moscow's largest cathedral to protest the unholy alliance between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church, an alliance that lends divine sanction to Putin's rule and arms the church in its battle against what it calls "gender ideology". Or, to put it another way, they made a video of themselves dancing, mimicking the gestures of Orthodox ritual while incanting the "Punk Prayer" (here slightly amended from Borenstein's translation):

> Mother of God, Virgin Mary, Cast Putin out
> Cast Putin out, Cast Putin out
>
> Black Cassock, golden epaulettes
> The whole congregation crawls on its knees
> The spectre of freedom in the heavens
> Gay Pride sent off to Siberia in shackles
>
> The KGB chief, their chief saint
> Leads protesters to the isolation chambers
> So as not to offend His Holiness
> Women need to make babies and to love
>
> Shit, shit, Holy shit
> Shit, shit, Holy shit
>
> Mother of God, Virgin Mary, become a feminist
> Become a feminist, become a feminist

Borenstein characterizes Pussy Riot's videos as exercises in "avant-garde political magical thinking, a cry out to the audience to make their words come true". It's an excellent description, especially if you believe with Bismarck that politics is the art of the possible and therefore that "political magical thinking" is an oxymoron. But perhaps you are more inclined to agree with Max Weber, for whom "all historical experience confirms that people would not have attained the possible unless they had reached out, time and again, for the impossible". Or even better, with Sun Ra: "The possible has been tried and it failed. Now it's time to try the impossible".

The "Punk Prayer", according to Borenstein, "succeeded beyond [Pussy Riot's] wildest expectations", "shock[ing] their audience out of their complacency". Which audience exactly? Borenstein drolly acknowledges that Pussy Riot "did not start an actual revolution. But the revolution that did not take place was nonetheless televised". Public opinion polls by the respected Levada-Center, however, indicate that the overwhelming majority of Russians do not sympathize with Pussy Riot and did not change their view of the Russian Orthodox Church in the wake of the "Punk Prayer", the video of which remains accessible in Russia via the internet, despite the harsh punishment imposed on Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina for "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred". Many scratched their heads over the group's foreign name, which, like the word "dissident", typically gets transliterated but not translated into Russian. By contrast, Western media along with celebrities from Paul McCartney to Madonna have lavished attention and praise on Pussy Riot, drawn by the irresistible narrative of heroic artists battling the repressive Russian state – a narrative that, whether conveyed via samizdat or the internet, shows no signs of going away. ■

Benjamin Nathans teaches at the University of Pennsylvania and is author of the forthcoming To the Success of Our Hopeless Cause: The many lives of the Soviet dissident movement

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Where church and state unite

Tracing the legacy of Byzantine-Eastern Christianity

ROWAN WILLIAMS

THE EASTERN ORTHODOX CHURCH
A new history
JOHN ANTHONY McGUCKIN
360pp. Yale University Press. £25 (US $32.50).

A miniature of the Second Council of Nicaea from the *Menologion of Basil II*, c.1000

THE HISTORY AND CULTURE of Eastern Christianity create many problems for the familiar crude polarization between a "Judaeo-Christian" Western identity and a homogeneous and threatening Islamic world. The sharp state-and-church division which the West more or less takes for granted – along with the public-and-private distinction that often goes with this – is very hard to map on to an Eastern Christian mentality. As a result, Christianity in Eastern Europe and Western Asia is seen by most Western intellectuals as simply an anomalous pre-modern survival – an ally of the regressive non-Western ideologies that menace us, with their indifference to democracy and human rights. Russia may have stopped being Communist but it is still alien, perhaps all the more alien for its parading of a Christian identity.

One of the strengths of Fr McGuckin's book is that it tackles such perceptions directly and helpfully. Without simply endorsing the classical Byzantine understanding of the *sumphonia* between clerical and lay vocations in the Christian state, with its distinctive picture of the monarch as a living image of Christ's authority, McGuckin spells out this alternative Christian perspective in terms that allow us to see its sophistication and flexibility. It is not – in the sense in which we usually understand the term – a "theocracy" in which political power and spiritual authority are inseparably fused; it is a finely balanced, dialectical system of differentiated responsibilities, in which the theological vision of human community is upheld and defended by the polity, and the ruling authorities agree to be held accountable to that vision in certain important respects. This was, of course, an ideal at best imperfectly realized in the Byzantine world; but, McGuckin argues, it is important to grasp that Western assumptions about authority in state and church – suspicious of state control over confessional identity, defensive about the liberties of conscientious dissent – are not the only possible development of Christian theological principles.

The point is well made – though it glosses over the implication that religious dissent becomes a form of treason in this framework, and was punished accordingly in Byzantium during some periods in the empire's history (penalties for heresy mirrored those for treason and for "crimes against nature" such as cannibalism). McGuckin also tends to see Western resistance to this model as largely the child of a modernizing Protestant mindset; but in fact Western unease about the assimilation of imperial rule to the kingship of Christ goes back to ninth century and the critique of aspects of Byzantine theology developed by some of Charlemagne's court divines. There is also a problem, which McGuckin acknowledges, in what happens when the Byzantine model is repristinated in the context of a modern nation-state and blends with messianic racial mythologies; Russian history over the past few centuries furnishes some sobering versions of this, and many of them are alive and well today. A theological assessment of Vladimir Putin (let alone, say, Slobodan Milošević) as if he were Constantine Porphyrogenitus faces some challenges.

But it does no harm at all to have an intelligent restatement of the "symphonic" vision, if only to make us pause in our facile judgements of non-Western Christian practice and rhetoric. McGuckin is consistently energetic and constructively provoking in his narrative – as he is in his opening chapters on Christian origins, where he argues robustly in defence of an integral role for tradition, sacramental practice and spiritual discipline, in the first foundations of Christian faith, refusing to accept any legitimate theological division between history and interpretation. He is a lucid expositor of patristic theology (adding a useful appendix of clause-by-clause commentary on the Nicene Creed), as we should expect from a scholar who has published some excellent studies in early Christianity, especially on Gregory Nazianzen and Cyril of Alexandria; he has a gift for making the classical doctrinal arguments vivid and contemporary. And a closing "postlude" on why Eastern Christianity might matter for the West today presents a fine argument about our need for a spiritually resourced doctrine of the human person: our problem, he says, is not so much that Western moderns have "lost the sense of God. The problem is that they have lost the sense of what it is to be truly human".

