

# The Critic



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## China Ascendant

Is Beijing picking  
the wrong fight?



# 9 SERIOUS CHOICES

**WHAT HAS NOT HAPPENED IN THE** war in Ukraine? Russia has not withdrawn. Nor has her economy collapsed under Western sanctions. Her armies in Ukraine are still in the field and being reinforced for a new offensive.

Almost 20 per cent of the country is in Putin's blood-soaked hands. As Lucas Webber details in this issue, although Russian military incompetence arguably squandered her opportunity to knock over the entire independent Ukrainian state a year ago, no one should think outright defeat is close for Moscow now. Grimly, her armies seem set to advance.

How does this proxy war differ from other Western wars of choice this century? We have chosen to ally ourselves with Ukraine. This was courageous and right; we did not have to do this — a truth gruesomely illuminated by the behaviour of many foot-dragging European countries, and by the indifference of non-aligned ones.

But, demonstrably, this time we are not fighting an enemy whose formal state structures fall over on contact. Russia's capacity for retaliation means we cannot act with near-impunity, as we have been accustomed to do since the end of the Cold War.

Despite Western sanctions, Russia has, with much Chinese support (and Indian acquiescence), been able to keep her war going. We have kept Ukraine in the field, but were most Nato countries themselves to fight this sort of war, it would be a race to see whether they ran out of men, munitions or morale first.

Our industrial base has been hollowed out and there is no long-term thinking on how to supply and sustain a prolonged decoupling from the arteries supplying the West with its cheap fixes.

And as Mark Almond details in our cover story this month, we face in China a country determined to learn the lessons of how America succeeded Britain rather than repeat how Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany failed to do so.

**THUS, IN FRAMING POLICY TOWARDS** Ukraine, the real question ought to focus

upon who is the greater enemy: Russia or China? And how does the prolongation of the Ukrainian conflict impact upon that calculation?

A year supporting Ukraine, a decade in Iraq and 20 years in Afghanistan should make the English-speaking world chary about answering the question, "Where did it get us?" We know where it got so many of them: dead, displaced and destroyed.

Reckoning with the failure, political and military, of Anglo-American interventions abroad is vastly overdue. This is not least because Iraq and Afghanistan, contrary to what the bunco-men and propagandists claimed at the time, did not fundamentally matter to us.

By contrast, strategically, Chinese intentions and alliances do matter to the West as much as controlling Ukraine seemingly does to the regime in the

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Kremlin. If we want our interventions to work, and not just be geopolitical gestures, it is long past time for realism to dictate priorities.

**WHAT DO WE REALISTICALLY EXPECT** will happen? A Russian "victory" could take various forms. It could amount to more Ukrainian territory falling under Russian control but "free Ukraine" valiantly retaining its autonomy.

Or that autonomy could be clipped by Russia like a latter-day "Finlandisation". Worse still, the rump Ukrainian state could be forced into a client status even more wretched than Belarus.

Whatever the outcome, Western states will move on, in due course, as they did rather speedily over the annexation of Crimea in 2014, either to renew Russian business and energy links or with the objective of detaching Russia from China.

In the absence of strategic thinking, what other humiliating climbdown in the face of reality is to be expected?

But what if Russia loses, and in the



process the war doesn't escalate into one we become formally involved in fighting? Although there are few signs of it so far, perhaps it might result in a more democratic, pro-Western Russia, which becomes, on a gigantic scale, what we failed so utterly to achieve in Iraq and Afghanistan, despite defeating and occupying those states.

Or do we expect Russia to fall apart? If so, would China benefit from this more than the West? If Putin is killed or left to spend the remainder of his days in a closely guarded dacha, would he be replaced by someone chastened and slightly less bad, or revanchist and even worse? Who knows what we can expect because we show no capacity for realistically assessing what we have done in our foreign policy this century, and why it went so badly wrong in every single instance.

Putin's specious claims to be interested in what Russians outside Russia popularly want can be dismissed as fully as any claim he cares about what Russians inside Russia want. But having championed self-determination at the expense of the integrity of an established state for Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina and — most contentiously of all — Kosovo, Western principles are ill-adapted to make a stand on the future of Crimea or Donbas.

We have been willing to help Ukraine because we can afford to do so. At what point would that support become a price



The Victory Day military parade in Moscow on 9 May 2022

## The one strategy we must avoid is half-hearted support that only prolongs Ukraine's agony

we cannot or simply do not wish to pay?

German ambivalence about Ukraine – her hugely greater economic (and psychological) stake in Russia compared to Britain or America being very much the issue – is much sneered at in London and Washington. However, this reflects the tendency of the Anglophone chattering classes to be either licking Berlin's face or vomiting on her shoes.

There is a happy medium, and while Germany may not have found it, Berlin at least seems to know it conceptually exists.

