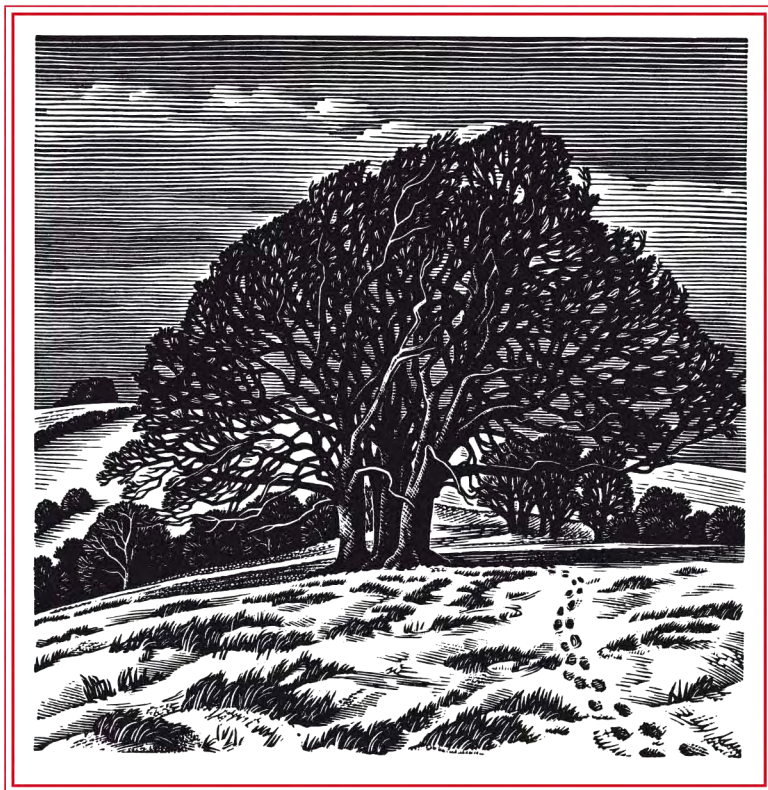


THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed



NO. 28 WINTER 2010

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

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'Happy Ever After'



NO.28 WINTER 2010

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Howard Phipps is a painter and printmaker with a special interest in wood-engraving, a medium in which he is now acknowledged as a leading exponent; the British Museum acquired twelve of his engravings for its collection in 2009. For further information he can be contacted on 01722 718294, and more of his work can be seen at the Rowley Gallery, 15 Kensington Church Street, London W8, and on their website: www.rowleygallery.co.uk.

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

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THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY



'Snowstorm' by Ian Stephens

Our bookshop can obtain any of the books mentioned in this issue.
Slightly Foxed on Gloucester Road, 123 Gloucester Road,
London SW7 4TE, email: enquiries@foxedbooks.com, tel: 020 7370 3503.

From the Editors

Predictably perhaps, given the season, it's all go here at *Slightly Foxed*, what with dispatching the new book bags (for which there's been a gratifying demand – hurry while stocks last!), taking orders and sending off copies of the quarterly to new subscribers. Then, of course, there's fulfilling requests for Slightly Foxed Editions, forwarding orders for slipcases (also very popular at this time of year), chatting on the phone to those of you who ring us with enquiries and suggestions (always welcome), not to mention all the stuffing and franking of envelopes that goes with a small business like ours.

We say 'a small business', which of course it is, but in the past months we do seem to have suddenly grown. As well as invaluable part-timers and a succession of helpful work experience people, we have a new addition to the full-time staff – Richard, who's joined us from university and spends part of the week helping here in various ways and part of the week serving in the shop. He's done sterling work on the *Slightly Foxed Catalogue*, which we hope has reached you all by now and is providing ideas for some additional winter reading and possible Christmas presents. Tony and the bookshop staff are standing by for any orders you may have.

Another development is the revival this year of the *Christmas Fox* – in a larger, more readable format. Those of you who've been with us from early on may remember the first two in this series – little paperbound pieces of original writing which (at £5) stand beautifully on their own as small presents or elegant substitutes for a card. We gave ourselves a break in order to establish the Slightly Foxed Editions, but this year our regular contributor and award-winning

short-story writer Linda Leatherbarrow came up with a story we found irresistible. *Between the Lines* features two rather solitary people, a cat and a printing press – we loved it and think you will too.

We're also especially pleased with the latest of the Slightly Foxed Editions, the author-illustrator Edward Ardizzone's memoir of his Edwardian childhood, *The Young Ardizzone* (see p. 14). Written with the mixture of gentle humour and sharp observation that characterizes his drawings, and illustrated on almost every page, it tells the story of a somewhat peripatetic childhood spent, with his brother and sister, in the care of their much-loved but irascible grandmother while his parents were mainly absent in the Far East, where his father was a telegraph engineer. A must for fans of Ardizzone, young and old, and an excellent introduction for those who haven't yet discovered him.



David Eccles

And finally, by popular request, another literary Christmas crossword. You'll find it tucked into this issue. Entries should reach us no later than 14 January, and the first correct one to be drawn out of a hat will receive a year's free subscription.

So put your feet up, charge your glass with something cheering and escape, for a moment, troubling thoughts of government cuts, global warming, the challenge of the e-book and other similar worries. As always, we do thank you for your loyalty and send you our very best wishes for the coming year.

GAIL PIRKIS
HAZEL WOOD

Happy Ever After

DAISY HAY

On 30 May 1919, the *Athenaeum* published a review of a new novel. The reviewer was Katherine Mansfield; the novelist was a 39-year-old secretary called Daisy Ashford. The novel was *The Young Visitors*, summarized by Mansfield thus: ‘This is the story of Mr Salteena’s plan to become a real gentleman . . . of his unrequited love for the fair and flighty Ethel Monticue, of Bernard Clark’s dashing and successful wooing of Ethel, together with some very rich, costly pictures of High Society, a levie at Buckingham Palace, a description of the Compartments at the Crystale Palace occupied by Earls and Dukes, and a very surprising account of the goings on at the Gaierty Hotel.’

As Ashford aficionados will know, this quotation is not symptomatic of eccentric proofreading. *The Young Visitors* was published in 1919 but written in 1890, when its author was 9. It appeared with a Preface by J. M. Barrie and with the manuscript’s many spelling mistakes faithfully reproduced. Within two years it had sold 230,000 copies, given rise to a stage play, and caused a rumpus in literary London. It has never been out of print since. This is an exceptional record for a slight work. Why was *The Young Visitors* so popular and why does it endure?

Daisy Ashford, *The Young Visitors, or Mr Salteena’s Plan* (1919) · Illus. Posy Simmonds · Chatto & Windus · Hb · 84pp · £9.99 · ISBN 9780701127251

Quotations from the letters of J. M. Barrie are taken from R. M. Malcolmson, *Daisy Ashford: Her Life* (Chatto & Windus, 1984). Margaret Steel’s introduction to her mother’s work is published in Daisy Ashford, *The Hangman’s Daughter and Other Stories* (Oxford University Press, 1983).

Daisy Ashford wrote *The Young Visitors* over a twelve-day period, in pencil, in a tuppenny red-covered exercise book. It was not her first work, but it was the first she wrote rather than dictated to her parents, and it was one of her most sustained pieces of writing. As the *Athenaeum* review indicates, it tells the story of Mr Salteena and Ethel Monticue, whose lives are changed forever when they are invited to visit Lord Bernard Clark, 'a tall man of 29 . . . rather bent in the middle with very nice long legs fairish hair and blue eyes'. Bernard is a recluse who lives alone at his family seat of Rickamere Hall, with only several footmen and his impossibly grand butler Minnit in attendance. He has 'somber tastes' and is 'rather pious' but neither taste nor piety prevent him from falling for the fascinating Ethel, who snares potential suitors with a devastating combination of rouge, brightly coloured dresses and a 'very superier run'.



Posy Simmonds

A battle ensues between Bernard and Mr Salteena, who is also in love with Ethel. In order to gain the upper hand Mr Salteena takes himself off to the Crystal Palace, home of several earls and dukes, which houses a finishing school for aspiring gentlemen in its 'Lower Range'. Despite being 'not quite the right side of the blanket' Mr Salteena throws himself into the task of self-improvement, ably assisted by Bernard's friend the Earl of Clincham.

It's not really giving too much away, however, to reveal that Mr Salteena's efforts are in vain. Bernard seizes the opportunity offered by his rival's absence to whisk Ethel up to town for a week's gaiety, and love flourishes. Mr Salteena does propose but is refused and told, kindly but firmly, to 'be a man'. Having dispensed with one suitor, Ethel flits off to Windsor with Bernard, although not before providing my favourite line in the novel: 'Oh Hurrah shouted Ethel I shall soon be ready as I had my bath last night so wont wash very much now.'

It is in Windsor that *The Young Visitors* reaches its romantic climax, in a proposal so sublime I quote it in its entirety here:

Bernard placed one arm tightly round her. When will you marry me Ethel he uttered you must be my wife it has come to that I love you so intensely that if you say no I shall perforce dash my body to the brink of yon muddy river he panted wildly.

Oh dont do that implored Ethel breathing rather hard.
Then say you love me he cried.

Oh Bernard she sighed fervently I certainly love you madly you are to me like a Heathen god she cried looking at his manly form and handsome flashing face I will indeed marry you.

How soon gasped Bernard gazing at her intently.

As soon as possible said Ethel gently closing her eyes.

My Darling whispered Bernard and he seized her in his arms we will be marrid next week.

Oh Bernard muttered Ethel this is so sudden.

No no cried Bernard and taking the bull by both horns he kissed her violently on her dainty face. My bride to be he muttered several times.

Ethel trembled with joy as she heard the mistick words.

Oh Bernard she said little did I ever dream of such as this and she suddenly fainted into his out stretched arms.

Oh I say gasped Bernard and laying the dainty burden on the grass he dashed to the waters edge and got a cup full of the fragrant river to pour on his true loves pallid brow.

After this stirring event Bernard and Ethel get married in Westminster Abbey and live happily ever after, although poor Mr Salteena weeps copiously throughout their wedding. Ashford marries him off to a red-faced serving-maid from Buckingham Palace and gives him ten children (Bernard and Ethel have seven, one of whom makes his appearance on their honeymoon), before closing the door on her world with a suitably firm final flourish: ‘So now my readers we will say farewell to the characters in this book. The End. by Daisy Ashford.’

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Daisy Ashford was no ordinary child scribe. *The Young Visitors* is funny, moving, acutely observed and brilliantly plotted, shifting between the parallel stories of Mr Salteena's education and Bernard and Ethel's romance with breathtaking style and rapidity. Some of its humour is entirely deliberate: Ashford has a keen eye for the ridiculous, deployed to devastating effect as she describes Mr Salteena 'getting rather flustered with his forks', and in her account of the one-upmanship engaged in by Mr Salteena and Ethel when they meet again in London. Some of it is inadvertent, as is evident in the description of Mr Salteena sitting down to 'eat the egg which Ethel had so kindly laid for him'. Much of it comes, however, when Ashford's description of a grown-up world mingles with nursery lore. Mr Salteena 'gets down' from his breakfast and forswears an egg before travelling 'in case he should be sick on the journey'. The altar boys at Ethel and Bernard's wedding are very 'clean', as are the underclothes Bernard dons to go away in. And the diplomats gathered at Buckingham Palace eat ices while they talk about affairs of state.

At such moments, it's easy to say whence *The Young Visitors* derives its inspiration. At others, it's much trickier, although Ashford's

background does offer some clues. She was the eldest daughter of William and Emma Ashford, well-to-do Catholics who encouraged both Ashford and her younger sisters to write. Central to the genesis of *The Young Visitors*, however, was the fact that Emma Ashford had a complicated past. As a young woman she eloped with an army officer with whom she had two daughters and three sons. She converted to Catholicism after her first husband's death and was subsequently introduced to William Ashford by the local priest. Daisy grew up, therefore, in a household less conventional than those of her peers. Her adult step-sisters were at home, squabbling over beaux and rouge, and her step-brothers and their friends provided an appreciative audience for her literary efforts. It seems likely that the discovery that she could render such elegantly Bernard Clark-ish young men helpless with laughter acted as a powerful stimulant to her writing, although she did later recall being very put out when they roared through readings of her tragedies.

By the time Daisy and her younger sisters were born both parents had reached middle age, and both had been buffeted by fortune. Perhaps as a result, they were relaxed, unorthodox parents, who were actively involved in the upbringing and education of their daughters. Notably, they allowed all their children free run of the library, and Katherine Mansfield conjectured that Bernard and Ethel's story owed something to the popular novels of Maria Ramé, more commonly known as Ouida. Daisy's daughter, however, wrote that her mother was more influenced by things she saw than things she read, a view supported by the fact that she grew up in a house full of young men and women. Mansfield agreed that *The Young Visitors* was a triumph of perception as well as a work of remarkable literary synthesis. 'Signs are not wanting', she observed in her review, 'that she enjoyed exceptional opportunities for looking through keyholes, peeping through half-open doors, gazing over the banisters at the group in the hall below, and sitting, squeezed and silent, between the grown-ups when they took the air in the barouche.'

This partial perspective is one of the things that make the novel endure, for its magic derives not just from its humour but from the mirror it holds up to adult behaviour. In Ashford's world rouge and velvet dresses and silver paper stars are weapons in a grown-up battle to become 'less mere' – a battle as universal as it is fruitless. From her position peering through the banisters Ashford recognizes the inherent hilarity of much grown-up aspiration, but she is always magnanimous towards those she mocks and never writes about her characters with anything other than affection. *The Young Visitors* is ultimately about the pursuit of happiness, and in the end Ashford is unable to leave even Mr Salteena unhappy.



Posy Simmonds

The Young Visitors was published when Ashford discovered the manuscript after the death of her mother and sent it to a friend, who was recuperating from a bad bout of flu and was in need of cheering up. Her friend sent it in turn to Frank Swinnerton, an editor at Chatto & Windus. Swinnerton was so entranced he decided to publish it, and he prevailed upon J. M. Barrie to provide a preface. Barrie thought the novel a 'scrumptious affair . . . fit to make the right people jump for joy', but his involvement landed him in trouble. Several early readers refused to believe it was the work of a child and accused Barrie of perpetrating an elaborate hoax. Debate on the subject raged in newspaper correspondence columns. 'We have known many children as intimately as it is ever possible to know them at all, and some of them have been horrid,' ran one letter. 'But we have never known a child horrid enough to write *The Young Visitors*. As the playful fantasy of an elder, it is charming. As the work of a child, it would be

repulsive and contrary to all we have learned to like and admire in our young friends. Children are never facetious; they do not understand snobbery.’

Chatto & Windus responded by producing the manuscript of *The Young Visitors* and by publishing further juvenile works by both Ashford and her sister, which gave the novel a context and put its authorship beyond doubt. Barrie was left feeling rather sore about having his word doubted, and both he and Ashford had to deal with a deluge of manuscripts that flowed in from parents determined that their offspring should be the next Daisy.

Ashford, meanwhile, quite deliberately faded from view. She married, had four children, and never attempted to publish more than the occasional article again. During the war she wrote an autobiography but she later burnt the only copy during a fit of spring cleaning. She made her final public appearance in 1968, as she was helped to her feet to receive applause at the end of a musical version of *The Young Visitors*, and died in 1972. ‘I wonder’, wrote her daughter in 1983, ‘if she had continued to write, she would as she became more proficient have relegated her earlier stories to the waste-paper basket, so depriving the world of so much fun. I am glad that she stopped when she did.’

I am glad that she stopped when she did too, for a world without *The Young Visitors* would be a dreary world indeed. So now my readers we will say farewell to the characters in this book. The End. by Daisy Hay.

DAISY HAY is the author of *Young Romantics: The Shelleys, Byron and Other Tangled Lives*. She is very proud to share a name with such a repulsive, contrary and facetious child as Daisy Ashford.

Something Always Turned Up

HUON MALLALIEU

I feel I have known Edward Ardizzone since being absorbed by his work in childhood. Later, but when I was still quite young as a writer, I was approached to produce a biography of him. The commission came to nothing, to my great regret, and I never met him. By the time I married into his extended family, he was dead.

Ardizzone's world, as he presents it, is a most agreeable place, well-mannered and ultimately safe, even when dangerous things are happening in it. His pubs and studios and cluttered Edwardian interiors are welcoming places; though tarts may fight in the street, as he observed when a small boy, and brawl in the pubs he frequented as a young man, no lasting damage is done, but they are recorded. In his books lone heroes come through the worst of storms, and villains are eventually defeated. His line is often reminiscent of Rowlandson's draughtsmanship, but it is genial rather than acid, and more often than not his figures – notably his own – are rounded rather than fiercely distorted. However, he, like his young heroes and heroines, had a nonchalant toughness beneath his amiable exterior. His war work has especial power because real horrors are often presented in pleasing settings. The aftermath of the landmine in the Sicilian olive grove comes to mind.

Ted Ardizzone had a remarkable capacity for doing two things at once, and not just any two things, but a pairing that would be quite impossible for almost anyone else. His daughter, Christianna Clemence, records how she would see him 'sitting in a shady corner of some delectable garden, busily drawing a group of old ladies he had noticed in the pub that morning, while the girls playing in the

lake beside him were being precisely observed and stored up for later. It was life interpreted and distilled for translation from three dimensions into two. His magnificent visual memory gave him the time to sort out the bits which really mattered.'