> **"Our problem, McGuckin says, is not so much that Western moderns have lost the sense of God. The problem is that they have lost the sense of what it is to be truly human**

Unsurprisingly, when he offers in a slightly earlier chapter a handful of exemplary modern Orthodox lives, two of the three belong to the lively and still controversial world of the Russian émigré congregations in France, where the issue of discovering a true humanity in the presence of God through both practical service and liturgical nourishment, informed by a profoundly culturally literate theology, might be said to have played a determining role. This being said, the third name is that of a very different figure, Fr Cleopa of the Romanian monastery of Sihastria, one of the most celebrated Orthodox "elders" of the twentieth century, representing an impeccably traditional style of monastic holiness which was lived out in circumstances of great privation and suffering in the communist era. It is important that this witness to an unbroken continuity of monastic spirituality is set alongside the more immediately "accessible" lives of the other two figures, Mother Maria Skobtsova, imprisoned and executed for her untiring defence of French Jews under Nazi occupation, and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, a convert from Protestantism and one of the most imaginative lay theologians of the twentieth-century Orthodox world.

McGuckin has already published and edited substantial surveys of Orthodox identity, and has established a well-merited reputation as an academically credible and engaging expositor of Eastern theology. The least successful sections of this book, however, are some of the more directly historical chapters, regrettable in a work subtitled *A new history*. They move rather confusingly from narrative to thematic discussion, and the narrative itself is surprisingly patchy. A chapter on "The Byzantine Imperial Church" takes us only as far as the Seventh Ecumenical Council (held in 787), and the chapter that follows, on the expansion of the Church in Eastern Europe, skips forward to the fifteenth century in its account of Byzantine history – so that the details of the schism of 1054, the impact of the Crusades, the Christological controversies of twelfth-century Byzantium, and the Council of Lyons receive no treatment at all or (with the Crusades) only the most minimal. Startlingly, McGuckin also forgoes in-depth engagement with the controversy around the fourteenth-century theologian Gregory Palamas, which has in the past been misrepresented as simply the opposition of Western scholasticism and Byzantine hesychasm (a hermetic practice of prayer and contemplation). There are slips or oddities of detail, as with the reference to a "Nestorian" mission to Ethiopia, or the mention of a "patriarch" in the Russia of Ivan the Terrible when we have already been told that this office was only created some decades later.

The account of the composition of the Greek and Slavonic versions of the *Philokalia*, the authoritative eighteenth-century anthology of spiritual texts, is helpful, and the overview of the history of the Balkan churches is a welcome addition. But the treatment of Russia from 1700 to 1900 is thin. It would have helped perhaps to mention the German Protestant influence on Peter the Great's church reforms (in addition to the good and clear earlier account of the impact of Catholic educational methods on Russian Orthodoxy by way of Ukrainian reforms in the seventeenth century), and the Slavophil movement has a rather cursory handling. The section on Orthodoxy in the Soviet era reminds the reader of what is still shamefully unknown in the West, the sheer numerical scale of the butchery of clergy and other believers in the early post-Revolutionary period; and there is a good summary of Stalin's opportunistic mobilizing of collective Orthodox memory in the early 1940s as part of the war effort. More might have been said about the impact of perestroika on religious writing and publishing in the 1990s, not least in the wave of both translation of foreign theological texts and retrieval of older Russian material or writings from the Russian diaspora – not to mention the influential new work of Fr Aleksandr Men and his circle. And a curious absentee from the discussion of post-Communist Orthodoxy is the extraordinary story of the massive revival of the Church in Albania, led by the outstanding figure of Archbishop Anastasios of Tirana.

Books that offer a broad overview always invite niggling complaints about omissions, and a reviewer needs to bear this in mind; but my concern is that Professor McGuckin's central historical chapters (4 to 7, say) could have been more tightly and systematically constructed, so as to cover the ground more evenly. The reader will need to turn to other works (including some by the same author) to get a more connected and comprehensive picture of the story. But this book offers some first-rate treatments of theology and the ethos of Orthodox worship, and conveys an infectious positivity. The exhortations in the postlude to focus on telling the classical theological narrative afresh, with vigour and imagination, and getting used to Christian witness in a climate of cultural dispossession are forceful and timely. And it hardly needs saying that their relevance is not limited to Orthodox Christian communities. ■

Rowan Williams is Master of Magdalene College, Cambridge. His most recent book is Christ the Heart of Creation, *2018*

IN BRIEF

Grey zones and frontlines

GULAGS

JOURNEY INTO THE LAND OF THE ZEKS AND BACK
A memoir of the Gulag
JULIUS MARGOLIN
Translated by Stefani Hoffman
640pp. Oxford University Press. £30.99 (US $39.95).

"You have to touch death to know what life is", Julius Margolin wrote in Tel Aviv in 1946, after seven years in Stalin's Gulag. His was one of the very first books to be published about the parallel, unseen Soviet Union. Multitudes perished, but Margolin, a Polish-Jewish intellectual, survived thanks to sheer luck, his proficiency in languages, his friendship with doctors – and his belief in "the power of words" to argue his corner. After more than seventy years, this is the first time that an account of his harrowing sojourn in the land of the "zeks", the universe of Gulag prisoners, has been published in English translation.

In 1936, Margolin and his family emigrated from Poland to Palestine under the British Mandate, but he had to borrow £1,000 to pay for the visas. He subsequently returned to Poland to work off the debt by managing a textile plant in Łódź. He was due to return to his family on September 3, 1939 – two days after Hitler invaded Poland. Two weeks later, Stalin devoured the eastern half of Poland. The unhelpful British Consulate in Moscow now received an order not to issue any more visas. The Rumanians refused entry to Jews. Margolin's Tel Aviv identity card, issued by the British administration, did not protect him – the Soviets labelled him "the Englishman". Margolin was sentenced to five years for passport violations because he was a citizen of a country, Poland, that no longer existed.