**LUCAS WEBBER CHARTS CLEARLY** that the war in Ukraine is militarily tilting Russia's way; this war matters to her as none of ours have done to us this century. Those now in power in Moscow know they're unlikely to die peacefully in their sleep in Monégasque penthouses decades hence if they lose now. It is a matter of life

and death for them and perhaps, too, for their collaborating crooks and satraps in Russian-occupied Ukraine. They are not going to give up tamely.

Mark Almond illuminates a deeper truth that this cold war redux with China is not comparable to the former show-down with the Soviet Union. The struggle against Soviet-inspired Communism automatically gifted the West's allies – often very disagreeable ones – who feared for the future of their regimes domestically.

India, Brazil, South Africa, Israel, Saudi Arabia were all with us then. They are not with us now. They don't fear Chinese capitalism: why should they? What threat is that to them? It doesn't – yet – tell them what to do at home or bomb them if they don't toe the line.

Imperial Germany failed to supplant Britain's place in the sun because although she had the capacity, she lacked the resources. China has every capacity America has and more besides. What she lacks is what Russia has: resources.

The one strategy that must be avoided is a half-hearted reinforcement for Ukraine that is too under-powered to achieve results, prolongs the agony, and cements Moscow's and Beijing's "no limits" partnership because we lack the will and resources to match such determination.

We have serious choices in front of us, and we must make them soon. ●

# The Critic

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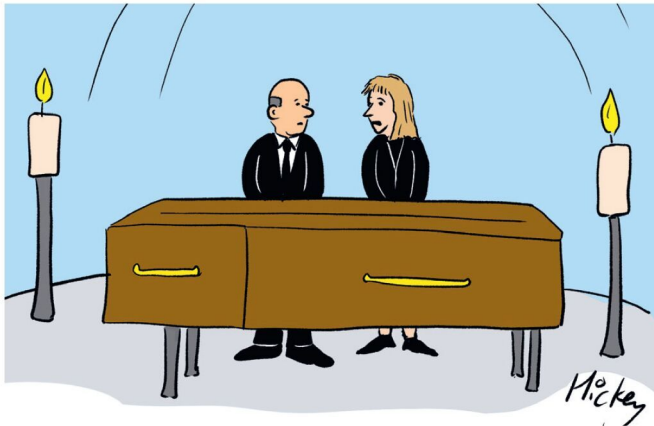
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"The really tragic part is that his podcast was finally starting to gain a following."

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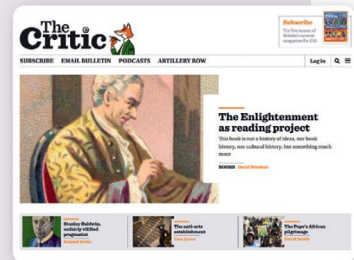
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# Gender gymnastics



Lola Salem

“Female” role models now include the former Olympic men’s decathlon champion Caitlyn Jenner, awarded *Glamour’s* Woman of the Year award in 2015

“**THE FUTURE IS FEMALE.**” Cohorts of corporate t-shirts and signs have displayed that progressive motto for a while. It didn’t age very well.

Today, what counts as a “female” leader is subject to ideological scrutiny. A variety of qualifying labels — such as “queer” and “gender fluid” — are attached. Intersectional theorists and activists promote “uterus-havers” on an equal footing with gender “diverse” people.

“Female” role models include, for example, Philip Bunce, a male Credit Suisse director and occasional cross-dressing fashionista who was included in Britain’s top 100 female executives for the 2018 Champions of Women in Business awards.

It also embraces the former Olympic Games men’s decathlon champion (and now transgender media celebrity), Caitlyn Jenner, who was awarded *Glamour’s* Woman of the Year Award in 2015. In sports, it leaves the field open to male athletes competing against women, as seen with swimmer Will “Lia” Thomas, cyclist Zach “Emily” Bridges, or MMA fighter Boyd “Fallon Fox” Burton.

That shift is not simply a matter of terminology. It bears political consequences. It is clear in the way the designation is prescribed to (biological) women specifically. Chanting “Girl Power” comes with a prescriptive clause, that of gender ideology.

Despite being materially sidelined by the erosion of their sex, women have an important role to play in this epistemological revolution. It is only through their marketed consent, their self-policing contentment, and their permissive nods that the cultural revolution continues. However, not all women can become these Captive Minds. It takes a very special type of “leader” to do so.



**THERE IS STILL A GAP BETWEEN** popular feeling and activist objectives. For much of the public, women’s fair access to leadership roles and the gender-gap are still priority issues. But in executive, political and thought leadership discourse, the debate has already moved on.

There, the priorities focus on securing the right *type* of female leader: leaders who agree to trans-inclusive feminism, and don’t see any issue with misogynistic banners such as the now infamous “Kill TERFs” or the poetically worded “Transphobes Can Suck My Pink Strap”.

The lag between popular and leadership priori-

ties are especially evident in academia. In the latter, the Future has already arrived. For the 2019 intake across Britain’s Russell Group universities, women made up 55.6 per cent of admissions. Since 2018, female students have been in the majority at Oxford University, where they now exceed 55 per cent of all UK-domiciled undergraduates.