It is the working of that magnificent memory – which was not only visual – that makes his memoir of childhood and youth, *The Young Ardizzone*, such an abiding pleasure. The book should share a shelf with two other autobiographical charmers by contemporaries of his, one considerably older, the other six years younger. Both *Drawn from Memory* by his fellow illustrator E. H. Shepard and John Betjeman's *Summoned by Bells* demonstrate similarly clear retention of early experience, and because of this sympathy Ardizzone was the perfect illustrator for *A Ring of Bells*, the children's version of Betjeman's poetic account of growing up. These illustrations were among the Ardizzones that I knew best, since the Percival 'Mandeville' who features in the tale with improbable heroism, was my uncle.

Ardizzone and Betjeman shared more than retentive memories. Both families mixed powerful English or Scottish strands with foreign elements and backgrounds in trade (or on the edge of what Ardizzone more precisely calls 'the professional class of the time'), giving them a certain social ambivalence. This was exploited with relish by Betjeman in his poems, which anatomize the middle classes so exactly, and also by Ardizzone in his own books, in the creation of so many characters who are in some way outsiders. Both poet and artist had fathers who were – or who were deemed by them to be – unsympathetic to the arts. Betjeman's father seemed distant, and Ardizzone had parents who were often actually absent, particularly his father.

The schooldays of the two also ran on parallel lines. Both attracted the attentions of bullies from time to time, and neither was a natural schoolboy, although for both there were happy periods as well. 'I always hated crowded playrooms and passages, the smell of hot water pipes, chilblains and the complete lack of privacy,' wrote Ardizzone.

On the other hand, 'though never very happy, I was rarely actively unhappy,' and he records several distinctly happy term-time recollections, often to do with food or smells, such as picking mushrooms and consuming new-baked bread.

It testifies to the honesty of Ardizzone's memories that he tells us only of his own experience of the Headmaster of Clayesmore School, Alexander Devine – a 'great man though an eccentric' – and nothing of 'Lex's' wider career. As well as founding the school, Lex was a social and educational reformer, and in 1912–13 he covered the Second Balkan War as special correspondent for the liberal *Daily Chronicle*. This experience led him to champion the romantic but doomed cause of Montenegrin independence after the First World War. Earlier in his journalistic days he had written on stabbings among Manchester youth gangs, and on the Olympics.

Memoirs such as this have a particular resonance for the now middle-aged. The childhood world described may have little in common with that of the current generation, but it is that of our parents, or perhaps grandparents, and we know it well at one remove through them. Indeed aspects of that Edwardian and inter-war period are not entirely divorced from what we ourselves experienced, or at least think we remember, in the 1950s and '60s. This is an England in which the sun almost always shone. There are just two winter illustrations in *The Young Ardizzone*, and one of those is picturesquely abroad in Bruges. Summer holidays stretched for ever, and during them the countryside and all in it was ours. Bicycling to fish in distant streams; potting one's sister with an air rifle; attempting to spit down the funnels of passing railway engines from bridges; Sharps creamy toffee; the mingled excitement and



embarrassment of smart dances. Even in cities there was much more freedom for children.

There are many great children's books, and many great illustrators of them, but comparatively few of which the author is also the artist. Two of the outstanding names among those few are Beatrix Potter and Edward Ardizzone. In their work words and images cannot really be separated. Remember how the filmed ballet of *The Tales of Beatrix Potter* – for all its charm – was diminished by presenting her vision without her voice.

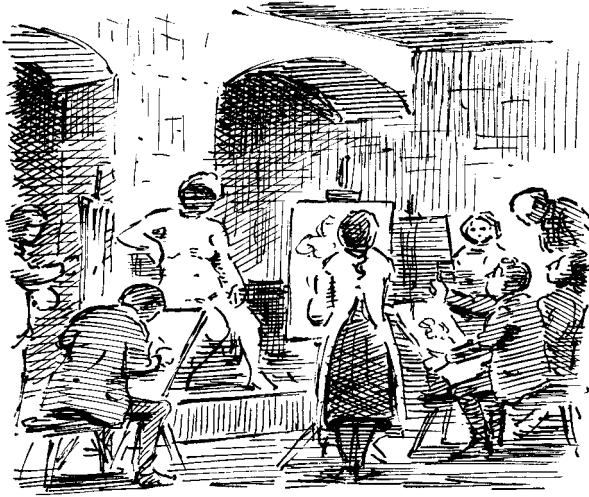
Of course *The Young Ardizzone* is not a children's book, rather a book about childhood intended for adults, but here, as in the *Lucy* and *Little Tim* series, the integration of words and images is complete. As a work of art the text alone, admirable as it is, would not be in the same league. Anyone experiencing it as an audio-book would miss a great deal.

In one respect this memoir goes beyond either Shepard, who deals only with his childhood in *Drawn from Memory*, or Betjeman, who concludes *Summoned by Bells* with his less than glorious university career. Ardizzone, who failed to get into the army in 1918 because of a misdiagnosed aortic murmur, went virtually straight from school into employment. So he continues his story for a number of years more, until, to his father's dismay, he finally becomes an artist.

The artistic strain in the family came not from the Ardizzones but through Ted's mother, who was descended from Gainsborough's friend, the painter John Joshua Kirby. She was herself a talented watercolourist and needlewoman, and she also read to her children, especially Dickens, which they adored 'and adored most of all the sentimental bits. I doubt if any of us, my mother included, were quite dry-eyed at the death of little Paul Dombey.' Lex Devine also read aloud to his junior pupils at Clayesmore, and these pleasurable experiences undoubtedly helped to form the future creator of children's books.

Ted was supposed to follow his father as a telegraph engineer, and

to that end worked at various clerking jobs. However he was always drawing, and after evening classes at the Westminster School of Art under Walter Bayes and Bernard Meninsky, he took the plunge in 1926. Meninsky encouraged the natural coupling of art and beer: 'The real teaching came after class when we would retire to the local pub. Over a half pint of beer Meninsky would talk. He talked of the Renaissance draughtsmen and of Signorelli in particular. He made us aware of the beauties of Poussin and led us up to Cézanne who was to become our God.'



It was his father who, inadvertently, rescued him from clerking and set him on the path to success and fame. Auguste Ardizzone had risen high in the Eastern Extension Telegraph Co., and in 1926 he was awarded a number of bonuses. He gave Ted and his two sisters £500 apiece, intending that they should invest it. Instead, Ted chucked in the last of the clerking jobs – despite having achieved a place in his father's company at last – declared his intention to become a full-time self-employed artist, and departed for Venice with his sister Betty.

The last few pages of *The Young Ardizzone* are a breathless epilogue

– ‘by now I was married and good fortune smiled on me’ – but they tell us the secret of his appeal:

In bad times we were much helped by incurable optimism. We were young Micawbers. If cheques bounced, pictures did not sell nor illustrations come to hand we comforted ourselves with the thought that something was bound to turn up. My poor father considered this a foolishness and would finger his cheque-book, fearing a call upon his limited resources. The call never came; something always turned up. I wish he was alive today to know that his fears were groundless.

And indeed to read his son’s lovely book.

HUON MALLALIEU is a generally sedentary writer on art and antiques – except for moments of uncharacteristic activity, such as a 12-day walk from York to Battle in the footsteps of Harold’s army, resulting in his *1066 and Rather More: A Walk through History*.



The Child on the Beach

SUE GEE

On a summer afternoon fifteen years ago, I went to hear Jane Gardam at the South Bank Centre. She does not often appear in public, indeed she has been withering in her fiction about the idea of an author meeting her readers. 'It must be like discussing your marriage with strangers,' thinks Betty in *Old Filth* (2004), and there is a devastating portrait of the perils of authorship in *The Queen of the Tambourine* (1991).

However, there she was, sharing the platform with Georgina Hammick. The room was packed, the readings brilliant, the audience perhaps less so. What, demanded one chap rather testily, was the meaning of the story she had just read? In it, an elderly couple driving down Devon lanes turn a corner and disappear. 'Well,' said Gardam with bemused patience, 'I suppose it's about death.' The sun shone through the dusty plate glass behind her, and it felt all at once like a moment from one of her own books: a clever woman in a difficult encounter; the collision of the quite unlike; death – 'the serious act of life' as Eliza Peabody puts it in *The Queen of the Tambourine* – never far away.

Jane Gardam, *God on the Rocks* (1978) · 224pp · ISBN 9780349121499; *The Queen of the Tambourine* (1991) · 240pp · ISBN 9780349102269; *Old Filth* (2004) · 272pp · ISBN 9780349118406; *The People on Privilege Hill* (2007) · 256pp · ISBN 9780349118451; and *The Man in the Wooden Hat* (2009) · 288pp · ISBN 9780349118468, are all published in paperback by Abacus at £7.99. 'Angels & Daemons: The Anatomy of a Novel' appeared in *The Agony & the Ego: The Art and Strategy of Fiction Writing Explored*, ed. Clare Boylan (1993), now out of print.

That dusty sunlight, too, made of the moment something otherworldly and surreal – like the ghosts and apprehensions which haunt so many of Jane Gardam’s short stories: the African bishop in ‘Waiting for a Stranger’ who stays the night in a North Country B&B though he has been killed in a car crash on the way there; the beloved dead dogs in ‘The Latter Days of Mr Jones’, frolicking in the snow as their old master dies of loneliness and sorrow. These come from *The People on Privilege Hill* (2007), a collection with which I spent the whole of a happy New Year’s Day in bed; but there are plenty more such shivery moments in her work.



▲ Alice Tait

Something of Jane Gardam’s blend of the solid and surreal comes from her own childhood. Brought up in north Yorkshire, a Catholic, she often explores ideas about goodness and God: from the splendid/desperate missionaries in Malaya and Hong Kong in *Old Filth* and *The Man in the Wooden Hat* (2009), her end-of-Empire novels, to the chaotic but kindly vicarage life in *The Queen of the Tambourine*. ‘I stand watching the rain and contemplating the silence of God,’ says Eliza in that remarkable *trompe-l’oeil* novel, written entirely in letters to a woman we are never certain is real or the product of a mind in disintegration, craving a confidante.

‘With me the idea for a novel has always arrived with an image,’ Gardam once wrote in an essay about *The Queen of the Tambourine*: its origins, the way it went into the dark, was reborn in an epiphanic moment, and finally found its form. ‘Angels & Daemons: The Anatomy of a Novel’ (1993) is something which every aspiring novelist should read: I have given it to students for years. Her image ‘has often been the same one, of a child walking alone on a beach . . . always full of light. The light is the seaside of my childhood and it is not surprising for the beaches of the north-east coast are famous.’

When Gardam once wandered off on those sands as a little girl, she returned to pandemonium. ‘My mother said, “You must thank God that He looked after you,” but I don’t think I did. I believe something happened to me on the beach that day, now quite buried . . . some sort of freedom . . . Something eternal.’

The image of the child on the beach is, says Gardam, often disguised in her novels, even if they begin there. In *The Queen of the Tambourine* it becomes, dramatically, a baby and a pond. But in *God on the Rocks*, a runner-up for the 1978 Booker Prize, she appears directly: as Margaret Marsh, daughter of Kenneth, the leader of the congregation of Primal Saints in a northern seaside town. Almost in spite of herself, Margaret knows much of the Bible by heart, and recites it freely, but in this coming-of-age novel, set between the wars, her questioning of the adult world leads her into terrible danger on those rocks, and it is her dreary, repressed little father who in a Christ-like act of redemption saves her life.

All the threads of this tightly plotted novel, and there are many, are drawn together in an astonishing piece of back story at the end. It’s a technique which in lesser hands could fail utterly, but Jane Gardam has said that ‘Every serious novel must in some degree and UNNOTICEABLY carry the form further. It may fail, but better to be sorry than safe.’

The fact that I did notice may be because Gardam is so much a writer’s writer: formally intriguing, her prose gloriously exact and quotable. But if ‘writer’s writer’ can imply ‘but not a reader’s’, with her this is never the case: she is vibrantly engaging, funny and touching, even the most minor character unforgettably commanding his or her space. Her descriptive writing, whether of a Burmese jungle, a dim Brussels church or a post-war London street is original and strong; she’s good on light and weather – ‘splashy rain’, ‘hectic sunlight’, ‘water from the canals flashing yellow across the walls’ – and very good on physicality: sex – good, bad or absent – babies, lost babies. In *The Queen of the Tambourine*, the miscarriage which we

eventually learn broke Eliza Peabody's heart takes place in a scene which must be one of the darkest and strangest in literature.

There's another miscarriage in *The Man in the Wooden Hat*, also central to the novel, but the woman enduring it could not be more different. Where Eliza is one of Gardam's sad, yearning, unravelling women, Betty – Elisabeth Macintosh as she is before her marriage – is young, strong, clever and independent. Her parents perished in the Japanese internment camps; now she is working in Hong Kong, where Edward Feathers – soon to become a QC, then a judge, eventually Sir Edward – has asked her to marry him.

Edward Feathers – Filth, as he is known (Failed in London, Try Hong Kong) – is *crème de la crème*. He first appeared to an adoring readership in *Old Filth*: in his eighties, tall, distinguished, elegant, bereaved. Everything about him, from his Harrods socks to his black silk umbrella, speaks of his wealth and good taste: Hong Kong made him very, very rich. 'He had been in Commercial Chambers. The construction industry. Bridges and dams.' Magisterial, every detail at his command, determined to win the Case (Gardam's capitals are always a joy), he was terrifying in court. But Betty has died, planting tulips in their Dorset garden, and without her he becomes unhinged. 'Looking back, Filth knew that beneath his apparent serenity the years after Betty's departure had been a time of mental breakdown.' The novel explores his long journey into the past, revealing at last the real old filth which blighted his childhood and impelled him to an act of desperation.

Filth is a child of Empire. The novel is dedicated 'to Raj Orphans and their parents' – those families who, as in Kipling's case, sent their children Home, away from the heat and the natives, to receive an English education. What they often endured, of course, was neglect and loneliness. 'Never leave me,' he tells Betty, when they become engaged. He is brilliant, he is much admired – but he is also deeply damaged. Nothing has truly healed that long-ago severance from love.

Striking images mark this wonderful novel. One is of his Dorset gardener, hacking off the ivy on the house after Betty's death: tearing away that which clings, like Filth's nightmare childhood, and will ultimately destroy. The other comes right at the end of the book, when he decides to return to the Malaya of his infancy. As the plane descends, 'he looked down on a fat carpet of clouds and saw something he had never seen in his life before. Two suns stood side by side in the sky. A parhelion. A formidable and ancient omen . . .' He cannot remember of what, but they surely stand for his two lives in East and West – as well as reflecting the two-way structure of the novel, which cuts continually between the present and the past.

The Man in the Wooden Hat has a largely forward momentum. Retelling the story of Filth's life from his wife's perspective, it gives a revelation of something which in the earlier novel is only hinted at: Betty's deep involvement with Filth's lifelong enemy.

Terry Veneering is married, to a Chinese wife with 'a face of perpetual ennui'. They have a son, Harry, at prep school in England. Veneering is everything Filth despises: jumped-up, brash, on the make – the other side of the colonial coin. Largely through Elisabeth – Oxford-educated, working with a missionary in the slums before her marriage – Gardam vividly delineates the teeming streets and exclusive clubs, the glitter and squalor of Hong Kong in the Fifties, as Empire begins its long decline. Almost alone among the colonial wives, Betty/Elisabeth is able to understand the true nature of British rule: its blindness as well as its gifts.

But the novel's exploration of the passage to modern life after the war is played out through her relationship with these two quite different men: the one upright, pukka to his spotless fingertips, sexually reticent, the other a parvenu who gives her a single, unforgettable night of passion. And though she grows to love Filth deeply – madly, even, in the early days of their marriage – it is children she has always hoped for, and these she will never have. Veneering's son Harry becomes a beloved surrogate son, but her future, in Hong Kong and

Dorset, is simply as a useful Englishwoman – though she does her good works so well she's awarded an OBE.

These two novels make a marvellous diptych – there's a triptych, even, when you include the little panel of 'The People on Privilege Hill', the short story where the widowed Filth and Veneering (now, ye gods, become Dorset neighbours) meet at a lunch party. (In the author's true style, the chief guest, a monk, never turns up.) They show Jane Gardam at the height of her powers, sweeping through decades of personal and political change, and through several countries, swinging round the picture to reveal the other side, in prose which is never, ever showy, but which reveals the psychological truth of every moment. Somewhere in *The Queen of the Tambourine* is a line about Coleridge working with 'the full flow of the deep, true, creative imagination'. Gardam might have been writing about herself.

SUE GEE is the daughter of an Indian Army officer, the subject of a new novel. Her short-story collection, *Last Fling*, will be published by Salt Publishing next spring.

The illustration in this article appeared on the original dust jacket of *The People on Privilege Hill*.

Essential Baggage

JOHN JULIUS NORWICH

Maurice Baring – who was my godfather – once had a dream. He crossed the Styx, and there on the other side was, as he put it, ‘a Customs House, and an official who had, inscribed in golden letters on his cap, *Chemins de fer de l’Enfer*, who said to me “Have you anything to declare?” And he handed me a printed list on which, instead of wine, spirits, tobacco, silk, lace, etc., there was printed Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Scandinavian, Chinese, Arabic and Persian, and it was explained to me that this list referred to the literary baggage I had travelled with during my life.’ *Have You Anything to Declare?* was the title he gave to the best anthology of poetry and prose I know. For the past half-century I have bought any copy I see in a second-hand bookshop to give as a present. During that time at least a dozen must have passed through my hands.

I call it an anthology; but I should make it plain that the author – or should I say compiler? – does not. ‘I am not making an anthology,’ he writes, ‘nor choosing what I think best, and arranging it in the order I think best; I am taking my notes as they come, and interrupting what is noted by what I remember, or by what the notes may suggest.’ These interruptions and asides – which take up almost as much space as the quotations themselves – are what give the book its lasting magic: we feel all the time that we are in the presence of a friend – a man of deep culture, dazzling intelligence and, above all, irresistible charm.