After several weeks in the "wandering coffin" of his train, Margolin arrived at his camp when the day began at five in the morning with the felling of trees in winter temperatures of -30°C. Margolin describes in absorbing detail the minutiae of the process through which human beings were gradually reduced to hungry beasts, "labouring machines" for their bosses. Many arrivals were unused to such arduous labour, whether they were the wives of Polish aristocrats or Hasidic Jews from Złoczów – and died like flies. Devout Russian Christians, "the little Christs", refused to work on Sundays – and were shot. Camp women became prostitutes to survive. If they became pregnant, their babies were taken from them after birth. Only the "urki", Russian criminals, fared well – no one dared to oppose them when they stole at will.

This is a book that demands to be read. The celebrated historian Timothy Snyder comments in his introduction that "memory is empty without witnesses". Fifty years after his death, Julius Margolin is finally testifying to the English-speaking world.

Colin Shindler

BEES

GREY BEES
ANDREY KURKOV
Translated by Boris Dralyuk
349pp. MacLehose Press. £14.99.

Like many of Andrey Kurkov's novels, *Grey Bees* has elements of both the fable and the epic. The bees of the title, with their ability to collaborate and loyalty to their hive, are a model for humans to emulate. "Come on now, don't act like people!", their keeper, Sergey, reminds them on more than one occasion (the implication, of course, being that people should act more like bees).

Translated by Boris Dralyuk with sensitivity and ingenuity, *Grey Bees* centres on Sergey's journey, beehives in tow, from his home in the "grey zone" between the frontlines in Donbas to Crimea, where he seeks out his old friend and fellow beekeeper, Akhtem. Sergey is at once a war-weary adventurer and a fairy-tale innocent, a cross between Odysseus and a Slavic holy fool. As he overcomes various obstacles, from traumatized Ukrainian veterans to Russian mercenaries and propaganda television crews, his naive gaze allows Kurkov to get to the heart of a country bewildered by crisis and war, but where kindness can still be found.

During his travels, Sergey stops periodically to release his bees. Without fail, they return. It is only when one of his hives is seized by the Russian secret services that this pattern is disrupted. Once the confiscated bees are returned, it is clear that they have been corrupted in some way – for a start, they have turned a strange shade of grey – and the hive becomes untenable. Just as the hive exerts an irresistible pull on its bees, humans are drawn homewards, however damaged that home may be, however isolated by checkpoints and borders. It is the painful question of when a damaged home becomes untenable that hangs over Kurkov's novel.

Grey Bees ends in Sergey's own homecoming to his unlikely Ithaca in Donbas. But there is another kind of homecoming that turns out to be impossible: the return to a happier time. By finding Akhtem, Sergey had hoped to recover something of his simpler, brighter, pre-crisis youth. The bucolic mountains of Crimea, which hold a special place in the hearts of many in Sergey's generation, would seem to be the perfect escape from the "grey zone". Instead, Sergey finds Akhtem's family bereaved and beleaguered, suffering, like many of the Crimean Tatar community in reality, under Russian police terror. The best he can do is help his friend's daughter, Aisha, leave for a new life in mainland Ukraine. Sergey's return to Donbas coincides with the beginning of Aisha's own odyssey, with no guarantee of return to her compromised hive.

Uilleam Blacker

NEWS

THE TIMES GREAT EVENTS
200 years of history as it happened
James Owen, editor
448pp. Times Books. £20.

What is it about the news, that we fear and despise it, and yet cannot get enough of it? Robert Burton, in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621), expressed the very contemporary bewilderment of being assailed by news of "war, plagues, fire, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres, meteors, comets, spectrums, prodigies", yet found that, withdrawing from the public world of "pamphlets and curantoes", he was no more contented.

This anthology of *Times* journalism from the report of the storming of the Bastille in 1789 to the killing of George Floyd in May 2020 contains more than anyone can bear of murders, plagues, massacres and war. Of course, it is not meant to be read in just a few sittings; I suspect most buyers will place it in the bookshelf of their smallest room, between an encyclopedia of verse and a collection of old political cartoons.

There isn't much for historians here, apart from a clear illustration of the way journalistic narratives changed on or around 1851, when the telegraph first transformed international news and then altered profoundly the way reporters strung their words together. Earlier entries are circumlocutory, full of digressions. An article on a fatal railway accident published in 1830 begins, "From all that I can learn from eye-witnesses, the unfortunate event of which I am now going to give you the details, happened in the following manner...". The writer then takes several hundred laborious words to provide a setting and context, before telling the by now impatient modern reader, "the wheel went over his left thigh, squeezing it almost to a jelly, broke the leg, it is said, in two places, laid the muscles bare, from the ankle, nearly to the hip". The account of the Indian mutiny published in 1857 is written quite differently, the story told in the first sentence.

Another noticeable characteristic is that between 1789 and 1919, when Lady Astor took her seat in the House of Commons, women are put firmly in their place: the only named female protagonists are royalty, a child murderer and a victim of Jack the Ripper.

Anthologies are opportunities for endless pleasant quibbling over editorial choices – I wonder why the rather anodyne entry on the Spanish Civil War was chosen above the *Times* correspondent George Steer's outraged account of the bombing of Guernica in April 1937 – but readers will certainly get their fill of historical trivia.

Sarah Lonsdale

NHS

BREATHTAKING
Inside the NHS in a time of pandemic
RACHEL CLARKE
228pp. Little, Brown. £16.99.

If any book can demonstrate how the world has changed it is this one. We last met the NHS doctor Rachel Clarke in her superlative book *Dear Life: A doctor's story of love, loss and consolation* (2020), exchanging frontline medicine for palliative care. There she lamented the failure of general medicine in particular and society at large to breach the taboo surrounding death and embrace dying as an inevitable, even uplifting, experience.

Since then Clarke has returned to the NHS frontline as part of the army of health staff tackling the influx of Covid patients in a world where death is anything but taboo and there is nothing uplifting in its onslaught. In *Breathtaking* she chronicles the first four months of the pandemic as she witnesses the NHS turned upside down. As she acknowledges, this is a snapshot view, written fast and furiously during nights when she cannot sleep for anxiety and sorrow. Raw, uncompromising and heartbreaking, her book channels her fury at the inertia of government, her grief at the deaths of patients and colleagues and, ultimately, her sense that she – all NHS staff – is somehow complicit in this tragedy.

Clarke begins her story on New Year's Day as the first cases emerge in Wuhan. As she unravels the growth of the virus, its eruption in Italy, its arrival in Britain, the events feel horribly familiar yet still startling in their scale and speed. While UK ministers issue reassuring messages, she feels dread at the coming storm and anger at government and public complacency. As wards fill and colleagues struggle to cope, the prime minister joins 82,000 rugby fans at Twickenham and shakes hands with Covid patients. Ministers and their scientific advisers glibly advise a policy of "herd immunity" as intensive care units buckle under the strain.

In March, Clarke returns to frontline care, splitting her time between the hospice where she is based and Oxford's Covid wards. Like many of her colleagues, she fears she will make orphans of her children; as a mother she "never felt shabbier". With dizzying speed, the NHS transforms itself, cancelling non-urgent care and evacuating thousands of patients. Wards, theatres and conference rooms are converted into ICUs while other hospital areas are like "ghost ships".

Clarke charts this apocalyptic landscape through the voices of her colleagues and patients. Staff beg for PPE and weep when fellow workers succumb to the virus. Clarke is adamant that the NHS rose stupendously to the challenge but only at the "terrible cost" of sending thousands of elderly patients to die in care homes. Her story ends in August when she notes "we have no idea what lies ahead this winter". Clarke's account provides a haunt-

Beverly Docherty by Tom Mead; from *Portraits for NHS Heroes* by Tom Croft (224pp. Bloomsbury. £25.)

ing picture of the past and a chilling glimpse of the future.
Wendy Moore

SINGLE MOTHERS

SEX IN AN OLD REGIME CITY

Young workers and intimacy in France, 1660–1789
JULIE HARDWICK
288pp. Oxford University Press. £22.99 (US $35).

It once was a truth universally acknowledged that a single woman with child would be disciplined by an absolutist state. No longer. Historiography has come a long way since Foucault and first-wave feminism. In Julie Hardwick's compelling study of youthful intimacy in early modern Lyon, the word "patriarchy" never even appears. This is not because the city was a sexual utopia – it emphatically was not, for either women or men – but because our understandings of the early modern state, law and gender have changed. A royal edict of 1556 against clandestine pregnancy which supported much of the disciplining narrative turned out to be misunderstood by historians and mostly ignored at the time.

The foundation of Hardwick's study is paternity suits brought by single mothers. Such legal documents present two obvious difficulties: they only record those, by definition atypical, instances where things go wrong, and they do not tell us what comes next. Hardwick cannot fix the latter problem, beyond noting that high infant mortality meant many of the children involved would have died young. But her close reading of hundreds of cases reveals not a parade of sexual transgressions in need of discipline but commonly accepted courtship practices that went wrong. The courtship of young heterosexual Lyonnais, often co-workers, transitioned to marriage in stages: a public phase filled with walks and picnics in the park (courting rituals which have undergone a recent revival), and a private phase which involved sex after the man's strenuous promises of marriage. Those records that survive are the small minority where marriage did not follow. While they also show many other possible solutions to pregnancy – including infanticide – the court inevitably awarded the mother costs and the father custody of the child, which usually was sent to a wet nurse at his expense.

Far from disciplining young women, then, the Lyon court disciplined men for failing to keep their promises. In so doing they restored women's honour. Women still faced much greater risk before, during, and after pregnancy than their partners, and Hardwick has a keen eye for the power asymmetries involved. My one note of scepticism relates to the role played by the wider community and the court. There was certainly sympathy for the plight of young single mothers, but it was their children's future that made communal support less than altruistic. There were financial incentives to accept a woman's word. If fathers did not pay, then the community would have to cough up. The patriarchy worked in mysterious ways.
Jan Machielsen

AUTHORS

SO YOU WANT TO PUBLISH A BOOK?

ANNE TRUBEK
160pp. Belt Publishing. Paperback, $16.95.

Anne Trubek was a professor of communication at Oberlin College, gave up tenure to become a writer, and went on to found Belt Publishing, an independent press in Cleveland, Ohio. *So You Want to Publish a Book?* is a compact, practical manual on how books are made that draws on her experiences as both author and publisher. Aimed at readers interested in either of those pursuits, the book assumes no prior knowledge, and offers a wealth of information usually available only to insiders. The reader will see an example of the "profit and loss spreadsheet" publishers use to try to calculate the costs of a book, be given the key to the genteel but enigmatic phrasing (such as "very nice deal") used to describe advances to authors, and come to understand how and when publishers are paid by their distributors – or not.

Trubek has taken advantage of the liberty that comes with publishing a how-to book with her own press to make playful choices in both design and structure. Small tags explain what each part of the printed book is: running heads, colophons and half-title pages are all marked in this way. Scattered throughout the book are brief guides to other trade lingo, though the reader should be warned that a "strip-and-bind" is not nearly as exciting as it sounds. Finally, Trubek enlists some of her colleagues at Belt to explain how they go about their jobs of copyediting, cover design or interior book design, with graphics to illustrate their work in progress.

Most readers of this book will probably be aspiring authors, and they will find tough love in its pages. Trubek explains that would-be authors need to read widely in their area, know their competition, and think in terms of selling a book to a market rather than pursuing their own pet project. "Writers who think selfishly aren't the kind of writers I hope to work with", writes Trubek, and she goes on to describe the intensive editing process with which authors should also make their peace.

At the same time, Trubek offers solace to writers frustrated with the cookie-cutter approach of large publishing houses. Although she explains how "comps" (comparison titles – books with a similar appeal) work, and provides an invaluable guide to the "Big Five" American trade publishers, Trubek also laments how this very system stifles authors, pushing them to imitate already-successful releases rather than forging their own path. Unsurprisingly, Trubek praises independent presses for offering publication to a wider range of authors, including those without a high-powered agent or the time to write a lengthy proposal. Her advice on marketing books also runs counter to traditional wisdom, suggesting ways to spread the word beyond endless social media activity and exhausting book tours.
Irina Dumitrescu

PERSONALS

MY VICTORIAN NOVEL

Critical essays in the personal voice
ANNETTE R. FEDERICO, EDITOR
316pp. University of Missouri Press. $36.