Maurice Baring, *Have You Anything to Declare?* (1936), is out of print.

Dramatist, novelist, poet, travel-writer and war correspondent, Baring was, moreover, a superb linguist. He may not have mastered quite all the languages on the list proffered to him by the customs man, but Greek, Latin and most of the European ones held no secrets for him; Russian he spoke like a native. And when he knew the language you could trust him to know the literature too. I doubt whether there is a single critic writing today who would be capable of throwing his literary net, as Maurice Baring did, across seven languages, not counting his native English.

But don't, I beg you, be put off. Let me quote his very first sentence: 'This book is not meant for scholars nor for the learned, but for those who, like myself, although they have only a smattering of letters, are fond of books and fond of reading.' Most of the foreign quotations are translated – often, quite brilliantly, by Baring himself – and his running commentary is lively, even chatty. What shines through every page is his own enchanting personality, and his deep, all-embracing love of literature. Let's have a quote or two: here he is talking about Racine:

What has always seemed to me one of the most poignant lines in poetry comes from *Mithridate*:

Mais la mort fuit encor [sic] sa grande âme trompée

which might be translated

But Death still shuns his great defrauded soul.

The line sums up the whole lives of many great men who have outlived their prime and experienced disappointment, disillusion and ingratitude in their old age. A good example is Herzen, the Russian socialist reformer, who lived to see his work misunderstood and 'twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools'. It might apply to Racine himself; or among younger men, that is to say among the middle-aged, to the Black Prince, pining away and sick of mortal disease at Bordeaux.

He is, I think, particularly good on Dante:

Of all the landscape painters in verse, there is none who has a more magical touch than Dante, nor any who can evoke a more spacious picture with so few strokes. For instance,

*E come li stornei ne portan l'ali,
Nel freddo tempo, a schiera larga e piena,*

And as the starlings, borne upon the wing,
Fly in large flocks in the cold winter air,

or

*Li ruscelletti che dèverdi colli
Del Casentin discendon giuso in Arno,
Faccendo i lor canali freddi e molli,*

The rills, that glitter down the grassy slopes
Of Casentino, making fresh and soft
The banks whereby they glide to Arno's stream.

Other lines (Baring writes) which are marvellous in their beauty and Homeric completeness are:

*A noi venia la creatura bella,
Bianco vestita, e nella faccia quale
Par tremolando mattutina stella.*

Then came that lovely being from afar,
Clothed in white robes, and bearing on his brow
The trembling glory of the morning star.

This last passage reminds me inescapably of those lovely lines from *Lycidas*:

And tricks his beams, and with new-spangled ore
Flames in the forehead of the morning sky.

Oddly enough, Baring doesn't mention this. On the other hand he wonders whether Shakespeare (as opposed to Milton) ever read Dante. I can't think it likely, since there is no reason to suppose that Shakespeare knew a word of Italian, and I doubt whether the *Divine Comedy* had yet been translated into English. But he refers us to the great speech in Act III of *Measure for Measure* ('Ay, but to die, and go we know not where . . .') and points out that

you could find no better description or summary of the punishments which Dante tells us of in the *Inferno* than some of those lines; it is not unreasonable to believe that when Shakespeare wrote

To be imprison'd in the viewless winds,
And blown with restless violence round about
The pendent world

he may have had in mind Dante's

La bufera infernal, che mai non resta,

and Paolo and Francesca

Together on the never-resting air.

Does anyone today read John Oliver Hobbes? And, if they have heard of her at all, do they know that she was a woman? Among the under-sixties, the answer to both questions is, I suspect, very few. 'For the moment,' Baring writes in 1936, 'her work has been forgotten, but I cannot help thinking that a time will come when some modern will have the great fun of rediscovering her. Rediscovered she is bound to be; for her work has a historical interest. It carries on the panorama of English country and county life which was begun by Miss Austen and carried on until the end of the Seventies by Anthony Trollope.' To give us a flavour of that work, he quotes a short passage from the beginning of *The Sinner's Comedy*, describing the death of the ninth Lord Middlehurst:

He did not speak again till just before he died, when he kissed his wife's hand with a singular tenderness, and called her Elizabeth. She had been christened Augusta Frederica, but then, as the doctors explained, dying men often make these mistakes.

Elsewhere in the same book we find an unforgettable pen portrait, drawn in a few deft lines:

Mrs Digby Vallence was tall and spare, with a small face, big eyes, and a large mouth. Digby was fond of saying that his wife's face was geometrically impossible. The parts were greater than the whole. She was a very amiable, intelligent woman, who played Schumann with a weak wrist, and was noted for her cooking recipes.

After three-quarters of a century, Baring's prophecy has still not come to pass; we can only hope that he may yet be proved right.

Have You Anything to Declare? is not his only anthology, though it is, I believe, his only published one. He compiled several more, which he had printed and bound and gave as presents to his friends – including, I am delighted to say, my mother. I possess hers, and have seen two or three others; and I have been struck by the fact that he never – or hardly ever – repeats himself. He had plenty of material to choose from: bedridden with Parkinson's disease for the last fifteen years of his life, he spent many hours a day with his books, and the breadth of his reading was apparently limitless. After a quotation about Xanthus, the talking horse of Achilles, he throws in a short parenthesis:

There are other talking horses in literature. In Grimm's story *The Goose Girl* there is a horse called Falada, who not only talks, but talks after its head has been cut off, and in rhyme. There is also Anstey's Talking Horse whose name was Brutus, and who was ridden disastrously by Mr Gustavus Pulvertoft.

Even more than most anthologies, here is the ideal bedside book, to be opened at random in the certainty of finding a treasure with every dip. And if I may end on a personal note, I have to say that *Have You Anything to Declare?* has been one of the most lasting influences on my life. It was thanks to it, and to it alone, that I began my first commonplace book – I am now on my eleventh – in 1958; and when in 1970 I started producing a little 24-page Christmas anthology of my own, I followed its admirable example of giving each item, even if only two or three lines long, a page to itself. I have now produced forty of those little anthologies, and the forty-first is on the way; but when my turn comes to face the infernal customs officer, I only wish that I had a tenth of the amount of baggage to declare.

JOHN JULIUS NORWICH has published three ten-year collections of his annual anthology *A Christmas Cracker*; the fourth, *The Big Bang*, was published in October.



Cheers!

GEOFF BRANDWOOD

When I began my under-age drinking in the early 1960s this rite of passage took place in pubs that were, in many respects, different from those of today. And it is not just the pubs themselves that have changed – the drinks then on offer have now, in some cases, almost vanished. My initiation, as it turned out, took place during a pivotal decade in the history of the pub.

Drinking establishments – taverns, inns, alehouses, bars – have, thankfully, been around for a very long time. The Greeks and the Romans relaxed in them, and they were liberally sprinkled throughout our medieval towns and cities. They became part of the fabric of our society and, as such, were incorporated as crucial backdrops in many great works of literature. It was from the Tabard Inn in Southwark that Chaucer's story-telling pilgrims set off for Canterbury over 600 years ago, aided and abetted by its genial host. Falstaff's roisterings at the Boar's Head in Eastcheap provide one of the enduring images of the pub, and pubs play key roles in several of Dickens's novels.

Dr Johnson made time between writing and compiling his dictionary to enjoy the pleasures of the pub, famously declaring to Boswell, 'There is nothing which has yet been contrived by man, by which so much happiness is produced as by a good tavern or inn.' In more recent times George Orwell set down for readers of the *Evening Standard* a description of his idealized, imaginary pub, the Moon

Maurice Gorham, with illustrations by Edward Ardizzone, *The Local* (1939) · Little Toller Books · Hb · 88pp · £15 · ISBN 9780956254597; *Back to the Local* (1949) · Faber Finds · Pb · 134pp · £12 · ISBN 9780571247394

under Water, where perfection was embodied in ‘architecture and fittings [that] are uncompromisingly Victorian’ and where he could find ‘draught stout, open fires, cheap meals, a garden, motherly barmaids and no radio’.

Orwell was writing in 1946 at exactly the same time that another enthusiast, Maurice Gorham (1902–75), was touring pubs in austere, post-war London. A journalist and broadcaster, Gorham had a passion for the English pub which he shared with his friend, the artist and illustrator Edward Ardizzone (1900–79).

Gorham and Ardizzone spent a good deal of time in London’s pubs and together they collaborated on a celebration of them in *The Local* (1939), the text by Gorham and the accompanying coloured lithographs by Ardizzone. Although well-received, it was soon overtaken by catastrophe: the unsold stock, along with the artwork, went up in smoke when Cassell’s premises in Belle Sauvage Yard caught fire during the Blitz. As a result the original edition is now a rare item and copies change hands for in excess of £300. (Happily, Little Toller Books have just published a new edition, at a much more reasonable price.) Its virtual extinction turned the authors’ minds to preparing a much revised version after the war. Published in 1949 and appropriately entitled *Back to the Local*, it is (with its scarce companion-piece) probably the most delightful and evocative book ever produced on the English pub. Not only is it beautifully written, it is also extremely informative, giving us valuable insights into the world of the pub sixty years ago.

When I first encountered pubs they were still very much as portrayed by Gorham and Ardizzone. Each was generally divided into several rooms, hierarchically organized. The term ‘public bar’ is familiar to all, but any spaces still so named today are scarcely distinguishable from any other part of a pub. Then the public bar was the working man’s domain, a spartan place of much vertical drinking and smoking.

For the more respectable and better-dressed there was the saloon or, better still, the lounge. These were rooms with tables, carpets and

upholstered seats, where ladies (if in the plural) might go unaccompanied. In between there was the private bar (very much a London term) which even in Gorham's day was tending to disappear.

The names of the rooms or spaces, the way they were furnished, and the social composition of their clientele varied from pub to pub because it was (and, of course, still is) impossible to speak of a 'typical' pub.



Barmaids old . . .

In the early 1960s I was certainly aware of the social distinctions of the various rooms. There was a definite sense of raffish slumming about entering the uncarpeted public bar with its thick pall of smoke. Greater social status and greater comfort came at a price, for different prices were charged in different rooms. This was universal into the '60s and beyond. Now it is all but extinct. The ultimate expression of a desire for respectability and privacy was the presence of snobscreens. These were small swivelling screens at head level which, when closed, screened the lounge or the saloon bar from the public bar on the other side of the counter. They can still be seen at the Prince Alfred, in London's Maida Vale, and just creep into Ardizzone's sketch of the saloon bar at this still magnificently appointed late Victorian pub.

Back in 1949 it was very likely that you would purchase alcohol for home consumption from your local pub. Not any more: the big shift came about with legislation in the early 1960s liberalizing the sale of alcohol from supermarkets. Gorham and Ardizzone have a lovely short chapter on the Jug-and-Bottle (or Bottle-and-Jug) as it was most commonly known, which had, in Gorham's words, 'a taint of furtiveness that is not shared by the rest of the pub. There is a sort of sneaking assumption that whilst it would be disgraceful to be seen

drinking in a pub, it is consistent with respectability to use the Bottle-and-Jug. The theory, presumably, is that in this bar you are buying for your husband and not for yourself, but some of the customers give you the impression that if they have got a husband, he won't get much of what they buy.'

The provision of food is a vital component in the success of huge numbers of pubs today but it has long been so. Gorham tells us that 'Before the war it could be claimed that London pubs provided as good food of its kind as you could get in England.' Afterwards, in the economically exhausted nation, 'Food is a problem now for the pubs as for everybody else . . . you sigh for honest bully-beef or genuine Spam.' Perhaps! Still, things were gradually picking up, although what is now put about as 'traditional pub fayre' – scampi and chips, lasagne and the like – lay some way in the future, as did the 'gastro-pub'.

The Second World War had had a sobering effect in more ways than one. The average strength of beer fell by 15 per cent during the war and was on average lower than it had ever been with the exception of the Great War. Then, under the teetotal Lloyd George, beer had been cut both in its strength and in the volume in which it was produced, a fact that was thought to contribute to the unrest affect-



. . . and new.

© 1949 Edward Ardizzone, from *Back to the Local*. Permission granted by the artist's estate

ing the country from 1917. Mindful of this, in the second great conflict the government tried to keep up beer production, at least in terms of volume, but there were still problems, as Gorham tells us in a heartfelt chapter. Supplies often ran out, and he explains how the arrival of the brewer's dray was

‘rather like the sighting of the relief force from the walls of Lucknow’. ‘The worst of the famine’, he tells us, ‘was in the summer of 1946, when . . . too many people were chasing too little beer.’

In 1949 what we now refer to as ‘real ale’ – traditional English ale which is still working in the cask – was overwhelmingly the dominant drink sold in the pub. Lager, although available in Britain since the late nineteenth century, was ‘still not a very popular drink in pubs, except in fairly high-class Saloon Bars during very hot weather’. So Gorham, his artist friend and their fellow drinkers were consuming ale, chiefly mild or bitter. Nowadays mild – the weakest and cheapest of beers, dark in colour – has disappeared from the London drinking scene and, indeed, most other parts of Britain. But back in 1949 it was the standard drink in public bars – ‘a pint’ without qualification, we learn, meant a pint of mild, just as ‘a pint’ in the saloon would summon forth bitter.

Mild and other styles of beer are among the mentions in Gorham’s fascinating ‘Glossary of Terms commonly used in connection with London Pubs’. Brown ale, Burton (‘a draught beer darker and sweeter than bitter’), ‘mother-in-law’ (stout-and-bitter), ‘old’ (the same as Burton), and Scotch ale (similar to Burton) are all terms for ale that would perplex bar staff today. On the other hand there are now far more types of drink available. Ardizzone’s affectionate illustrations show bar counters encumbered by nothing more than a few hand-pumps and the odd glass. Today, banks of lager, stout, cider and even wine fonts line our bar counters.

A final change worth highlighting is that of pub ownership. In Gorham’s day pubs were mostly owned by breweries, and most of these were local. In the late 1950s and early 1960s many brewers amalgamated, and this process has continued to the point where there is now only one brewer – Fuller’s – of any size in Maurice Gorham’s former drinking grounds. What is more, most pubs are no longer owned by brewers at all. The government’s ‘Beer Orders’ of 1989 forced brewers with tied estates of over 2,000 pubs to divest them-

Cheers!

selves of pubs beyond that number in an ill-thought-out attempt to stimulate competition and promote consumer choice. As a result many big brewers sold off all their pubs or formed separate holding companies. Most houses now belong to pub companies with no brewing interests, the largest of which have far more pubs than the big brewers ever did.

Were Messrs Gorham and Ardizzone to return to Earth for a posthumous pint today they would find a London pub world both familiar and unfamiliar. Many of their haunts are still there, although others have gone. They would probably be shocked that there is no longer a separate, comfortable saloon or lounge in which to relax, and no doubt alarmed by the brightly illuminated fonts on the bar counter, huge television screens and flashing gaming machines. They would be amazed by the post-2007 absence of cigarette smoke and would wonder at the range of food available. As for the ale, they would almost certainly find ours a marked improvement on their thin, post-war pint. The pub changes – it always has and always will. The joy of Gorham and Ardizzone's classic book is that it captures it at a particular moment in history.

GEOFF BRANDWOOD is an architectural historian whose interest in the Victorian and Edwardian era developed through studies of churches. He then became involved with the Campaign for Real Ale's fight to preserve historic pub interiors. Churches and pubs? Holy buildings both, he says.

Behind the Privet Hedge

JULIET GARDINER

In 1936 my father designed the house in which I grew up in the Fifties. I would like to say that it was a textbook example of Thirties Modernism, like a small-scale model of an ocean liner in dry dock, with sinuous white curving walls punctuated by Crittall metal windows, and a flat roof – that signifier of all that was modern (or ‘*moderne*’ in house-speak). The inside white à *la* Syrie Maugham, with minimalist pale plywood furniture, maybe a Marion Dorn cubist-design rug on the herringbone parquet floor, smudgy John Piper textiles hung at the windows. A regular ‘machine for living’, form elegantly following function. Only it wasn’t.

The house my father built was the sort of house small children draw: a pitched tiled roof, a sturdy chimney at each corner, four symmetrical wood-framed windows, even a castellated brick wall with iron chains and a sunburst gate in the front, standard rose bushes erect alongside the crazy paving path. In short, it was the ubiquitous suburban vernacular of the Thirties – much more representative of that decade than anything the so-called ‘flat roofers’ built. Indeed, it was just like the house Thomas and Edith Baldwin buy in R. C. Sherriff’s 1936 novel *Greengates* – and yes, our gates were green too, somewhere along the spectrum between emerald and British racing green.

Our house wasn’t quite as grand as the Baldwins’: we didn’t have a

R. C. Sherriff, *The Fortnight in September* (1931)

Persephone • Pb • 336pp • £12 • ISBN 9781903155578

Greengates (1936) is out of print.

maid's room – not that we needed one because we didn't have a maid, just someone who 'did' for my mother. And inside it owed little to the influence of the interior of the *Queen Mary*, embarking on her maiden voyage the year the house was built, and featured in all the 'picture papers'. The furniture consisted of the usual hand-me-downs, a few 'good pieces', the odd new purchase from Maples or Drage's (rather than Heals or Dunns of Bromley, I suspect), my room furnished in whitewood furniture painted apple-green gloss, with, I shudder now to recall, lustrous pink plastic handles.