The subjective, autobiographical approach to scholarly writing has no better advocate than Annette Federico. Her wise and wide-ranging introduction identifies it, surely correctly, not so much as a recent trend as an entirely natural way of relating to literature. In the essays that follow, she and fourteen other scholars each explore their own relationship with a selected Victorian novel. You might be sceptical. Does it help you, as a reader yourself, to see what was "life-changing" about Beverley Park Rilett's early reading of *Middlemarch*? Or how regular re-engagements with *Wuthering Heights* have helped Federico herself to understand the young woman she once was? Actually, yes. These personal journeys are often passionate and always highly readable. Recounted by critics who know the novels inside out, they encourage others to honour the exhilaration of their earliest reading experiences, while remaining open to new questions and reassessments.

Andrea Kaston Tange, writing about *Jane Eyre*, recalls her early admiration for Jane but finds it dampened by Jane's failure to give more thought to the first Mrs Rochester, for whom there is no happy ending. Michael Flynn remembers being jolted by Steerforth's betrayal of David in *David Copperfield* – a response so visceral that it determined the choice of his academic career. These days, he says, students of the digital age, alert to deceptions of all kinds, see the betrayal coming. But do they spot "how marginalized David becomes in the second half of the novel"? Flynn suggests that in the age of social media all of us are getting used to the networked rather than "traditional humanist" self.

Other contributors analyse their experience of *The Pickwick Papers* and *Bleak House*, and two essays apiece are devoted to George Eliot and Thackeray. Also represented are Emily Brontë, Arthur Conan Doyle, Elizabeth Gaskell, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, Anthony Trollope and Bram Stoker. Reliving the excitement of that first plunge into a complex and unfamiliar fictional world, as Ellen Rosenman still does when grappling with *Daniel Deronda*, is a common thread. Often enough in these meetings of minds, as in Federico's with Emily Brontë's, pain speaks to pain, and later readings set in train a therapeutic programme of deeper understanding. Sara Manton, troubled by tragic misinterpretations and all-too-accurate prophecies in *The Return of the Native*, comes back to it after an interval to glimpse "joy ... tenderness" there as well. Identifying with Gaskell's uncomfortable awareness of privilege in a profoundly unequal society, Mary-Catherine Harrison hopes, like Margaret Hale in *North and South*, to help overcome such divisions, and bring about "transformative change" for others. With useful nods to recent critical theories, these critics and their co-authors have revealed what drew them, and still draws them, to particular novels. The results are inspiring. ■
Jacqueline Banerjee

The mother as myth

Challenging the values that surround pregnancy in the US

JESSIE MUNTON

BELABORED
A vindication of the rights of pregnant women
LYZ LENZ
240pp. Bold Type Books. $26.

Lt. Governor Jane Swift and Governor Paul Cellucci at a transfer of power ceremony, Boston, 2001; Swift became the first pregnant governor in US history

According to legend, on Good Friday in 1276 Countess Margaret of Henneberg gave birth to 364 children as small as mice. Half were girls and half were boys. All the boys were baptized Jan and the girls Elizabeth, and neither mother nor children survived. The uncanny nature of pregnancy and birth - the slow, sometimes violent process by which humans fission from one another - has placed them at the centre of webs of mythology and ideology. "In America, to be a mother", writes Lenz "is to become a myth. Stepping into this role, a woman is no longer a human."

Lenz was home-schooled in a large Texan Evangelical family, and married a conservative Christian who, during divorce proceedings, claimed she owed him $100,000 for the time and effort he had put into "developing and educating" her mind. In *Belabored: A vindication of the rights of pregnant women*, Lenz blends personal experience with social and economic analysis to offer an often angry, sometimes funny, critique of the ideology and practice that surround pregnancy and birth in the US, where, she argues, a particular form of motherhood is valorized: "the perfect mother is a white, middle-class, straight, cisgender, married woman". Those who do not fit the type are excluded from the limited privileges that can accompany pregnancy: the legitimation of certain needs, and a reverence for the body's ability to produce new life. Even those who do conform are let down: "It can be freeing to find power in your womb. But if that is the extent of the power we allow women, it's not really power at all". Lenz is describing a particular instance of the dilemma that patriarchy poses: if you win as a woman, you lose by the broader criteria that determine how power is distributed.

There's a certain irony to Lenz's recognition that we are "saturated with representations of overwhelmed, white, straight, cisgender, middle- and upper-class, able-bodied mothers", when she ticks many of those boxes herself and tends to generalize based on her own experience. "You will take the birthing classes ... You will want to eat Taco Bell ... You will cry in the parking lot", she writes in a peculiar incantatory prophecy, overlooking the fact that many in the US cannot afford such classes. Yet she emphasizes the extent to which the impact of pregnancy and motherhood depends on class and race. Consider the economic effects: on the one hand, childrearing has often been used to legitimate the exclusion of women from the paid labour force: "unemployed men are a crisis, but unemployed women are mothers". In the first half of the twentieth century, convention and legal restrictions on married women working confined middle-class women in particular to the home, thereby consolidating the image of homemaking as the female vocation and increasing pressure on those working outside the home to perform motherhood. But not all women can afford to succumb to such pressure. Lenz notes that Black women have consistently been represented at higher levels in the labour force than their white counterparts, and consequently suffer disproportionately from the lack of paid parental leave in the US: one in four mothers return to work within two months of giving birth, and one in ten after four weeks.

That is one factor that contributes to higher maternal mortality rates for Black women in the US: the risk of death during or after childbirth is three times that of white women, for reasons that include unequal access to medical treatment and systemic racism in the medical establishment. Racism in obstetric care has long roots. Marion Sims, the "father of gynaecology", developed many of the tools and techniques on which modern obstetrics is based through experimentation on enslaved Black women (without anaesthesia), and, at various points, Black, Hispanic and Native American women have been forcibly sterilized, often without their knowledge. White women were often the most immediate beneficiaries of increased obstetric knowledge.

The juxtaposition of these systemic problems with Lenz's personal experience - she tells us, for example, that after giving birth her lower half was "like a Vegas hotel room after it had been trashed by a B-list rock band" - is sometimes jarring. She herself points to the need for a perspective that abandons the viewfinder of the white vagina. *Belabored*, then, is not a particularly novel proposition. But as Adrienne Rich wrote in 1986, in an introduction to a reissue of her book *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as experience and institution*, "some ideas are not really new but keep having to be affirmed from the ground up, over and over. One of these is the apparently simple idea that women are as intrinsically human as men". ■

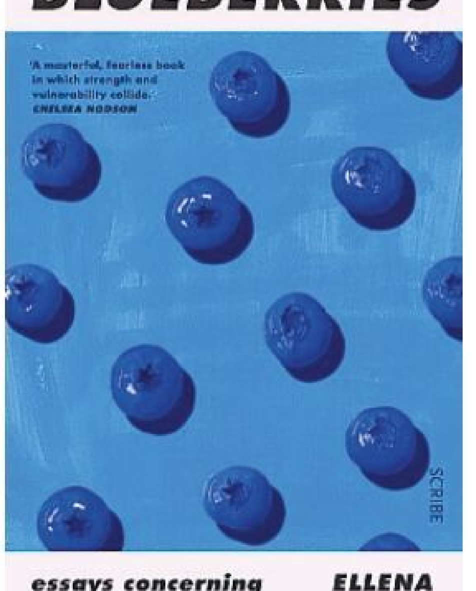
Jessie Munton is a lecturer in philosophy at the University of Cambridge

Flesh and remembering

The experience of revisiting an assault

NATASHA RANDALL

BLUEBERRIES
Essays concerning understanding
ELLENA SAVAGE
256pp. Text. Paperback, £9.99.



When Ellena Savage returned to Portugal in 2017 to revisit an assault she had survived nearly a decade earlier, she felt unsettled, anticipating that her investigation would disrupt the fabric of her very self. Her memory of the incident was relatively intact, it was "an encounter during which my flesh remembered the possibility of a violent death". She recalls two young men conspiring to rape her, and nearly succeeding, thwarted only by her pleading, thrashing and agreeing to other brutal acts, ending finally with a lucky escape. Her memory is flawed, though, and she finds that she has switched the names of her assailants: the crueller of the two wasn't called Salvator. Salvator was the one who couldn't go through with it, who burst into tears and helped her to flee. Delving into old files of police paperwork, reading the official account, she temporarily reverts to the third person: "She doesn't want to know the words she gave that tourist police officer, so revealing will they be of what essence she's made".

Blueberries, a collection of essays, begins with this study of flesh and remembering, and returns again and again to the notion of the self across time. Who was she then, and what has been brought into her current self? She writes about anchoring memories "to signposts that suggest linear time" but knows this approach is imperfect, that there is "a fiction fixed to the linear self". Memory is not marked on a calendar or in police reports but is instead a constantly re-played series of remembrances, or "re-remembrances". That the self exists in narrative form lies at the centre of *Blueberries*, as Savage explores the sites of identity – trauma, gender, class, religion, the body – in clear, rhythmic prose.

When the detective asks Savage why she wants to see the archived documents of her assault, Savage explains that she never learnt of the judgments brought against the two nineteen-year-olds. Would it matter to know the outcome, though? Or was she, herself, the outcome? She is also, however, seeking "to attach to memory some order, an architecture" because it "helps to assuage the sense that one has slipped into a warm pond, only to turn around and find oneself in treacherous waters, far from land". In an essay entitled "The Museum of Rape", in the middle of the collection, she returns to the idea, considering how the time-bound trauma of physical violation might be "contained within a building, a mission statement, a human mind".

Savage ruminates on other dichotomies of the inner and outer realms, and not only the breaches between. "Houses" is an episodic and poetic journey through the twenty-two houses in which Savage has lived - vignettes describe the quality of home she felt in each. Some offered refuge, others were deeply uncomfortable. There were family homes and squats, and as she remembers, she conjures the version of herself that lived there. "In the eighteenth house," she writes, "I learned to discipline space."

Blueberries is a book of reflections, in the sense that Savage appears to us reflected in the events and objects she describes. It is not a memoir. She is writing about the self, or selves, and how they are contained, whether in space or time or the trappings of culture. And she ends by gradually writing herself out of view, questioning her motives for writing at all: was it "to let the pollen fertilise" or "to insist on the structure of her world"? In the last few pages she expunges herself from the narrative, exposing the scaffolding of her project, and leaves us to ponder the untold: the self that is yet to be, "the she of what next: action". ■

Natasha Randall is a writer and literary translator. Her novel, Love Orange, *was published earlier this year*

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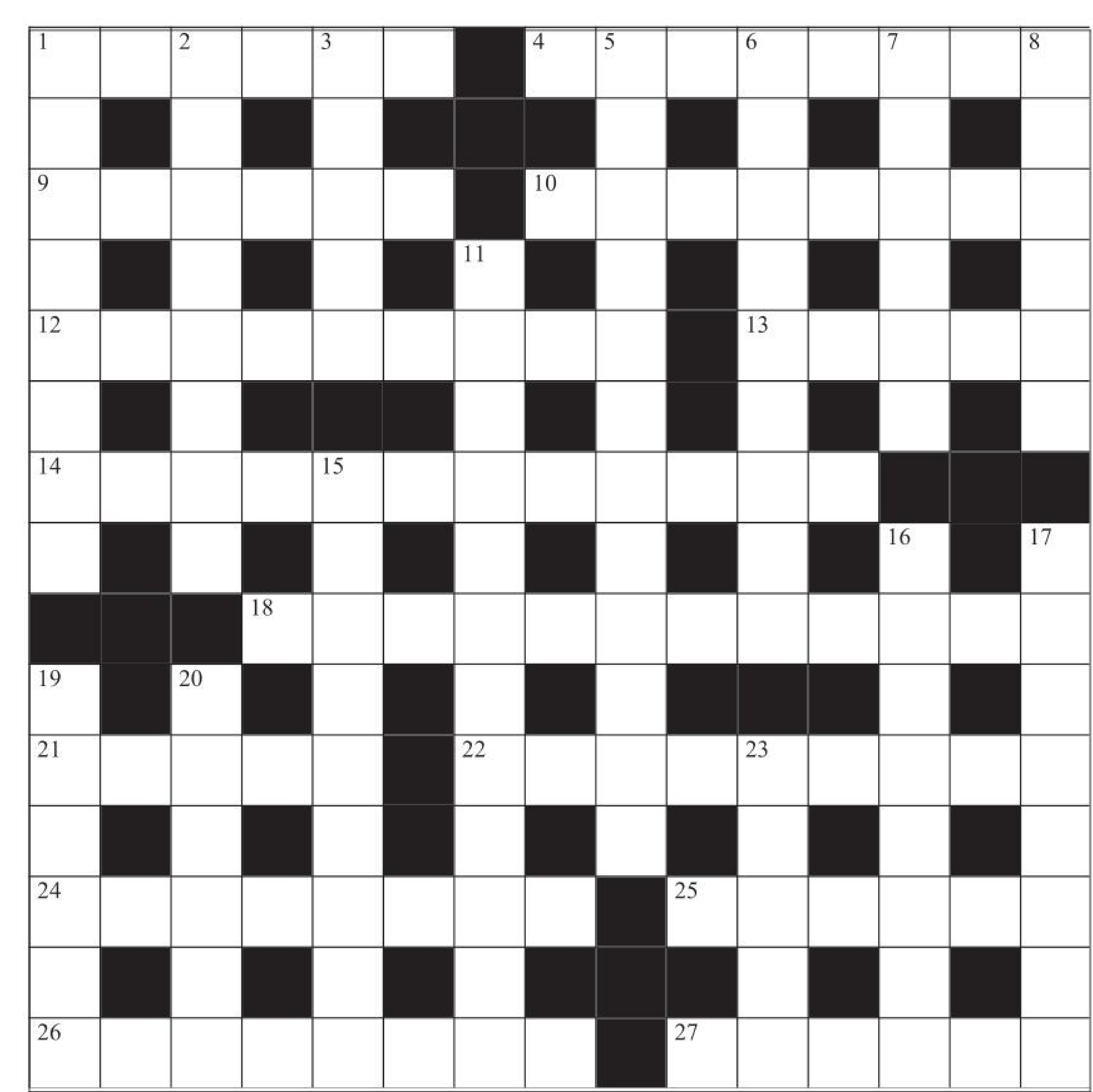
In next week's TLS