Not that the Baldwins' home had always been a symphony in cream with acres of fawn carpet, a modern boxy Rexine sofa, twin beds with satin eiderdowns and wall lights, and such fancies as a nest of occasional tables in the lounge and a pull-down ironing board in the (partially) fitted modern kitchen. When Tom Baldwin retired from his job in insurance in the City of London at the age of 58, he came home to live out his days of well-earned leisure in Grasmere, an austere, dark Victorian villa off the Edgware Road. But he soon found the house enervating, the garden so exhausted that no matter how much 'chemical fertilizer' he dug into the soil, it seemed unable to revive, stuck in a sort of perpetual November in the gardening calendar.

Tom's retirement was not a success. Yet he'd had such plans: to revivify the garden, do all those jobs round the house that he'd never had time to do when he'd taken the 8.15 to the City every weekday. He had even decided to take up history, maybe discover some ancient, previously unknown language – Anglo-Saxon hieroglyphs, as it were, on the South Downs – or write a new history, making the dry-as-dust tomes he ploughed through compelling reading for ordinary people.

But it had all come to nothing. Tom's disappointment was beginning to sour his previously happy marriage. He and Edith found it a strain to be together all the time. They had nothing to talk about any more as they had had when they inhabited separate spheres of work

and home. Edith had begun to resent the disruption of her previous routines, while feeling guilty that it was only because Tom had worked so hard all those years that she had such a pleasant life.

The Baldwins' salvation was a Shangri-La moment (James Hilton's *Lost Horizon* had been published in 1933 – see *SF* no. 9). Reaching the top of a hill on a once-favourite country walk, the couple gazed down into the transformed valley below. No longer was there a small village nestling in the hollow: the valley was now full of activity and churned-up mud. A new housing estate was being built. Resentful at first of this defacement of what they had almost considered their own rural idyll, the Baldwins were sucked in within minutes. Invited into the show house, they suddenly saw the possibility of a new life opening up. The next day they wrote to reserve a plot, then threw a lifetime's financial caution to the winds, cashing in Edith's debentures, taking out a mortgage, putting Grasmere on the market, and selling off at auction every stick of furniture, including the clock on the mantelpiece ('doleful at the best of times, it looked at its worst at twenty-five past six, when its hands gave it a dreary, drooping moustache'), and every pot and pan. Their elderly maid Ada, she of the arthritic knees in her basement kitchen domain, was pensioned off, to be replaced by 'a young country girl – everything fresh and new'. Effectively the Baldwins would be reborn in Welden Close, Welden Valley.

R. C. Sherriff was a miniaturist of genius, a poet of the ordinary and the banal. He captured a lower-middle-class family's annual summer holiday to perfection in *The Fortnight in September* (1931). A George Grossmith for his time, in *Greengates* Sherriff paints an achingly authentic picture of the other side of the usual Thirties coin. While long-term, intractable unemployment, underemployment and poverty were the lot of those working in the old traditional industries – coal, iron, steel, ship-building, textiles – in the north, Scotland and the Welsh valleys, for those in the south or Midlands, it was a decade of growing prosperity which found its expression in the massive interwar housing boom. Three million new homes were

built – two million of those by private landlords, most for owner-occupiers. It was a time of easy mortgages, low deposits, growing reliance on the ‘never never’ for couples whose parents’ iron mantra had been ‘neither a borrower nor a lender be’.

Moreover, most of the new building was on suburban estates – either huge local authority ones like Becontree in Essex, the St Helier estate in Surrey, and Wythenshawe outside Manchester, or private ones that sprawled out along the A3, wonderfully portrayed in the arts journalist Paul Vaughan’s memoir of his childhood in newly built New Malden, *Something in Linoleum: A Thirties Education* (1994). Or in Kent, Middlesex or Hertfordshire where my father, with his local-authority architect’s expertise (he designed the Chipperfield – or was it the Bovingdon? – cricket pavilion too) bought a plot but insisted on his own design rather than relying on that of the spec builder as the Baldwins did.

Greengates touches on every aspect of the new suburbanization, and especially on the desire to emphasize rurality, to distance the suburban from the urban. There were no streets in suburbia, all were closes and crescents, drives and avenues, and every suburban house would have a name as well as a number. Ours was The Laurels in honour of the rather scrubby hedge that divided us from the neighbours, while the Baldwins scrapped amicably about whether their house should be Lavender Corner or Restnook (too feminine, thought Tom) or Firstcome or Clean Sweep (too ugly, dismissed Edith) until they settled on Greengates.

Sherriff perceptively picks up on suburbia’s class nuances and insecurities, an example being Mr van Doon – just about ‘one of us’ despite his references to ‘the wife’ and the purple jelly he serves at a social gathering. Indeed, in *Greengates* Sherriff subtly recreates the whole fraught notion of what a community meant in these new, inorganic settlements, and how best that might be forged without disturbing the calibrations of class or intruding on the middle class’s reverence for privacy and privet hedges.

This forensic yet kindly approach should come as no surprise. Sherriff was – is – best known for his harrowing play about the First World War, *Journey's End* (he had been badly wounded at Ypres). After that triumph, the career of the bachelor who lived with his mother in Kingston upon Thames and died a few miles away in Esher was somewhat in the doldrums, until, sitting on the front at Bognor, he had the idea for a novel. Diffidently submitting the manuscript of *The Fortnight in September* to his publisher, Victor Gollancz, seemed, Sherriff said, 'like offering a fruit drop to a lion'. Yet when it was published in 1931 the book was an instant success, described by reviewers as 'enchanting' and a 'little masterpiece'.

Greengates followed. Writing in the *Listener*, the recorder of the countryside Adrian Bell was equally enthusiastic, calling it 'that rarity, a complete novel . . . one that is completely experienced, whose success is both local and cumulative . . . in which every detail tends towards the whole'. And he instanced as exquisite evidence of Sherriff's mastery his description of the eve of the auction of the old house's effects, when 'Mr Baldwin dropped his umbrella in Lot 1 and hung up his hat on Lot 2.'

The era of the silent film was all but over by the early Thirties, and movie studios, desperate to find writers who could produce convincing dialogue for the talkies, alighted on Sherriff. He was shipped to Hollywood (taking his mother along too) where he scripted the film of H. G. Wells's *The Invisible Man*, and later the film version of James Hilton's sentimental novel of school life, *Goodbye Mr Chips*.

But he soon came home to suburban Surrey, his natural habitat, to live out his days among the rows of Tudorbethan semis and faux Georgian houses that had provided him with his best material, and the mid-twentieth century with a poignant taste of its unique and complex flavour.

JULIET GARDINER'S *The Thirties: An Intimate History* has just been published. She can't wait to start writing another book about that paradoxical, contradictory decade.

Feline Philosophy

ANNE BOSTON

Like so many cats that arrive on a doorstep and choose their owner, *Le Chat du rabbin* found me. I can't explain why I was loitering in the *bandes dessinées* section of a students' bookshop on the boulevard St Michel – maybe it was raining outside. I picked up *Le Chat du rabbin* and that was it: the *coup de foudre*. Only after a patrolling bookshop assistant tapped me on the shoulder some time later did I snap out of the Jewish quarter of Algiers nearly a century ago, where a talking cat lives with a rabbi and his daughter.

I coveted the rabbi's cat as my personal discovery. Five years later, far from it: the cat's adventures have been translated into English (though to my mind they read better in French), Hebrew and Spanish, and he is soon to star in his own animated movie. Joann Sfar, his prodigiously gifted creator, is the author of at least three dozen other cartoon books; and this summer his first film went on general release, a fanciful life of Serge Gainsbourg in which the French-Jewish singer-songwriter has a tall, thin alter ego with cartoon head and spidery fingers, and a fluffy black cat appears briefly as Juliette Greco's maid.

'It's very difficult for me not to be Jewish so I don't even try,' Sfar said, interviewed about *Gainsbourg*. His family background is both Ashkenazi and Sephardic, his maternal grandfather having emigrated

Joann Sfar, *Le Chat du rabbin* series: *La Bar-Mitsva* (2002); *Le Malka des lions* (2002); *L'Exode* (2003); *Le Paradis terrestre* (2005); and *Jérusalem d'Afrique* (2006), published by Dargaud, are all available in paperback at €9.80. The first two volumes are available in English from Pantheon.

to France from Ukraine, his father from Algeria. Sfar was born in 1971; his mother died when he was 3. A recent photo shows him with cropped hair, dressed like a biker; but in an earlier portrait a sleeker Sfar sits in a striped suit, on his lap a grey cat with mad eyes, *Doppelgänger* of the rabbi's cat.

The five *Chat du rabbin* graphic novels are adult fables set in the vanished pre-war Levantine world where Sfar's father was born, where Jews and Arabs co-existed in townships of flat-roofed houses spilling down to the Mediterranean. You can almost smell the orange blossom, cooking spices and fish off the boats in the harbour. Through the cobbled alleys plods the rabbi in his pillbox hat, jacket, knee-length pantaloons and pointed babouches, his grey cat riding on his shoulder.

The rabbi's cat is the nameless narrator. He has a long muzzle, huge ears, skinny legs and tail, and a pair of small furry balls which he puts



to use on the tiles at night when the household is asleep. He does exactly what he likes and tries the rabbi's patience mercilessly. They both worship Zlabya, the rabbi's daughter, a Matisse odalisque as delectable as the honey-soaked pastry that shares her name.

One day the cat eats the rabbi's parrot whose constant squawking has been getting on everyone's nerves. The rabbi is distraught; where is his bird? 'Gone out,' replies the cat. 'Sudden business. He said don't wait for him for dinner.'

The rabbi is amazed and aghast: his miraculous talking cat is a brazen liar. Banned from Zlabya's presence as a bad influence, the cat absolutely insists on becoming a bar mitzvah, secretly believing that then the rabbi must surely let him return to his adored mistress.

Can a cat become Jewish? The dubious rabbi consults his own

rabbi. In an impassioned wrangle the cat tests his thrilling gift of speech to its limits, finally, devastatingly, pouncing on the truth – behind the scholarly cant of the rabbi's rabbi is a lonely old man seeking solace in an illusion. The sage urges the rabbi to drown the cat and shows them both the door.

What kind of comic book is this? The cat has barely learnt to speak before he plunges into a thicket of argument (all hand-written by Sfar, who occasionally breaks into Russian and even Aramaic script) about God's existence and the meaning of faith.

Argument is as integral to *Le Chat du rabbin* as the cat's iconoclasm. As the rabbi explains to the cat (and the reader), unlike Western reasoning (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) Jewish discourse proceeds by continuous contradiction: thesis, antithesis, antithesis, antithesis. (Sfar's religious schooling clearly left its mark: 'I love to quarrel,' he says. 'When people agree, I want to leave the table.')

The cat bombards the rabbi with interruptions. The world invented in seven days 5,700 years ago? Even a kitten wouldn't believe that. Adam and Eve? They must be a symbol. No, the rabbi explains, symbols and allegories don't exist in Jewish teaching, which proceeds by analogy – again reflected in the narrative: the cat ate the forbidden prey, lost his innocence and was exiled from paradise/Zlabya. His Fall is a pitiless nightmare in which Zlabya has died and the cat and his master are drowning in a faithless, comfortless grey world. The rabbi, finding his daughter weeping for her pet, restores the cat on one condition: he must never speak.

Jewish readers would have realized sooner than me that the rambling plots are actually deliberate progressions mirroring Talmudic learning. The effect is never thematic or didactic thanks to Sfar's wit and irony, the magic marriage between drawings and dialogue, and the cat's piercing knack of going straight to the heart of the matter.

The scratchily expressive illustrations, coloured by Brigitte Findakly in the earthy shades of North Africa, are an enchanted gateway to the rabbi's exotic yet homely universe. Zlabya's domain is the



kitchen, her bedroom and the roof terrace where she gossips with her friends; the rabbi sometimes visits Oran to perform circumcisions and slaughter chickens. But their traditional ways are threatened by 'progress' imported by the French colonizers, along with tree-lined streets and café waiters who refuse to serve Jews and Arabs.

In the second book, a letter from the Consistoire Israelite de France informs the rabbi that to qualify for his post he must pass a test in French dictation, never mind that for the last thirty years he has led prayers in Hebrew for his Arab-speaking Jewish congregation. Through the window the cat watches the rabbi flunking his test: only a miracle can save him. To utter God's name, even destroy a scrap of paper on which the sacred name is written, is a mortal sin. In desperation the cat invokes the forbidden word and . . . but I shouldn't spoil the story.

Both rabbi and cat are appalled when Zlabya falls in love with Jacques, a pale young rabbi from Paris who has studied reformist teachings and wears a suit and lace-up shoes. The prospect of losing her to marriage brings out the worst in them, especially the rabbi, who invites himself on their honeymoon to Paris, then refuses to enter the in-laws' house after Jacques has rung the electric doorbell on Shabbat; his pedantic insistence on strict orthodoxy condemns him and the bedraggled cat to wander in the wilderness, in other words Paris in the rain, where they have many adventures. Hence the title of the third book: *L'Exode*.

Ailurophobes will welcome the distraction of other animals (who can all talk), such as the small stray dog in Paris who speaks street argot and helpfully sniffs out the lost rabbi's trail – though his incessant tail-wagging irritates the cat. Several delightful characters also recur, including an old Muslim musician and song-collector who

travels the desert with his donkey. The rabbi and the sheikh's peaceful pilgrimage to their shared ancestor Messaoud Sfar's tomb is interrupted by their animals shrieking like bigoted sectarians about the saint's true religion.

Research in Paris often took me to the Bibliothèque Jacques Doucet near the Panthéon, which inconveniently opens on just four afternoons a week. After hours at the coalface, I would walk back to the bus stop via the *bandes dessinées* bookshop in the rue Monsieur-le-Prince. Each new episode of *Le Chat du rabbin* became the current favourite.

The fifth book, *Jérusalem d'Afrique*, introduces a Russian painter who stowed away in a misdirected coffer of Jewish texts intended for Ethiopia, where Communist spies had reported a tribe of black-skinned Jews surviving in an African Jerusalem. Rabbi and cat join the painter, a vodka-crazed White Russian, the sheikh and his donkey on an expedition to this fabled place; among their adventures they meet Tintin, who turns out to be a racist bore, in the Congo. Threaded through the farce is a running theme of racial tolerance, a brilliant digression on the artist's need to create, and a cautionary subtext that the Promised Land, when you find it, may not be the one you expected.

Most of all, though, I returned to the fourth book, *Le Paradis terrestre*. This episode follows the cat's travels with the rabbi's cousin the Malka, a nomadic storyteller with fierce blue eyes like the Kabyle Berbers, and his companion, an elderly lion. The ageing Malka has to dye his moustaches and can no longer live up to his legendary reputation, to him more essential than survival itself. A poignant sequence of tales recounting his life and death ensures that his myth will fortify his people in darker times ahead. Sfar's disarming note states that these events are scrupulously accurate, being just as his granny told him.

Sfar's stories delight both strangers to the rabbi's enclosed world and those familiar with it. Meanwhile the characters develop during

their adventures together. The cat, having sacrificed his gift of speech, at last regains it; he now suspects that the rabbi is a better musician and car mechanic than a scholar but has learned enough tact not to say so. With heightened awareness he can see ahead, a discomfiting exercise for a Jewish cat. He even feels compassion for the rabbi's students, mollycoddled wimps who are prey to fleshly temptation. One youth joins the partisans training in self-defence, against the rabbi's teachings. They will get their army and their land, the cat muses, but their enemies will always outnumber them – and will they still be pure enough in heart to find the Malka's tomb?



ANNE BOSTON's biography *Lesley Blanch: Inner Landscapes, Wilder Shores* has been short-listed for the Biography Club's Best First Biography 2010 award. She is looking forward to the animated movie of *Le Chat du rabbin*, due out this November, and a sixth episode of the book currently in progress.

Tips about Icebergs

SARA WHEELER

I first encountered Tété-Michel Kpomassie in a tent on top of the Greenland ice cap. The temperature was minus 30, and I had burrowed into my sleeping bag to read in the small pool of light cast by a miner's lamp strapped to my forehead. Every so often, like a soft-shelled crab, I poked my head from the bag to take a gulp of air. The tent was brightly lit by the midnight sun, the shimmering sky outside the plastic pane the fabled Arctic blue. But it was impossible to read without being sealed into the bag. One's fingers froze, otherwise, while turning the pages.

Night-time in the polar latitudes provides a robust test of a book's capacity to take one's mind off the horror of the moment (surely one of the functions of literature). Going to bed in the far north or south is not only like retiring to a deep freeze. It is also like taking a nap in a cutlery drawer, as one is obliged to cuddle all one's battery-charged devices to prevent the cold sucking the cells dry.

From the first page, Kpomassie revealed himself as the man for the job. His superb volume *An African in Greenland* not only drove out the cold. It did what I most like a travel book to do. It held up a mirror, and the Arctic reflected back the world. The naked portrait of an exotic society – long gone, now – enabled me to understand the flaws (and a few benefits) of my own overdeveloped and overheated niche.

An African in Greenland was first published in Paris in 1983, a period in which Lévi-Strauss and exotic ethnology had captured the

Tété-Michel Kpomassie, *An African in Greenland* (1983) • Trans. James Kirkup
New York Review Books • Pb • 432pp • £8.99 • ISBN 9780940322882

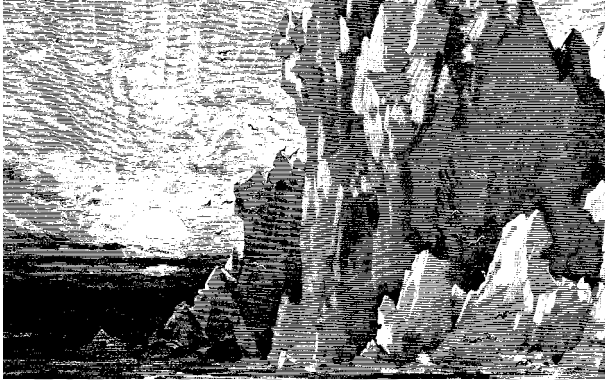
imagination of French intellectuals. In Kpomassie's book they got two for the price of one, for the first chapters deal with the author's childhood in rural Togo. It was a long journey from Togo to the Arctic Circle.

The author records how, as a small boy, he fell out of a tree while gathering coconuts and, following a purification ceremony by the High Priestess of the Python, was destined to be initiated into her cult. The prospect was so terrifying that he dreamt of escape – to Greenland, which he had read about in a missionary bookshop in Lomé. Greenland was, to the young Kpomassie, the antithesis of the jungle – white, frozen and python-free. When he was 16, he took off. A journey to the distant unknown is among the oldest stories ever told, but in his book the self-educated Kpomassie makes it his own. It took him eight years to get to Greenland, working his passage up the west coast of Africa port by port and taking jobs in France and Denmark. But his real break came when he found a wealthy mentor in Paris.

In 1965, aged 24 and an Arctic greenhorn, Kpomassie arrived at Julianehåb, now Qaqortoq, on the southern nose of Greenland. At five feet eleven he towered above the Inuit, and of course he caused a sensation. The national broadcasting station announced his arrival on the evening news. 'I had started on a voyage of discovery,' he wrote, 'only to find that it was I who was being discovered.'

Kpomassie was a man for whom the interior and the exterior life converged, and he recorded his observations and responses with the same artless ingenuity, like all the best writers combining comicality with a sense of the sad absurdity of life. As an African, he did not carry the White Man's Burden, and it would not have occurred to him to romanticize Inuit lives. He describes a baby suffocated by drunken parents; a meal of rabid dog; a group conversation in someone's front room which continued as each person took his or her turn squatting over the latrine bucket. More significantly, he notes more than once 'the crying lack of mutual help in a Greenland village, and

the villagers' profound contempt for their poorer countrymen'. But he took everything in his long stride. When his drunken host pissed in his rucksack, soaking all his clothes, he was unperturbed. In his book he perfectly captured the pared-down existence of Greenland and the grace of its people under pressure.



The Inuit competed to entertain him, and he immersed himself in their lives, learning both language and customs. Greenlandic society was on the cusp in 1965 – or rather, it had just teetered over the edge of the slope that led to Westernization. Qaqortoq already had a cinema, though the projectionist halted the film every ten minutes so that a muffled voice could translate the last batch of Danish subtitles into Inuktituk over a tannoy, but there was still no bank in the country. In the populated south the old customs had already vanished. 'Children are sent to school', Kpomassie observed, 'but are not taught anything about the traditional activities. Even worse, that way of life is disparaged to their faces, although it is their own. When they grow up, they can't even paddle a kayak.'

Like many white men before him, Kpomassie relished the Inuit Greenlanders' enthusiasm for casual sex, and for loaning out wives. Until, that is, he found his special girlfriend snuggling up with another. 'I was quite willing to share other men's girls', he notes, 'but not my own.' But endemic boozing and casual sex eventually lost

their appeal. 'Greenland morality was beginning to disgust me,' he writes (no wonder: he had just done a long stint in hospital with a suspected dose of the clap), and so he made his way up the west coast in search of the pure white land he had read about in the Togolese jungle.

Denmark laid claim to Greenland, a land mass fifty times its size, in the seventeenth century, and at the time of Kpomassie's visit, the islanders had not yet won Home Rule. But as our Togolese Odysseus moved north, Danes faded away. He wintered in a turf hut entered through a tunnel on all fours. 'The house', he wrote, 'vaguely reminded me of an African mud-walled hut.' (In fact, it was an *iglu*. Contrary to Western belief, an igloo is a traditional, turtle-shaped house made of stone and peat, entered by a tunnel and ventilated by a hole in the ceiling.)

Kpomassie's host was Robert Mattaaq, a destitute paterfamilias who wore trousers tied up with string which he did not take off for the entire winter. Mattaaq had papered the walls of his igloo with pictures torn from magazines; he referred to the collage as his library. Under his supervision Kpomassie learnt to drive dogs, perched alone in the darkness on a mound of frozen fish, and he came to see the patterns that had governed Inuit life for centuries. Even wife-loaning had a practical significance, for if a man was killed hunting, his wife's lover provided for the dead man's family (so there was some mutual help after all).

Above all Kpomassie immersed himself in the spirit world. In the inner life of the Inuit, not only did all living creatures have souls, but so did inanimate objects. Each rock, lamp and sealskin had its *inuua*, or owner: 'These *inuue*', he writes, 'are not exactly souls but manifestations of the strength and vitality of nature.' They were spirits that walked around at night, and talked, and they made the empty Inuit land less lonely. Rituals designed to appease the spirits governed every aspect of life, from hunting to mourning the dead. 'In the eyes of an Eskimo hunter,' marvelled Kpomassie, 'the Arctic world with

its vast, frozen expanses, its barren, snowy peaks and great bare plateaux – all that drab, white, lifeless immensity of little interest to an African like me – becomes a living world.’

Once the forces of what we call civilization set about the dismantling of Inuit culture, there was little chance for those myriad spirits that had been roaming the hunting grounds for two millennia. Shortly after Kpomassie’s visit, the Danish government pursued the now infamous G60 policy. To facilitate administration, civil servants decided to concentrate Greenland’s population in the bigger communities of the south, and as a consequence they relocated the occupants of villages with fewer than 500 inhabitants. In larger settlements the Grønlandsk Teknisk Organization bulldozed turf dwellings and replaced them with flimsy wooden houses. Mattaaq was shifted south like a piece of furniture, still with the string holding up his trousers, but without any of the less tangible things that had warded off despair.

Kpomassie went halfway home at the end of his Greenlandic adventures: he settled near Paris, where he still lives quietly. Forty-five years after he first drove a dog team across a starlit ice field, the future of the Arctic remains uncertain. Both polar regions appeal to something visceral in the spirit, especially in an era when we have lost contact with the natural world. But in the Arctic, unlike its southern counterpart, there is a figure at the centre of the picture: the Arctic is an image of the real world in all its degradation and beauty. Many authors kept me company in my sleeping bag when I made my own circumpolar journey, but Kpomassie came closest to capturing that ambiguous polar truth which is, after all, at the heart of being human.

SARA WHEELER’s books include *The Magnetic North: Notes from the Arctic Circle* and *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antarctica*.

No Swotting . . .

ANTONY WOOD

I first heard the name of John Betjeman at university. One of the more adventurous dons, an aesthetically aware mathematician, lent me a copy of *Collected Poems* (1958), just out. Torn from my Donne, I read:

Kirkby with Muckby-cum-Sparrowby-cum-Spinx
Is down a long lane in the county of Lincs,
And often on Wednesdays, well-harnessed and spruce,
I would drive into Wiss over Winderby Sluice.

‘Call this poetry!’ I said indignantly (it wasn’t the first time I was found too solemn, early in life). Years later I discovered that around the time I was delivering that judgement, Betjeman’s *Collected Poems* was selling a thousand copies a day – third on the bestseller list. (‘What ho!’ its jubilant publisher Jock Murray is said to have exclaimed, ‘I never remember such a dance since we published Byron’s *Childe Harold* in 1812.’)

Once I’d finished university I came to enjoy life more – including Betjeman’s poems. Now living, more or less, in the real world, I realized that the most original poetry isn’t usually a matter of intellectual constructions and conceits, but rather of finding expression for

John Betjeman, *Summoned by Bells* (1960), is out of print. However, an audio version, read by the poet, is available: BBC Audio • Abridged to 2 hours • £12.99 • ISBN 9781408400739; *Collected Poems* (2006 edition, including *Summoned by Bells*) • John Murray • Pb • 528pp • £14.99 • ISBN 9780719568503

thoughts and states of mind in language close to how people speak. This Betjeman does to perfection. And he addresses the world we know. His currency is real named places, English villages and churches with their bells, London suburbs, seaside holidays, train journeys – the paraphernalia of English middle-class life during most of the twentieth century, all viewed through an irresistible lens of affectionate wit and nostalgia. How perfectly he captures the English middle-class psyche in ‘In Westminster Abbey’ (1940), in which a well-dressed lady addresses the Almighty as she kneels and removes her glove:

Gracious Lord, oh bomb the Germans,
Spare their women for Thy Sake,
And if that is not too easy
We will pardon Thy Mistake.
But, gracious Lord, whate’er shall be,
Don’t let anyone bomb me . . .

But with his verse autobiography Betjeman does something different. *Summoned by Bells* is an account, in blank verse, of his life up to the age of 22 – or the bits of it uppermost in his mind when he was writing it between the ages of around 34 to 54. He says in an initial note to the reader that he wanted to go ‘as near prose as he dare’, and chose blank verse because he found it best suited to ‘brevity and the rapid changes of mood and subject’. I think the word ‘brevity’ here is a piece of shorthand, the lid on a cauldron of emotions and deeply held values, meaning that he could not have expressed what he had to say nearly so spontaneously and truly in either of the more restrictive media of prose or rhymed verse. And of course, ‘blank verse’, unrhymed pentameters, is a typically English understated term, being a favourite vehicle of our greatest poets. In *Summoned by Bells* we are online to Betjeman’s soul.

As usual when a writer does something different, there’s a negative reaction. Leading critics found *Summoned by Bells*, published in

1960, two years after the *Collected Poems*, too unintellectual, and the public on the whole stuck to the fizzier, more pointed short poems. To this day it is still overshadowed by them, but I fell in love with it as soon as I read its magical opening lines – I can't remember exactly when, but my copy I see is the 1976 edition:

Here on the southern slope of Highgate Hill
Red squirrels leap the hornbeams. Still I see
Twigs and serrated leaves against the sky.
The sunny silence was of Middlesex.
Once a Delaunay-Belleville crawling up
West Hill in bottom gear made such a noise
As drew me from my dream-world out to watch
That early motor-car attempt the steep.
But mostly it was footsteps, rustling leaves,
And blackbirds fluting over miles of Heath.

This was familiar ground. For a short while my parental home had been a little further up West Hill from No. 31, the house of Betjeman's boyhood. And cross-country running at Highgate School, where Betjeman spent two unhappy years, I and the rest of the pack had put many a blackbird to flight over those miles of Hampstead Heath. I have to say there's nothing like a topographical link with an author to give one an insider tingle.

Betjeman's fond reference to places is a very real part of his appeal: Egloskerry, Tresmeer, Trebetherick – even though I don't know them, I enjoy hearing their names and imagining them. Betjeman once replied to someone who had called him 'a poet of place' that it wasn't really the places that drew him, it was the people in them. And in this first chapter the person who stands out unforgettably is his 'first and purest love' at the age of 8, a fellow pupil at his Montessori school with 'ice-blue eyes' and 'lashes long and light', Peggy Pury-Cust. Betjeman's personal names too are an unforgettable part of his poetry – think of Miss Joan Hunter Dunn.

John Betjeman himself was the only surviving child of a manufacturer of furniture and household articles (the firm made its fortune in the mid-Victorian era with the Tantalus – a device for locking away decanters of drink from servants), who represented the third generation of a company founded in 1820 and which continued in business until 1945. Here is one of the many evocative passages in *Summoned by Bells* in which the past leaps up before us. Master John, aged 7 or 8, is being proudly taken round the Betjeman manufactory located next to the Angel, Islington, on the eve of the Great War by his father and introduced to the operatives and craftsmen:



The cabinet-makers' shop, all belts and wheels
And whining saws, would thrill me with the scream
Of tortured wood, starting a blackened plank
Under the cruel plane and coming out
Sweet-scented, pink and smooth and richly grained;
While in a far-off shed, caressingly,
French-polishers, all whistling different tunes,
With reeking swabs would rub the coloured woods . . .

But John was determined not to be a fourth-generation manufacturer. He knew 'as soon as he could read or write', he tells us, that he must be a poet. Arising from this, guilt is a dominant theme of *Summoned by Bells*. At various moments of his narrative he recalls his distraught father, hoping against hope that his son will continue the family firm. Handling a newly published volume of his own verse, he sees in his mind's eye his father's

. . . workmen seeking other jobs,
And that red granite obelisk that marks

The family grave in Highgate Cemetery
Points an accusing finger to the sky.

Physical beatings and moral humiliations recur: ‘that awful feeling, fear confused with thrill’ as, late for dinner again, he is unbuttoned and bent across Nanny Maud’s starched apron; he is punched and kicked in the street by fellow schoolboys, while others jibe, ‘Betjeman’s a German spy – Shoot him down and let him die’; at prep school in Oxford he receives a resounding three from, in fact, a favourite master (‘I liked the way you took that beating, John./ Reckon yourself henceforth a gentleman’). At Highgate Junior School, his first attempts at serious verse are coolly received by ‘the American Master’, T. S. Eliot, and during one holiday in Cornwall, a woman in ‘Girl-Guide-y sort of clothes’, who is organizing a children’s event, calls him ‘a common little boy’.

But all this is, as it were, subplot. His main theme is the growth of his two great enthusiasms – poetry and England’s architectural heritage. He shows his first verse to his father at the age of 8. At the age of 12, at the Dragon School in Oxford, he takes off on many a blissful bike expedition in and outside the city to inspect the ‘Norm., E.E., Dec.’ and ‘lamentable Perp.’ churches of the area, often in the company of a master who shares his passion. His verse breathlessly catches his excitement as he hunts down the keys of locked-up churches to discover ‘vaulting shafts,/Pillar-piscinas, floriated caps./ Squints, squinches, low side windows, quoins and groins . . .’

On winter Sunday evenings during Christmas school holidays, the prep-school boy would stand at lane intersections among the silent office buildings in the City and listen – not for an active or familiar peal, as from St Paul’s, but for the sound of an occasional, barely active bell, likely to be that of a church whose statutory service was being taken by ‘some lazy Rector living in Bexhill’, with scarcely any congregation, where he could enjoy 300-year-old interiors, hear the Book of Common Prayer and appease his already mounting sense of

guilt in peace. *Summoned by Bells* is rich in such unexpected intimate moments which point forward to the time when the ugly duckling would turn into a swan – the hugely popular architectural writer, broadcaster and conservationist.

It was at the Dragon School, too, that the nature of his ‘Faith’ was established for the rest of his life, as he recalls in describing his time as an Oxford undergraduate:

As at the Dragon School, so still for me
The steps to truth were made by sculptured stone,
Stained glass and vestments, holy-water stoups,
Incense and crossings of myself – the things
That hearty middle-stumpers most despise
As ‘all the inessentials of the Faith’.

This is the heart of Betjeman. Those critics who dismissed him as a poet were at least right in this respect – he is no intellectual. He deals in the concrete, not in ideas. It was the 8-year-old’s urge ‘to encase in rhythm and rhyme/The things I saw and felt (I could not *think*)’ that was to make him Poet Laureate.

Summoned by Bells has plenty that he saw *and* felt. The episode on a Cornish family holiday – when his father tells him to make himself useful instead of lounging about the house: (‘I’ll have obedience!’) and his son replies ‘You damn well won’t’ and makes for the door and his bike – brought a rush of blood to my head as I remembered similar scenes from my own adolescence.

Without rhyme, Betjeman is freed from the pressure to be constantly satirical and jokey, a mode he keeps up so brilliantly in his short rhymed poems. He was worried about the final chapter of *Summoned by Bells* on his time as an undergraduate at Oxford, fearing that the reader might by then have become bored with unalleviated blank verse, so he interjected some rhymed jingles and one magnificent rhymed poem, which is an ode to Oxford of the Twenties, where ‘life was luncheons, luncheons all the way’.

But he really needn't have worried. His blank verse is always wonderfully eloquent, sometimes as deeply serious as his fundamentally light-hearted nature will allow, sometimes extremely funny. The Oxford chapter is a brilliant finale, switching from agonized thoughts about his pained parents and the existence of God to memorable exchanges among his circle of close friends which included such notables and eccentrics as Harold Acton, Maurice Bowra, Osbert Lancaster and Edward James, future patron of Magritte and Dalí.

It was hardly surprising – considering how outrageously young Betjeman seems to have neglected his studies – that he failed his exams and was sent down without a degree. It was at Oxford, nevertheless, that he truly found himself:

THE I I learned . . .

. . . that wisdom was

Not memory-tests (as I had long supposed),
Not 'first-class brains' and swotting for exams,
But humble love for what we sought and knew.

That insight was to serve him for the rest of his life, and what better text for us in our struggle against the twenty-first century's obsession with time management, targets and places in the league-tables?

So how sad it is that this great, dear book has been so consistently overshadowed by the shorter poems and that it has been tacked on at the end of an unwieldy edition of the *Collected Poems* (2006) rather than breathing freely as the independent volume it naturally is. However, I feel I can confidently say that anyone who enjoys the Englishness of English verse, anyone with a taste for autobiography in whatever guise – even those who normally avoid poetry – will find it irresistible.

ANTONY WOOD lives in Highbury, North London, where Betjeman's parents grew up and were married, and from where he runs his publishing firm, Angel Books, devoted to translations of classic foreign authors.

Uncomfortable Truths

DIANA ATHILL

There is no book more haunting than W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001). I would not advise anyone unfamiliar with his earlier books to make it their introduction to his work, because his decision to do away, in this one, with paragraphs, and the way in which the narrative unfolds, are disconcerting enough when first encountered to be off-putting. It is necessary to make an act of trust – to put yourself in his hands; and this may be a problem for anyone who has not yet learned to trust him by reading his wonderful *The Emigrants*, *The Rings of Saturn* and *Vertigo*. I doubt whether I would have persisted beyond the first thirty-odd pages of *Austerlitz* if I hadn't already learned that wherever Sebald led, I must follow him.