CAL REVELY-CALDER

Saving Samuel Beckett from the critics

TLS CROSSWORD 1362 BY MYRTILUS



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SOLUTION TO CROSSWORD 1358

The winner of Crossword 1358 is Dr Stephen Wells, of Bath

The sender of the first correct solution opened on February 26, 2021, will receive a cash prize of £40. Entries should be addressed to TLS Crossword 1362, 1 London Bridge Street, London SE1 9GF

What English!

Do people care about books and book-learning? We can never be entirely sure. A tweedy friend of ours, passing through Los Angeles International Airport, once had a customs officer check his papers and clock the visa that spoke of an academic affiliation. "Where'd it get you", the officer smiled, "all that book-learnin'?" Our friend tells us that this was a joke.

Others are not joking, however, when they question book-learning's value. The Welsh government seems not to be smiling – to take one current example of book-scepticism – when considering the credentials of its own nation's book-learnin'.

The National Library of Wales was once the object of much praise in the *TLS*. Writing in 1953, the Welsh man of letters Iolo Aneurin Williams hailed the NLW, founded in 1907, as a "shrine and instrument of Welsh culture and learning". Even then, though, the NLW had money troubles, and was campaigning to raise £30,000 to cover an ongoing building programme, with the Treasury declining to cover the shortfall.

Seventy years, on, the NLW is enduring more serious troubles. An official review published last spring noted that its income had drastically decreased over the previous decade, by 40 per cent in real terms; "elements of the Library's work appear to be completely unchanged despite changes in user behaviour". In the same period, the NLW suffered a fire, an employment tribunal and the resignation of the Librarian.

As a legal deposit library (of which there are only six in Britain and Ireland), holding 6 million books and newspapers, not to mention 40,000 manuscripts and almost a million photographs, the NLW faces the perennial challenge of being a shrine that is also an instrument. It has to be accessible (get those visitor numbers up) while also protecting fragile artefacts that don't love being accessed (get those visitor numbers down again). It was all very well for I. A. Williams to applaud the decision to set up headquarters in Aberystwyth; others argue that the country's centre of cultural gravity lies to the south.

Wales has "never been a rich country", Andrew Green wrote last month in *Nation.Cymru*; without the NLW, it would be "infinitely poorer". A petition calling on the Welsh government to give this mighty treasury "fair funding" stands, at the time of writing, at 13,000 signatures. It may be found at https://petitions.senedd.wales/petitions/244641.

The University of Leicester, meanwhile, is undergoing its own book-sceptical attempt at a "restructuring". The news emerged last month that Leicester's high-ups want its English department – the home of several *TLS* reviewers over the years – to switch to a "'decolonised' curriculum". Chaucer and *Beowulf*, spat the *Daily Telegraph*, were to be replaced with "modules on race and sexuality". Why, the threat to canonical decency even extends to Marlowe, Donne and "texts like [*sic*] John Milton's *Paradise Lost*". "Welcome to the University of WOKE!", croaked the *Daily Mail*. Perhaps the rumours about Milton's regicidal tendencies haven't reached them yet.

The truth is less woke than broke. "This is about people's jobs", the proverbial well-placed source tells us, "not about Chaucer." The "threatened redundancies have nothing to do with so-called 'culture wars', and everything to do with saving money in the short term". The university is trying to find "soft targets"; "decolonising the curriculum" is a "narrative imposed on a particular financial strategy pursued by management", for whom cutting jobs is "the only answer".

Leicester's teaching union passed a vote of no confidence in the university's vice-chancellor last week. Maybe Professor Nishan Canagarajah (annual salary: £250,000) could think of some other way in which his institution could save money.