A reader soon becomes used to the lack of paragraphs. It means that the rhythm of Sebald's sentences has to do all the work of carrying you along, and you have only to read a page aloud to hear that his sense of rhythm, perfectly understood by his translator Anthea Bell, is faultless, making his prose so flexible and subtle that no visible pausing-places are necessary to allow you to draw breath. Its steady onward flow becomes hypnotic, so that you feel as though you are being swept along on a broad river. Finally, this effect contributes a great deal to the power of the book as a whole.

The journey on which you are being carried takes you through the life of Jacques Austerlitz, who arrived in England from Prague at the age of 4 on one of the *Kindertransports* which brought Jewish

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (2001) · Trans. Anthea Bell
Penguin · Pb · 432pp · £9.99 · ISBN 9780140297997

children to Britain when it began to be apparent that the Nazis intended to wipe out the Jews. He was taken in by a Welsh Calvinist preacher and his wife who raised him as Dafydd Elias, depriving the unhappy child of his name, his language, and soon of his memory of his past, giving him in return a loveless life so unremittingly bleak that when, at the age of 14, he was sent to a dreadful boarding-school it seemed like relief and freedom.

A friendship there led him into happiness – a period evoked with such touching beauty that by making everything that Austerlitz could love and enjoy so vivid, it eventually makes the stripping away inflicted on him by fate more terrible. An accident brought this happiness to an end. Thereafter he buried himself in the career of an historian of architecture, assiduously suppressing his emotions, hopes and any thoughts about his origins, until after his retirement increasing uneasiness leading to a breakdown forced him into a search for clues as to where he came from and who he really was. Following them, he reached the truth.

He went to Prague and found Vera, a friend of his mother, who used to look after him when his mother, who was an opera singer, was working, and as they talked details began to emerge from what had been darkness: his mother's warmth and beauty, the places he and Vera used to enjoy on their walks, even at moments words from the language they spoke. There was an intense though painful joy in this reawakening, until they reached the point at which Vera had to describe what had happened to his mother: how one by one her freedoms were curtailed, how she was forbidden to work, forbidden to visit coffee houses, forbidden to go to the cinema or concerts, forbidden to use public telephones, forbidden to enter a laundry or a dry-cleaner's, forbidden to walk on the side of the street nearest a park . . . until she was summoned, with hundreds of others, to a collection point and vanished to Terezin . . . from where, Vera didn't know when, she vanished for good.

How readers will react to Austerlitz's discovery of all this I cannot

tell; but I know that I was so hypnotized – so totally possessed – by what I was reading that I became physically colder and colder until I suddenly realized (to my amazement) that the blood in my arms might have turned to ice.

You do need to be quite brave to read *Austerlitz*. The story takes you through a great deal that is interesting, and indeed fascinating: wonderful excursions into history, architecture, natural history (including a magical extended passage about moths!) which sometimes feel at first as though they are irrelevant but which always contribute something vital to the story's fabric. But what essentially Sebald is exploring is the worst that human beings can do, and have done, to each other. A German who was a child during the years when the Nazis were putting the 'Final Solution' into practice, he was a writer whose abundant gifts of sensitivity, wit, erudition and empathy were unfailingly employed with the highest degree of moral integrity, so how could he escape that subject? One wonders whether there were times when he felt it to be like the Ancient Mariner's albatross, but if he did, it did not prevent him from going to the heart of it . . . and refusing, at the end of *Austerlitz*, to follow the rules of polite writing and allow us the comfort of catharsis. A great writer does not examine terrible truths in order to comfort or entertain. He does it as part of the human struggle to understand ourselves and make a stand against what is wrong with us.

DIANA ATHILL, in publishing for almost 50 years as Editorial Director of André Deutsch, has written nine books herself, the last three (including *Somewhere Towards the End*, winner of the Costa Biography Prize) since she turned 80.

Besieged by the Sea

ARIANE BANKES

In May 1937 Vita Sackville-West wrote to Harold Nicolson:

I've got another activity in view: three tiny Hebridean islands for sale, advertised in the *Daily Telegraph* today, 600 acres in all. 'Very early lambs. Cliffs of columnar basalt. Wonderful caves. Probably the largest bird colony in the British Isles. Two-roomed cottage.' Do you wonder? I have written to the agents for full particulars and photographs. They cost only £1,750.

It was their son Nigel Nicolson, aged 20 and still at Balliol, to whom she sent the particulars and who fell for the remote Shiant Islands at first sight and resolved to buy them. By August they were his, and he planned to spend a month there on his own to familiarize himself with them, ordering supplies from Fortnum & Mason, which were duly unloaded on to the beach by a local fisherman after their elaborate overnight journey by train and boat. Nicolson waved the man off, dragged the waxed cardboard boxes up to the stone bothy that provided the only shelter, and started to unpack, only to discover a polite note informing him that owing to Railway Regulations it had not been possible to include the safety matches requested. 'Trusting this will not be of any serious inconvenience, we remain, Yours, etc . . .'

Every boy scout is taught how to kindle sparks from dry bracken, and by dint of dismantling his binoculars Nicolson managed to do

Adam Nicolson, *Sea Room: An Island Life* (2001)

HarperCollins · Pb · 256pp · £8.99 · ISBN 9780006532019

so, but he was unable to leave the resulting frail flame untended for more than a couple of hours at a time. Out walking one day, stark naked – not unusual in wild places at the time – he was aghast to stumble upon a bucolic yacht-load of visitors picnicking directly on his route back to house and fire. Eventually he was forced to pick his way back past them with ‘an apron of gossamer fern’ and as much dignity as he could summon, to revive his precious but by now dying flame.

Despite such minor setbacks, Nicolson’s instinctive love of his islands only grew with time, and he bequeathed them to his son Adam as a twenty-first birthday present. *Sea Room* is Adam’s own love letter to the Shiant, written after more than two decades of growing intimacy with these stark, indifferent rocks, as he prepares to hand them on in turn to his own son Tom, just coming of age. This is no romantic evocation of a Rousseau-like idyll, but a raw appraisal of a place of infinite riches yet grinding poverty, of songs and stories, strife and struggle – yet his account is imbued with such passion that it left me almost feeling homesick for somewhere I’m unlikely ever to visit.

His account of these acres of ‘rock, grass, cliff and wilderness, stuck out in the middle of the Minch, between Skye and Lewis, besieged by the sea around them’, summons up a magnificent empire in miniature, home to half a million puffins, multitudes of seals and seabirds, and a host of shadowy ghosts. Whoever holds the deeds to these islands – as Compton Mackenzie did shortly before the Nicolsons – finds himself nevertheless there on sufferance, for this inhospitable Hebridean outpost offers no concessions, and over the ages boatloads of luckless men have foundered in its seas and on its shores. A real sense of ownership comes only with complete abandonment to ‘this wonderful sea room, the surge of freedom which a moated island provides’. Adam Nicolson has indeed surrendered himself to these islands over the years, exploring every geological nook and cranny, teasing out the shadowy history of their human

traces and contours, immersing himself in the cycle of their seasons, until he feels at times ‘no gap between me and the place. I have absorbed it and been absorbed by it, as if I have no existence apart from it.’

And what stories he finds to tell – stories to be savoured most keenly, it must be said, while tucked up in the warmth and cosiness of a winter evening, the wind howling outside, the fire crackling and dinner in the oven. For life on the Shiantas was never for the faint-hearted. Even getting there was troublesome: the treacherous Minch was reputedly once home to the Blue-Green Men, ‘strange, dripping, semi-human creatures who come aboard and sit alongside you in the sternsheets, sing a verse or two of a complex song and, if you are unable to continue in the same metre and with the same rhyme, sink your boat and drown your crew’. Or your boat might be skewered by a diving gannet, though if fortune was on your side, the bird would so effectively plug the hole he had just made that he saved you all the bother of bailing your way to a watery grave. (Adam commissioned his own *birlinn*, a sailing boat once used by highland chieftains and descended in form from Viking craft, to collapse the gap of centuries in sailing there.)

Such dangers apart, the islands have always sung a siren’s song, their velvety slopes offering perfect pasturage for flocks, and their waters teeming with fish. And though it is more than a century since the last family departed – the stout-hearted Donald Campbell and his stalwart daughters, whose beauty turned every head in the Western Isles – there are traces to be found of human habitation since Neolithic times, an ebb and flow of occupation, advancing and retreating like the tide. In the mid-eighteenth century there was still a small but viable crofting community hunkered down with their cattle and sheep, the odd pony, and plots of vegetables, oats and barley – almost the last of 3,500 souls who had over the centuries somehow scratched a precarious living from land and sea. Perhaps five families in all, each living in a long, low backhouse with a cen-

tral hearth, a floor of clay mixed with sheep dung, meat and fish hanging from the rafters to cure in the smoke, and only the odd stone or piece of washed-up timber to sit on. Beyond a simple kerb of stones were the animals – cows, goats, sheep, ducks, hens and dogs – cooped up hugger-mugger with the family all winter on a steadily mounting heap of dung. One can only imagine the fug that enveloped the entire household as the dark months of the year rolled by, until with the warmer winds of spring the east wall could be knocked down, the sty cleared out, and the whole place sluiced down and freshened up for the summer.

Life was harsh and everyone, young and old, had to pull their weight; the frail were given short shrift and were stripped of their flocks once they were unable to cope with them any more. And yet a complex interdependence threaded the community together: Nicolson quotes a wonderful account by Alexander Carmichael of the *tigh cèilidh*, the story-teller's house, where all would stream in out of the sleet and wind to huddle around a bright peat fire, the elders seated on benches and the children perched wherever they could find a toehold, and where a kind of primitive book club seemed to operate:

At the pathetic scenes and distressful events the bosoms of the women may be seen to heave and their silent tears to fall. Truth overcomes craft, skill conquers strength, and bravery is rewarded. Occasionally a momentary excitement occurs when heat and sleep overpower a boy and he tumbles down among the people below, to be trounced out and sent home. When the story is ended it is discussed and commented on, and the different characters praised or blamed according to their merits and the views of the critics.

It is a bright picture to hold on to, for this tightly meshed little community was not to survive much longer – but that is another story, and a sadder one.

Joyful, though, is the glorious invasion of birds in spring, in their

countless thousands; first the barnacle geese, then billowing waves of guillemots, razorbills, fulmars, kittiwakes, shags, skuas and gulls of every description.

Two per cent of the world's entire population of puffins descend upon the Shiantis in April after their winter wanderings, and the islands come alive with a 'whirring, eddying, a seething throng of life, drifting, and swooping, and winging in the wind, or pitching and heaving on the water', as a nineteenth-century naturalist put it. Compton Mackenzie was told that 'the Puffin comes, always on a Sunday night and remains for a week to clear out his burrow and prepare his nest'. True or not, by mid-May their eggs are everywhere, and these infinitely comical creatures are busily strutting around and batting their bills at one another. 'Ludicrous and lovable puffins!' writes Nicolson. 'Their sociability is as stiff and predictable as an evening in an Edwardian London club. Gestures of deference are required of any newcomer, and a little accepting dance of stamping feet is made by those already settled with cigars around the fender.' Loyalty to the same burrow means they tend to pair for life.

At the other end of the spectrum is the shag – 'an extraordinary, ancient, corrupt, imperial, angry, dirty, green-eyed, yellow-gaped, oil-skinned, iridescent, rancid, rock-hole glory that is *Phalacrocorax aristotelis*. They are scandal and poetry, chaos and individual rage, archaic, ancient beyond any sense of ancientness that other birds might convey.' If this is the way you like your ornithology served up, *Sea Room* is the book for you.

In the early Celtic Church the wild goose was a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and Nicolson explores the inherent sanctity of this 'desert in the sea'. This numinous sense of holiness, unfounded in anything but hazy legend and supposition, was abruptly focused by the excavation under Adam's very eyes of a large flat stone, the size of a loaf, clearly incised with a cross-within-a-circle: the pillow-stone of a seventh-century monk or missionary, probably a follower of Iona's St Columba, come to spread his holy word among the

Shiant islanders. And the reason for its burial face-down beneath the ruins of the backhouse? By the 1720s, when this ancient totem of Christian faith was interred, the new reformed church in its fervour demanded that any reminder of the old Popery, with its magical aura of associations, be expunged. It could now only be nurtured, literally, underground, while the new printed Gaelic Bible marked the growing reach of influence from the mainland and the slow draining of the islands' lifeblood.

For many years it was enough for Adam Nicolson to walk the islands, immerse himself in their atmosphere, relish their otherness, and ask no more. But having asked the questions, he had to find the answers, however obscure some of them might turn out to be. *Sea Room* is an astonishing, illuminating *tour de force*; who would have thought that those 'three specks of black pepper in the middle of that uncomfortable stretch of sea', as Compton Mackenzie once described them, could expand to a whole world of such dreamlike dimensions? Nicolson has written a homage, elegy and handbook all rolled into one, so stoke that fire and settle down to visit vicariously a destination 'as sweet as Eden and as malevolent as Hell'. I doubt you'll be disappointed.

ARIANE BANKES recently compiled, with Jonathan Reekie, the *New Aldeburgh Anthology*, another homage to place, but one considerably less demanding of its visitors.

Lighting a Candle for Poetry

HAZEL WOOD



When Jenny Swann's mother died and left her a little money, she wanted to do something with it that her intelligent, well-read mother would have liked. So she started publishing poetry – not large chunks of it between traditional hard covers, but poetry in small, tempting, bite-size helpings, attractive to those who already love poetry, and easily digestible by those who don't normally read it. The latter were the people she particularly wanted to reach. She hoped that discovering a poem they enjoyed might tickle their taste buds and lead them on to more of the poet's work.

She was keen to be green, too, so she found a local printer and some local illustrators. Her husband, who is an academic, designed a website, and she started off with four pamphlets – *Ten Poems by Walter de la Mare*, *Six Poems by Christina Rossetti*, *Ten Poems by Frances Cornford* (now, sadly, out of print) and *Miss Thompson Goes Shopping* by Martin Armstrong – each about 12 pages long and costing £4.95. She called her enterprise the Candlestick Press. In the two years since she started she's gone from strength to strength, beginning with

Twelve Poems about Birds; Ten Poems about Puddings; Ten Poems about Bicycles; Ten Poems about Love; The Twelve Poems of Christmas; Ten Poems by Walter de la Mare; Six Poems by Christina Rossetti; Martin Armstrong, Miss Thompson Goes Shopping; and Eleanor Farjeon, Mrs Malone, are available at £4.95 each from our shop Slightly Foxed on Gloucester Road (tel 020 7370 3503) or direct from the Candlestick Press (www.candlestickpress.co.uk; tel 07500 180 871).

250 copies of each title and now printing thousands, which have found their way into bookshops large and small.

Which is not surprising, for the pamphlets are beautifully produced and illustrated and make an excellent small present or substitute for an expensive card, with an envelope and an attractive bookmark on which to write your message included. The poems are obviously selected by someone who takes real joy in poetry and are a piquant mixture of the light-hearted and the serious – Edward Lear’s ‘There was an old man, on whose nose/Most birds of the air could repose . . .’ roosting next to Emily Dickinson’s “‘Hope” is the thing with feathers – /That perches on the soul’ (*Twelve Poems about Birds*); and Anon’s ‘O for a roly-poly Mother used to make./Roly-poly, treacle-duff/Roly-poly that’s the stuff . . .’ (in *Ten Poems about Puddings*, introduced by Nigel Slater) directly preceding a poignant poem of exile by Imtiaz Dharker about the cutting of a pomegranate.

What is more, the Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, has lent her support. Last Christmas she selected and introduced Candlestick Press’s *The Twelve Poems of Christmas*, and she has undertaken to contribute a selection every Christmas for the ten years in which she will hold the post, including a new poem of her own in this year’s selection.

Recently Jenny has taken on a business partner, Di Slaney, who also lives in Nottingham – like her an English graduate, who had already run her own successful business, someone to ‘bounce ideas off, who’s also good at spreadsheets and things – the missing part of my brain’ as Jenny calls her. But Jenny still puts it all together in a small room next to the kitchen. She jokes that, flitting between the two, she’s begun to lose the distinction between a food processor and a word processor.



She started out, she says, wanting to do something good with her mother’s legacy, believing that ‘the more poetry there is out there in the world, the better the world has to be’, and adding (firmly), ‘I’d

much rather be sent a gorgeous poetry pamphlet than a ghastly card or flowers which have been flown in from Kenya.' A sentiment with which I think we'd all agree.



A Spider Bought a Bicycle

A spider bought a bicycle
And had it painted black
He started off along the road
With an earwig on his back
He sent the pedals round so fast
He travelled all the day
Then he took the earwig off
And put the bike away.

Phyllis Flowerdew (1913–94)

The Girl from the Bogs

CAROLINE JACKSON

When Molly Keane's best-known novel, *Good Behaviour* (1981), was piped to the Booker Prize post by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* she did not much mind. She was 'ecstatic' over its success, calling it 'too extraordinary'. But this extravagant tone was neither archness nor Mitfordian flippancy (although, appropriate to her upbringing, she exhibited a strong, unsnobbish belief in the value of taste). She meant it. Molly Keane (1904–96) never considered herself a writer: 'It's all a great surprise to me – if you were to give me some old book of mine I'd read it with great surprise as though I had no connection with it at all.'

That phrase 'some old book' is telling. It speaks to me of the Anglo-Irish, their lack of self-regard, their stubbornness. She didn't do 'perhaps', 'quite', 'maybe' or 'rather' and, although she is celebrated for the comedy of *Good Behaviour*, her plots and characterization are bracing and unsentimental, even risky. As she wrote near the end of her life, 'the Irish are sardonic often, lyrical often, but comic – never'.

Part of the Anglo-Irish diaspora, I grew up not questioning what it meant to be berated as a 'rip' or an 'eejit' when I had been villainous

Molly Keane, *Good Behaviour* (1981) · Virago · Pb · 256pp · £8.99 · ISBN 9781844083244; and *Loving without Tears* (1951) · Virago · Pb · 264pp · £10 · ISBN 9781844084050. The following novels by Molly Keane are also available as Virago paperbacks: *The Knight of Cheerful Countenance* (1921), *Young Entry* (1928), *Taking Chances* (1929), *Mad Puppetstown* (1931), *Conversation Piece* (1932), *Devoted Ladies* (1934), *Full House* (1935), *The Rising Tide* (1937), *Two Days in Aragon* (1941), *Time after Time* (1983) and *Loving and Giving* (1988).

or wilful, or both. I've been down many a 'boreen' on either side of the Irish Sea and know that 'a cup of scald' is the best remedy when one feels 'shook', preferably taken by an ever-burning turf (never peat) fire. English boarding-school, however, instilled in me the niceties of what can and cannot, should and should not be said. So when, as a teenager, I first read *Good Behaviour*, purely because my grandmother had been a playmate of its author as a girl, I could entirely relate to, even hear, its dextrous linguistic parade, from the politesse of the narrator Aroon's family – secretive, inhibited and duplicitous overlords – to the verve of the native, serving Irish, conversely just as manipulative of their masters. And it is a marvellous story. Revisiting it nearly thirty years later was a revelation and compelled me to seek out all her other, lesser-known novels in what became an odyssey into a vanished world that, like the best fictional demesnes, exists fully formed and invites exploration.

Molly Keane's literary career followed an unusual trajectory. She was born, in County Kildare, into a prelapsarian, Anglo-Irish idyll in which beautiful houses and riding to hounds through the bogs of southern Ireland featured large. She recalled 'a society in which I wanted to get on jolly well. I know that sounds awful but it wasn't a snob thing at all. To belong to and be accepted in such a society mattered greatly in one's life.' At 17, she wrote her first novel, *The Knight of Cheerful Countenance* (1921), published by Mills & Boon, to supplement her insufficient dress allowance.

This literary activity was to continue, covertly, through several further novels under the pseudonym M. J. Farrell, a suitably anonymous moniker she had pilfered from a pub sign 'to hide my literary side from my sporting friends'. Being thought clever was shameful and Molly Keane was no closet bluestocking. This magpie instinct was, in fact, the backbone of her artistry for she seems to have emerged almost fully formed as a deeply descriptive writer, patterning her own experience in Ireland's 'big houses' with a sharp eye for the cruel, the kind, the absurd and the lovely. Yet while she wrote beautifully of houses,

horses, food, furnishings and, centrally, children and parents, most of her novels have in the hinterland, and occasionally the foreground, the unravelling of the Ireland she was born into and the troubled emergence of the Free State. As her great friend Elizabeth Bowen wrote in her memoir *Bowen's Court* (1942), 'In the matter of the Troubles and Ireland and houses and behaviour on both sides, no fiction could improve upon or exaggerate reality.'

Good Behaviour presents just such an exaggerated reality. Describing the loss of the St Charles family home and lineage and unreliably narrated by dim, galumphing Aroon St Charles, it opens with her admission of murder. This is shocking enough but its effect is heightened by the means of dispatch. Appallingly, domineering Mummie, who has starved lumpen Aroon of love, is force-fed a delicate rabbit mousse, an abhorred meat good enough only for children (not dogs, who deserve chicken). It is a delicious, unflinching conceit to enlist food as nemesis and this from the author of the innocuously entitled *Nursery Cooking* (1985). Molly Keane allows Aroon (whose Irish name, with perfect irony, means 'my beloved') to chronicle the preceding history and, in so doing, chart the self-destructive double standards which masquerade as good behaviour.

It is a finely tuned performance, allowing Aroon, by turns pitiable and laughable, to expose Mummie's hypocrisy which cannot admit her son Hubert's homosexuality or her husband's philandering with the servants and which prefers to ignore debt and progeny in favour of gardening. Yet Mummie, along with many of Molly Keane's protagonists, is no caricature. She is unremittingly foul to Aroon and compellingly plausible. It all makes for an unsettling read, not knowing who has the strongest grasp on reality – the socially functioning, the serving Irish or perhaps the eccentric and the deluded? Moments hang poised between tragedy and farce. Aroon persuades herself that allowing her beloved Richard to rest his head, fleetingly, on her pendulous bosom is a seduction and to be prized. To Richard, Hubert's lover, it is to be endured until it becomes 'a bit hot' and he

flees. From here it only needs a short step to see how, by a cruel kind of natural selection, the breed became extinct.

Good Behaviour was not a flash in the pan, nor Molly Keane a one-trick pony. Both metaphors are tempting – her prose on matters equine and culinary is superb – but deeply inappropriate. That *Good Behaviour* was beaten in the final furlong of the Booker seemed fitting – the new order outstripping the old, a symbolic rejection of the Irish Raj – and this irony would have commended itself to its author. In fact, Molly Keane's novels are emphatically not just memoirs of a fox-hunting girl. She derided Thackeray for his occasional lapse into 'the castle-to-pigsty, begorrah, top-of-the-morning' style in his *Irish Sketch Book* (1842) and this stricture underlies her own inimitable key. Her eleven novels eschew categorization. Collectively far more than the sum of their parts, they are an elegy for a remarkable, disappeared world.

Virtually uneducated, and by her own account ignored at home, as a young woman Molly effectively found herself a second family with the Perrys of County Tipperary. Their son, John Perry, was subsequently to co-author with her four plays that ran in the West End, with varying success, for over a decade. At the Perrys', Molly met Bobby Keane, four years her junior and with whom she lived, unconventionally, for five years before they married. Her husband's premature death in 1946 left her a penurious mother of two. It is widely believed that she fell silent for the following thirty years. In fact, *Loving without Tears* was published in 1951 and offers a full flavour of Molly Keane.

In *Loving without Tears*, the widowed Angel, châtelaine of Owlbeg and the apogee of maternal selfishness, manipulates her children and household in equal measure, wishing only to repossess her returning son Julian. The novel was written only a few years after Bobby Keane's death, and it is hard for Angel's predicament not to resonate: she is 'father and mother, too. A hopeless combination.' This harshness belies the clear-sighted tenderness with which Angel is drawn. She can

give as much as she takes, reminiscing to her retainer and erstwhile lover, Oliver: 'You were so sad and sweet when we found you, that last lovely spring before the war, all alone in the Austrian Tyrol – and a gentian in your hat.' It was these small accuracies that tied her charm to life.

Like *Good Behaviour*, the novel proceeds in a series of intense domestic scenes and results in a series of pairings which leave Angel alone, 'as sad as a French cemetery'. Her housekeeper, Birdie, is brilliantly described:

The woman and the gipsy in her looked for magic, believed in hauntings and the fall of the cards and changes coming at the turn of the moon. At forty-four Birdie still had looks, and very strict she was in their preservation. In youth there had been a softness of skin and hair, despairing blue eyes and a certain silly charm – the attraction of an exquisite milk pudding with summer fruit – in her abundance of sweet and healthy flesh. Such a figure should have had its pleasures and its ease, and gone to bits in its own way, but Birdie – in faithful imitation of Angel – pursued each stringent diet and course of exercise which in Angel's case gave the effect of a brittle leopard to limbs past youth, and in Birdie's hardened muscles to clutches of ostrich eggs, and to breasts like sleeping rabbits gave awful iron springs which practically went ping at a glance.

Birdie deserves her escape with Walter, a visiting manservant, and just as she is lost to Angel, so are both Angel's children. Unpredictably, Oliver departs with Julian's fiancée, Sally. The novel's dramatic conclusion, when each couple sails away, maroons and unmothers Angel. Julian's leave-taking stopped me short: 'You were quite perfect till I was twelve'. She has the wit to counter: 'I liked you best at two.'

Molly Keane is a deeply sensitive writer and this novel is imbued with a humanity that reins in the theatrical plot and offers consolation, reflecting that peculiar synthesis of the familiar and conventional

with the extraordinary that characterized the world of the Anglo-Irish.

Molly Keane lamented that ‘amusement was one of the main things that was lacking in my childhood. There wasn’t much fun . . .’ To remedy this, even her most grotesque creations are leavened with kindness and realism, Aroon and Angel alike, both appalling yet drawn with beguiling insight. Like Jane Austen, the only literary influence she acknowledged, Molly Keane claimed to write only of what she knew. By restricting her aperture she brought much into sharp and revealing focus, making a perfect microcosm of something difficult and expansive. Prefiguring J. G. Farrell’s *Troubles* (1970), she cast a dispassionate eye over the demise of the Protestant Ascendancy yet dissected it with empathy, often unpredictably. Analysing any terminal situation with wit is no mean feat. Molly Keane managed it. That she succeeded so remarkably is probably, as she admitted, because she was ‘a great old breaker-awayer’, and this spirit informed the intelligent, entrancing voice of the self-professed ‘girl from the bogs’.

CAROLINE JACKSON lives in Cambridge. She remembers childhood holidays in Ireland and grown-up life as a lawyer. She now happily attempts to fulfil her children’s creative fibs about their mother’s literary endeavours.

Spellbound

SARAH CROWDEN

When I was 7, I was given *The Tree that Sat Down* and *The Stream that Stood Still*, published as companion volumes in an abridged edition and written by Beverley Nichols. Apart from a strange dedication on the flyleaf, there were no clues about the author, no dust-jacket with photograph and potted biography. As a result, for years I assumed that Beverley Nichols, like Evelyn Waugh, was a lady novelist, having seen their names beside those of Marie Corelli, Mary Webb, Clemence Dane and Lady Fortescue on the bookshelves of my grandmother and her contemporaries. This entirely plausible belief lasted until A levels, when Evelyn's true identity was unmasked in a set text. Beverley too, I now knew, was also male and the author of archly titled books on houses and gardens. But that was all.

Evelyn Waugh's books are now classics, but Beverley Nichols has largely faded from the collective literary memory, mentioned *en passant* in the obituaries of his few remaining contemporaries. Yet he was an extraordinary man, both of his time and outside it, a man of unconventional beliefs and, oh, *so* opinionated about the world at large.

He was, as it turns out, a very Bright Young Thing (he wrote his autobiography at the age of 25), a jobbing journalist, fervently pacifist and against capital punishment, whose grandmother died laughing. He worshipped his mother and loathed his father, claiming in later life

Beverley Nichols, *The Tree that Sat Down* (1945), *The Stream that Stood Still* (1948), *The Mountain of Magic* (1950) and *The Wickedest Witch in the World* (1971), are all out of print.

to have attempted patricide three times, with poison, a garden roller, and by exposure. It must have been a terrible burden, that early promise, but it gained him an entrée into the highest echelons of 1920s London Society. The ladies who took him up treated him like an indulged pet, and he was clearly fond of them after a fashion: apart from the food and dazzling company, they provided him with prodigious amounts of copy.

After the Second World War he settled in the country to live a life of cosy domesticity, writing mostly non-fiction and advice columns for women's magazines, tending his flowers and being ruled by his beloved cats; a fitting end perhaps for one who had led such a rackety early life, hobnobbing in England and America with the likes of Noël Coward, Ivor Novello, Merle Oberon and Gertrude Lawrence.

His perspicacity, gaiety and wit shine through in his writing for children. He gives no quarter to the sensibilities of his young audience, which is probably why his writing appealed so much to me. There are animals, there is magic, and, most exciting of all, there is a far from traditional witch.

The narrative voice was a revelation, snippy and subversive, a vinegary antidote to everything I had read up till then. Enid Blyton had been the acme of my literary experience, but *The Tree that Sat Down* offered none of the usual anthropomorphizing of soft toys and domestic animals. While Enid Blyton's characters retained playground characteristics in their shrill exchanges, spitefulness and petty quarrels, Nichols's wilder animals possessed distinctly adult human characteristics – vanity, snobbishness and mendacity of a far more sophisticated kind.

The Tree that Sat Down is set in a gentle, idealized world with its Magic Wood, inhabited by a girl named Judy and her grandmother Mrs Judy, a white witch. They run a small shop under an enormous tree, and serve the animals they love a mixture of groceries and beauty products. Into this arcadia come a gangsterish boy, Sam, and his ancient grandfather Old Sam, who set up a rival concern. Sam

epitomizes everything that is bad about the human race – he revels in exploitation, ugliness and greed, and holds the animals in contempt for their innocence and ignorance about an outside world where a ‘war against men’ is raging.

Nichols offers many life lessons, the chief of which is that modernity cannot compete with old-fashioned virtues. He muses on the follies of mankind and the futility of war, on the evils of advertising and the indisputable fact that glamour seldom equals niceness. In one of his frequent digressions, he even brings in a sub-plot featuring a fallen angel.

The Tree that Sat Down was first published in 1945. Never having cared much for abridged versions of anything, I visited the British Library recently to read it in full and was amply rewarded. It contains some beautiful, lyrical writing, excised from my edition, and some even more outré stuff. Beverley urges his readers to try out the spells he describes. He was, of course, writing when the epithet ‘witch’ was used admiringly, and it is fitting that the anti-heroine of his first book to feature her is the gorgeous if wicked Miss Smith, surely an amalgam of those society and show-business ladies. ‘Human or animal?’ enquires one character. ‘A bit of both I guess. What about a witch?’ is the reply. Well, quite.

And thus Miss Smith is introduced, a vampish figure, in the mould of such tough Hollywood stars as Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck. One of the funniest scenes in the book is that of Miss Smith’s transformation from 300-year-old hag to blonde babe, secretly observed by Sam. The detail is priceless – wig, teeth, clothes pegs to lift the wrinkles, powder and paint, such information clearly gleaned from Beverley’s personal experience of the toilettes of his female mentors.

Unlike those ladies, the witch’s fellow conspirators are three extremely poisonous toads with inappropriate Biblical names, who double as an *a capella* trio – ‘made for Hollywood’ – and live for the most part in Miss Smith’s handbag. They are an antidote to the

sometimes unbearable goodness of Judy and Mrs Judy, although the latter prevents things from becoming too mawkish with some excellent elderly-lady put-downs. Mrs Judy also writes a book of magic, with a list in the front of it of her other works. Who could not enjoy the following dialogue?

‘Have you really written all these books?’ cried Judy.

‘Not exactly,’ replied Mrs Judy. ‘But it looks well. All the best authors do it.’

‘But supposing somebody asked to see them?’

‘I should say they were out of print. All the best books are.’

Despite their ceaseless efforts to eliminate their rivals, Sam and Miss Smith (who turns out to be pretty incompetent) eventually fail, but they escape the wrath of the animals. Interestingly, they escape proper punishment too, after a fashion. And of course Judy finds her Prince, disguised until the dénouement as in all the best fairytales, and there is a happy ending – a wedding, and a palace full of the latest labour-saving devices.

Miss Smith also appears in the sequel, *The Stream that Stood Still*, and two more books after that, though in the third, *The Mountain of Magic*, her inventor seemed to have tired of his creation, as he eventually tired of trying to kill his father. She returns to form, however, with an upgrade from Hampstead Garden Suburb to a residence in Mayfair, in *The Wickedest Witch in the World*, written in 1971, and this book I heartily recommend, if only for the marvellous double act of herself and a rival witch named Miss Jones.

However, now that the contours of my face are starting to melt, it is the first book in the series that I return to most, to reacquaint myself with Miss Smith’s transformation and with some of those spells.

Have I tried any of them out? You bet.

SARAH CROWDEN is slightly concerned that she may never revert to human form.

Folliries and Misinformations

DEREK PARKER

'My head', John Aubrey once said, 'was always working, never idle, and even travelling did glean some observations, some whereof are to be valued.'

No doubt at all about that, even if, as he admitted, he 'set things down tumultuarly, as if tumbled out of a Sack'. Indeed, his lack of discipline is perhaps the chief reason why the collection of his biographical notes, known as *Brief Lives*, survives as one of the most delightful of all books about life in seventeenth-century England and the personalities who lived it.

Aubrey was born in 1626, and happily for us never needed to work. The son of a debt-ridden Wiltshire squire, he squandered what money he saved from the wreck of his inheritance on good living and women ('several love and law-suits', he noted for the year 1656) and was finally bankrupted by Joane Sumner, who he planned to marry but who instead sued him, and won. From then on he 'enjoyed a happy delitescency', trading on his cheerfulness, good humour and generous talent for friendship to become a permanent guest, moving from one amiable friend's or patron's house to another, carrying with him on horseback his 'dust basket' crammed with up to two quires of folio paper covered with random notes.

His wit was equal to paying for his keep as a guest in the houses of his patrons. Almost every day he must have come down to dinner

There have been various editions of John Aubrey's *Brief Lives*, the most recent (2009) edited by Richard Barber · Boydell Press · Pb · 336pp · £14.99 · ISBN 9781843831129.

with another good anecdote, and it is not surprising that he never ran out of refuges, or that his hosts often plied him with liquor to draw out more and more dangerously libellous stories, with the result that when he rose early in the morning, as was his habit, to write up his notes, he was often ('sot that I am') suffering from a hangover, which led to some of the more obvious inaccuracies. (To do him justice, he often later corrected them.)