How identity politics failed one particular identity

'Fast, witty and occasionally furious ... David Baddiel has pulled one of today's most contentious blind-spots into focus and laid out an inarguable and shameful truth'
Caitlin Moran

'This is a brave and necessary book'
Jonathan Safran Foer

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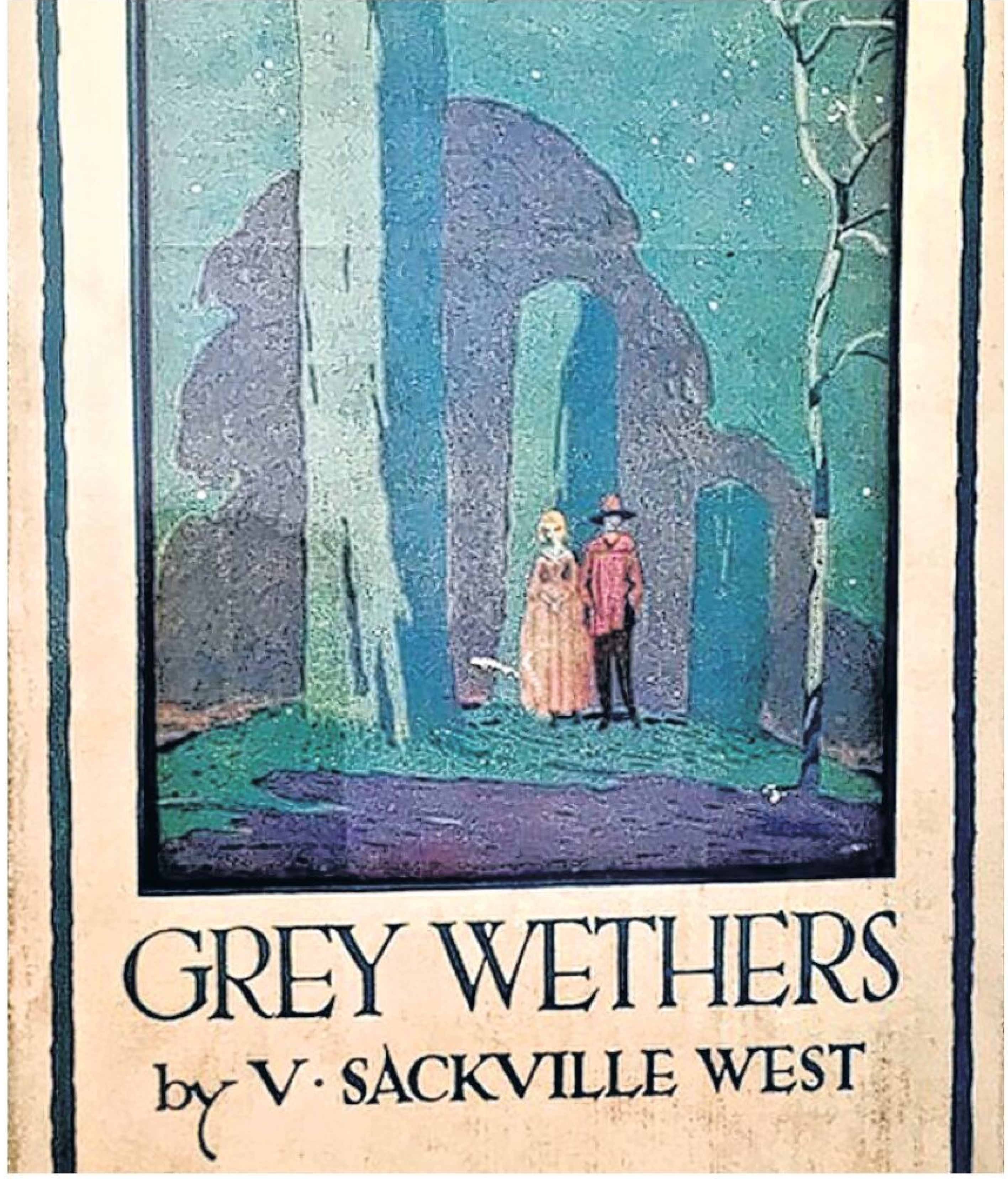

From Massachusetts comes the latest monthly list of items offered for sale by Jon S. Richardson Rare Books. Long a specialist in Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Group, Mr Richardson has some familiar names and titles in his February list. Here, for instance, are the first American editions of *Jacob's Room* ($195; "naturally without ultra rare jacket") and *The Waves* ($850; "scarce in this condition", including the jacket by Vanessa Bell). Oddities include the magazine *Service in Life and Work*, in which Harold Nicolson admits that "The English people, with all their superb qualities, are deficient in intellectual courage. They wince away from unpleasant thoughts" ($110; "a very obscure appearance").

Easily the dearest item here, but not the oddest, is a copy of Vita Sackville-West's novel *Grey Wethers*, pictured above. It was published in 1923 – the same year, that is, as the better-known *Challenge*. Both books may be read as reflections of Sackville-West's affair with Violet Trefusis; *Challenge* had begun as a lovers' collaboration, and was banned in the UK, until 1974.

In *Challenge*, Sackville-West calls her main male character Julian, after her own cross-dressing persona. In *Grey Wethers*, she more conventionally "creates a heroine in her own image, torn between conventional love and unacceptable love". At least one reader, Lord Curzon, claimed to be impressed. "Such power!", Curzon wrote of the novel, to the author's husband Nicolson. "Not a pleasant book of course! But what English!"

For the collector who has graduated from *Orlando* (in which the protagonist stands for Sackville-West and the Russian princess Sasha for Trefusis) to *Challenge*, and even to Trefusis's *Broderie anglaise* (in which Woolf is caricatured as Alexa, and Sackville-West switches gender once more, to become the "fatally divided" Lord Shorne), perhaps *Grey Wethers* is not to be omitted. The rare pleasure of making good that omission with this fine copy, "most handsome jacket" and all, will set you back $3,850.

Unfortunately, that jacket suffers from a "small tear at artist's name". The painting above could be the work of a certain John Gravetz – but any advance on that bare attribution, along with related enquiries or requests to be added to Mr Richardson's mailing list, should be sent to: Yorkharborbooks@aol.com.

After twenty-seven years as editor of the *London Review of Books* – the not-so-book-sceptical paper she co-founded in 1979 – Mary-Kay Wilmers is taking a step back into the role of consulting editor. "The succession", Wilmers has declared, "has been long in the planning." Her successors are Jean McNicol and Alice Spawls, both of whom are current members of the *LRB*'s staff. "We've never wanted to work anywhere else, and indeed neither of us ever has."

An orderly succession is also under way at the arts and literature magazine *The White Review* (founded in 2011, the year that Spawls joined the *LRB* as an editorial intern). Francesca Wade is to step down as editor; Rosanna Mclaughlin, Izabella Scott and Skye Arundhati Thomas are to succeed her; and Jennifer Hodgson is appointed editor-at-large.

M. C.

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