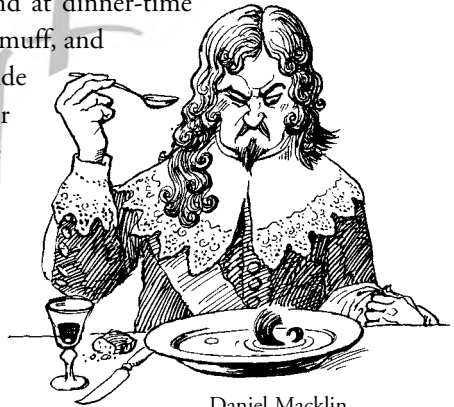
He began collecting other people's memories almost in childhood: 'When a boy' (he wrote of himself, in the third person) 'he did ever love to converse with old men, as living histories.' He was incapable of not giving a good yarn its head, and happy irrelevancies make their way into everything he wrote, however seriously he set out to compose a sober memoir. He simply could not apply himself to organizing his material – as his friend Anthony à Wood reports, 'he was a shiftless person, roving and magotie-headed, and sometimes little better than crazed. And being exceedingly credulous, would stuff his letters with folleries and misinformations, which would sometimes guid him into the paths of errour.'

Aubrey never intended to publish more than one or two of these witty sketches of the great, the good and the not-so-good worthies of his time; they started out as notes collected for a volume of biographies of Oxford men to be written by Wood. He interviewed every prominent man he came across – indeed Wood suggested he would probably one day break his neck rushing downstairs to waylay a departing celebrity. Falling out with his friend, he attempted to weld his notes together into substantial biographical essays; but form and discipline steadfastly eluded him.

He called his 'Lives' *Schediasmata* – 'pieces written extempore, on the spur of the moment', and they are all the better for that, though many of them were unfit for publication until the death of their subject: 'the truth, the naked and plain truth: which is here exposed so bare that the very *pudenda* are not covered, and afford many passages that would raise a blush in a young virgin's cheek'. Many a young

virgin will, I suspect, join the present writer in gratitude that Wood did no such thing – and that Aubrey himself did not believe he should reach for a fig leaf when he came across a good piece of gossip. Himself a lover of the ladies (writing of someone who was ‘debauched *ad omnia*’, he added, ‘we have all been young’), he was always interested in the love-life of those men whose lives he noted, and it was with approval if not envy that he recorded the story of Sir Walter Raleigh ‘getting up one of the maids of honour up against a tree in a wood’. She at first attempted to defend her honour with ‘Nay, sweet Sir Walter! Sweet Sir Walter!’ but at last was driven ‘as the danger and the pleasure at the same time grew higher’ to cry out in ecstasy ‘Swisser Swatter Swisser Swatter!’

He wrote of great men without fear or favour – of Francis Bacon’s ‘Ganymedes and favourites’; of the President of Trinity, Ralph Kettell, who abhorred long hair, and at dinner-time ‘would bring a pair of scissors in his muff, and woe be to them that sat on the outside of the table’. He was responsible for many of the spurious stories of the famous which ended up in more respectable biographies – that Shakespeare was a butcher’s boy, for instance, and that Ben Jonson ‘killed Mr Marlowe, the poet, coming from the Green Curtain playhouse’.



Daniel Macklin

As a book, *Brief Lives* was, then, a sort of accident. Aubrey’s notes were first edited and published in 1898 by the Reverend Andrew Clark – and his is still the most complete edition, though he was rather free with Victorian fig leaves. Later selections have happily removed these. Of his other work, more than a few diverting pages survive. He always took an interest in the young – in his *Idea of Education of Young Gentlemen* he quoted with approval the view of

one contemporary that foreign travel was excellent for young men, provided they avoided 'the frippery of France, especially Paris' which 'would too much allure them to vanity and make them disrelish their more serious and useful studies'. Germany would be perfectly safe, and indeed an admirable corrective for young men who 'are now entered into the dangerous time of temptation of love, which by staying at home they would infallibly fall into – lawful or unlawful – but being kept in action, body and mind, in a strange country they will not be at leisure to be attacked by Cupid'. On the other hand he approved of the attitude of the Cambridge baronet Sir William Platers, who was not only 'a great admirer and lover of handsome women, and kept several' but 'took care to provide sound and agreeable females' for his son.

He attacked the 'tyrannical beating and dispiriting of children from which many tender and ingenious do never recover again'. He admits himself to waking from dreams of the fear and trembling he had suffered during his earliest years under the lash of the ill-natured William Sutton of Blandford School in Dorset. Rather than suffer so, he wrote, 'a child of mine should never learn the Latin tongue, but be content with that of his mother'.

Riding about the country from one host's house to another, he magpied inveterately, stuffing into his pocket with equal care notes of probable, possible and highly questionable facts and fallacies, which happily survived in an enormous mass of manuscripts ending up in the Ashmolean, the British Museum or private hands. He was always furious at the cavalier way in which most of his contemporaries treated old manuscripts. The rector of his local church, for instance, used the records of Malmesbury Abbey to stuff up the bung-holes of his barrels of home-brewed ale, and Aubrey's schoolmasters – indeed, most people he knew – used old manuscripts to cover the outside of their books; he saw the local glover wrapping gloves in paper covered with sixteenth-century calligraphy (so went the MS of *Hamlet?*). 'In my grandfather's days,' he said, 'the manuscripts flew

about like butterflies.’ He did his best to save some of them, and took great care of his own.

Though he is best known for *Brief Lives*, he was not solely interested in gossip: his chief concern was in antiquarian research. A devoted follower of Camden and Leland, he conceived the idea of writing a huge book which he would call *Monumenta Britannica*, and which would deal with the topography, archaeology and local history of the whole of England. He left only voluminous notes for it, and in his lifetime published, in 1696, only *Miscellanies*, a strange, crack-brained book of superstitions and curiosities. No one thought well of it. His notes on local history and topography are as fragmentary and undisciplined as his biographical notes – though he travelled far to assemble them. In the margins of his text he often scribbles the Latin word *quaere* – ‘go and find out’; and he almost always did – though the resulting observations and generalizations are questionable, while at the same time making his conclusions irresistibly entertaining.

Readers in the Vale of Gloucester, for instance, may or may not agree that in general they – referred to, incidentally, as ‘the Aborigines’ – are ‘phlegmatic, skins pale and livid, slow and dull, heavy of spirit . . . melancholy, contemplative and malicious, generally apt to be fanatics’. The happy denizens of Hereford, on the other hand, are ‘of a brisk spirit, clear voices, speak quick, move quick . . . longaevous, not covetous and stingy, but hospitable, quick-witted, nimble, quick upon the catch’.

However unreliable, it all makes for reading as entertaining as his conversation must have been – and the old gossip was absolutely right when he remarked: ‘How these curiosities would be quite forgotten, did not such idle fellows as I am put them down!’

DEREK PARKER and his wife retired to Australia in 2002, where they and their two fox terriers enjoy life in Sydney. Derek regularly broadcasts on the city’s 24-hour classical music station, now streamed to the world on the Net – you might catch him at 2MBS.com.

A Touch of Morton's

OLIVER PRITCHETT

Special thanks go to the Real Tennis Club of Cambridge. This fine body earned the gratitude of Claire Tomalin when she was writing her wonderful biography of Samuel Pepys and she mentions it in the Acknowledgements. Someone at the club told her the dimensions of a real tennis ball – which was the actual size of the stone surgeons removed from Pepys in 1658 in an operation which is described in unsparing detail in the book. So we can work out that the stone was about two and a half inches in diameter. And we can almost feel Pepys's pain.

I love Acknowledgements. They are the Pearl & Dean moment before the main feature at the cinema, like taking time to admire the colour of the wine before the first sip, like standing on the diving board and admiring the scenery before you take the plunge. You can linger over the author's courtesies just to put off the expected pleasures of the book.

I confess also to a long-standing affection for the Acknowledgements in theatre programmes. They are part of the thrill of going to the theatre, reading the programme in those last seconds of anticipation before the house lights go down: Wigs by Wig Creations, cigarette lighter by Alfred Dunhill, stockings by Kayser, French windows by Drury Lane Glazing Co. Ltd., tennis rackets by Slazenger, cigarettes by Du Maurier, and so on.

I can find examples of pleasing book Acknowledgements from volumes which are within arm's reach at this moment. My copy of *The Flann O'Brien Reader*, edited by Stephen Jones at the University of Connecticut and published in 1978, wins you over with its

breeziness. He thanks the university 'for use of its copying machine, Scotch tape and midnight oil'. He is much obliged to William Kelly, of the same university, 'for his knowledge of gallows humor' (always useful when you are dealing with Flann O'Brien). He is also grateful to Helen Murphy Preston for recovering some bits of Dublin slang and to George Connaughton 'who cleaned up the mess'. Somehow you get a flavour of the atmosphere in which the book was produced – scholarship with a nice touch of the chaotic.

From the Preface of David McKie's *Great British Bus Journeys* (2006) you know immediately that you are being promised out-of-the-way information, interesting connections and enjoyable diversions. And that promise is abundantly fulfilled. In his preface, the author quite rightly pays tribute to local historians and librarians, the unsung and underpaid heroes and heroines who contribute so much to our knowledge and entertainment. He also acknowledges the help of Bryan McAllister 'who came up with a wealth of information about buses, some of it culled from sources of pleasing obscurity'. What could be more satisfying to a writer than a source of pleasing obscurity?

Sometimes an author is grateful to someone who was no help at all. In his preface to *The Companion Guide to Kent and Sussex* (1973) Keith Spence writes: 'My final thanks go to an unknown trudge along the Pilgrims' Way, who told me that I was following the route of the Pilgrim Fathers to America, and thus lightened a dismal November morning.'

The Acknowledgements in the front of *The Reckoning*, Charles Nicholl's account of the murder of Christopher Marlowe (1992), whet the appetite for the intrigue that is to follow. The author thanks Alan Haynes for his knowledge of Elizabethan spycraft and also Adrian While for advice on eye injuries. Mysteriously he also thanks Paul Murray 'for the silver penny of *circa* 1553'.

The long roll call of people Selina Hastings would like to thank for help with her biography of Nancy Mitford suggests the guest-list

for a spectacularly grand European ball. I picture Lady Diana Cooper being swept across the room in the arms of Comte Jean de Baglion, the Princesse de Beauvau-Craon sharing a joke under the chandelier with Contessa Anna-Maria Cicogna, and Lady Dashwood, over by the French windows, in earnest conversation with Prince Jean-Louis de Faucigny-Lucinge.

My fondness for the Acknowledgements genre is also partly due to the fact that I have an embarrassing disease known as Morton's Affliction. Sufferers have a compulsion to read lists of names. The disease is named after the genius J. B. Morton, creator of the Beachcomber column in the *Daily Express*, and refers explicitly to one of the running jokes in that column, the *List of Huntingdonshire Cabmen*. This alleged book, in several volumes, receives extravagant praise. Here is an extract from a review of Volume III:

An age devoted to pleasure-seeking and cheap sensation is, perhaps, inclined to underrate the importance of this exhaustive list of cabmen's names. But an attempt has been made in this new volume to counteract any tendency to dullness by abandoning the usual alphabetical order. Thus it is with a pleasant shock of surprise that one finds, on page 231, 'Jelf, E. N., Barlow, D. J.' Such happy juxtapositions as this stimulate the interest of the reader and give a semblance of narrative to what the undiscerning might call a mere catalogue of names. The volume concludes with 'Henderson, N.', and leaves one wondering whether there will be other Hendersons in Volume IV, promised for the autumn season.

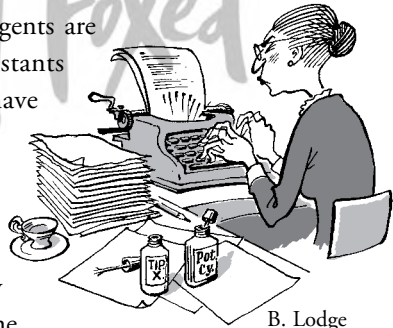
The reviewer goes on to quote an extract to give a taste of this monumental work. Here is an extract of that extract: *Manton, W. R., Caldecott, R., Lister, Tom, Robinson, B. L., Robinson, E. T., Prout, V.* . . . The juxtaposition of the two Robinsons, the reviewer observes, is a masterpiece of style, as daring as it is unexpected.

Morton's Affliction also manifests itself in a tendency to read the Birth Announcements in newspapers, to keep up-to-date with what people are calling their children these days: Isis Zara, Orlando, a brother for Jago, Hugo and Milo, Annabel Clara, Beatrice Poppy, Alicia Poppy, a sister for Fortinbras . . .

Sufferers will study the Court and Social page to check the list of names of those attending memorial services. The pleasure is in working out the connection of people attending with the distinguished person whose life is being celebrated and with each other. There are stories in there.

That is the secret of the charm of Acknowledgements. They are not just an act of good manners and not just the literary equivalent of an Oscar winner's speech; you feel they are the ingredients of a novel.

There are certain conventions in the Acknowledgements genre. Academic Foundations are always generous and academics on the same subject are generous with their time; spouses are always long-suffering, agents are enthusiastic, advisers are wise, assistants are tireless, especially when they have been given the task of typing the manuscript. Any errors or omissions are, of course, the responsibility of the author.



B. Lodge

Sometimes I wonder unworthily if a little sly name-dropping has gone into the list of people the author would like to thank for their sage advice. Is the Bishop of Bath and Wells there because he made a serious contribution? Perhaps he simply offered some general observation, such as: 'Put not thy trust in Wikipedia.' And what wise counsel did the Warden of All Souls provide? Maybe he said: 'I should take a coat if you're going out; it could turn quite chilly later on.'

As I've said, you can concoct a story from the ingredients on the Roman-numeralled Acknowledgements pages. The author owes a special debt to the Hon. Mrs Hermione Tadcaster for her generous hospitality at her lovely home in Huntingdonshire while he was going through the extensive family archives. And there's the Hon. Mrs Tadcaster wondering when the author is going to leave her lovely home. He's been there seven weeks; she suspects he is spinning things out and she can't help wishing the family archives were less extensive.

The grateful author is indeed spinning things out, because he is in hiding from his enthusiastic agent who keeps telephoning to ask when he may expect to see the manuscript. The author is not sure if it is safe to return home to his long-suffering wife who stopped being long-suffering seven weeks ago and is now heavily engaged with her own major non-fiction work which is being generously supported by the same Foundation that actually turned her husband down for a grant. At home, all tables and flat surfaces are now covered with the wife's research and she has begun seeing an agent who, she has to admit, is charmingly enthusiastic . . .

The Hon. Mrs Tadcaster, feeling less hospitable every day, considers a plot to prise the author away from the family archives. She tries to tempt him to call on Mrs Hoddlesden-Smart, in Derbyshire, who is believed to be in possession of some revealing letters and is also reputed to be extremely hospitable.

When this fails she drops hints of sensational revelations to be found in the archives at the Harry Ransom Center in the University of Texas, Austin. She also plays on the author's paranoia by suggesting that Professor A. L. Beamish (who had been so generous with his time and so wise in his advice on the project) is slyly working on his own book on the same subject and is, at this very moment, heading for Austin.

There will have to be a murder. And, of course, a long list of suspects. The finger of suspicion points to Caldecott, R., but there is also something fishy about Prout, V. Could the two Hendersons be

in it together? And where was Comte Jean de Baglion on the night in question?

My own hunch is that the culprit is the tireless Miss Sylvia Wrench who is typing the manuscript. She seemed so meek and put-upon, but all the time she was seething with resentment. After the forty-third batch of author's corrections, in his awful handwriting, she finally cracked. And, of course, she's now writing her own book.

OLIVER PRITCHETT is thankful that he is still getting work since retiring from the *Sunday Telegraph* after thirty years.

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed



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Beverley Nichols, <i>The Tree that Sat Down; The Stream that Stood Still; The Mountain of Magic; The Wickedest Witch in the World</i>	79
Adam Nicolson, <i>Sea Room: An Island Life</i>	64
W. G. Sebald, <i>Austerlitz</i>	61
Joann Sfar, <i>Le Chat du rabbin</i> series: <i>La Bar-Mitsva; Le Malka des lions; L'Exode; Le Paradis terrestre; Jérusalem d'Afrique</i>	43
R. C. Sherriff, <i>The Fortnight in September; Greengates</i>	38

Coming attractions . . .

JAMES HAMILTON-PATERSON follows a spy to Cairo

WILLIAM PALMER walks out with a young dog

MICHAEL BARBER admires an elderly mischief-maker

TRILBY KENT shares a desk with Claudine

DENNIS BUTTS finds poetry in the Second World War

ELISABETH INGLES spends time with the Dean

JAMES ROOSE-EVANS sees Europe with Augustus Hare

CHRISTIAN TYLER browses in a remote bookshop



**The Royal Society
of Literature**

Monday, 13 December at 7 p.m.: The T. S. Eliot Memorial Meeting: Sean O'Brien, Don Paterson, Fiona Sampson, 'A Celebration of Peter Porter'. Chair: Anthony Thwaite
Peter Porter, who died in April, has been described as 'a cultural epoch all to himself'. Four fellow poets – Anthony Thwaite, who knew Porter for over half a century, Fiona Sampson, editor of *Poetry Review*, and Don Paterson and Sean O'Brien, who edited Porter's recently published *Selected Poems* – celebrate his work.

Lectures take place in the Kenneth Clark Lecture Theatre, Courtauld Institute, Somerset House, Strand, London WC2, and begin punctually at 7 p.m. A limited number of tickets are available for members of the public at all RSL events, sold on the door, from 6 p.m., on a first-come, first-served basis, for £8 (£5 concessions). RSL membership is open to all. Please call us on 020 7845 4676 or visit www.rslit.org.

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