Outside the Russell Group, the same trend can be observed. In a 2020-21 report for the University of the Arts London, about two thirds of all students were female, with a handful of individuals not “identifying” with their biological sex. Yet events promoting the need to increase women in leadership have not stopped. Merely, their focus has changed.



**IN SPRING 2022, I WAS REACHING** two terms: that of my pregnancy and of my DPhil at Oxford. I wanted a change of intellectual scene, so I decided to attend one of the feminist workshops that I had, until then, warily avoided.

Knowing that young mothers in academia were not a priority for the usual advocates of diversity and inclusivity, I felt it was time for me to take part in a meeting discussing the representation of women in my profession. The event opened with a tour of people’s personal pronouns, something I swore to myself that I’d never partake in. Unwilling to play the game but conscious that useless tension would make the situation rather difficult, I claimed that people could refer to me as “eight months pregnant”.

Everyone laughed. I didn’t think anything more of it. A few days later, however, as I laid on the bed where I gave birth, an email arrived. According to its author, my joke had been nothing but transphobic bigotry, which I needed to acknowledge and atone for. Never mind the fact that being pregnant was a matter of “sex”, not “gender”, and nothing else; the organisers had immediately read through the lines.

They understood very well that the mere refusal to play the game was proof of my non-submission. It was thus explained in great detail how men too could bear children and give birth.

In the English-speaking world, the art of toeing the line on these illiberal issues has become a matter of political survival for most women. Those who bind their career progress to gender ideology not



ANDREW MILLIGAN/PAALAMY STOCK PHOTO

only believe that anyone who isn't stale, pale, and male is the future, they think that it is their sacred duty to proselytise and enforce that message.



**OF COURSE, MALE POLITICIANS** are never far behind. But for them, supporting gender ideology is one tool amongst many to advance their agenda. As such, their vague gestures are not as threatening as those deployed by female politicians.

That phenomenon is particularly acute amongst Labour MPs. Women who jump on the ideological bandwagon double down whenever they can. Zarah Sultana, Dawn Butler, and Lisa Nandy all seem to have given up on biological reality and its consequences for women's safety.

However, when some of their female colleagues, like Rosie Duffield and the SNP's Joanna Cherry, have attempted to raise the issue, it has been at the cost of marginalisation in their own party. Yet Keir Starmer can state in March 2022 that "a woman is a female adult, and in addition to that trans women are women" whilst agreeing in November last year that the transitioning of children without parents' consent shouldn't be allowed.

**Female role models:**  
**Philip Bunce, Caitlin Jenner, Isla Bryson**

Is it courage or opportunism that pushed the Leader of the Opposition to discount one of Labour's frequently repeated policies? Whatever the reason, pushback did not topple him.

Abroad, it is telling that women are generally the first to lead the path on these political issues. In France, for example, Sandrine Rousseau is the new ambassador of "ecofeminism" which plants the seed of queer and gender theory in the political soil. In countries where social liberalism is greatly advanced, such as Scandinavia, female politicians never cease to betray their electorate.

Norway's Minister of Justice, Monica Mæland, led a national ban on hate speech against transgender people, stating that protection was an "imperative". Paradoxically, postmodern female leaders perceive their role as that of a carer, a rather traditional function for the Fair Sex, for all varieties of micro-identities that allegedly suffer systemic discrimination.



**BUT BECOMING A CAPTIVE MIND** is a Faustian bargain. Whether you personally suffer from it or see your other political causes squandered, endorsing gender ideology as a female politician always comes with a cost.

Nicola Sturgeon is the latest test for that hypothesis. The SNP leader has so tied her political success to such ideological campaigns that the *raison d'être* of her own party suffers. Until popular outcry forced some nifty footwork, her attempted legislation could not have been clearer: she believes rapists should be treated according to their self-identified gender. Who would want to follow such a separatist leader?

The backpedalling over the case of male-bodied but female-identifying rapist Isla Bryson, who was initially assigned to a female prison, was excruciating to witness. For Sturgeon, sending him to a prison for men cannot be put in terms of biological reality. Her struggle over that simple point with the ITV interviewer, Peter Smith, reached unbelievably high levels of Kafkaesque logic.

There must be a wider reckoning for these ideology-driven political strategies. No one has the right to dismantle reality in order to secure political or personal gain. There is no progress in this, only a perverted management of decline that twists and breaks civic society to a point of no return. ●

## BLANKET WOKERY

Your correspondent, Jonathan Laycock, rightly asks why so many university departments have embraced and re-enforced the dogmas of “critical theory” (LETTERS, DECEMBER-JANUARY). He wonders whether it is attributable to the incentives generated from the funding streams of other public bodies.

That may be a part of the story, but alas it begs the question why those bodies offer such incentives. Much of the impetus is generated by universities adopting *en masse* the strictures of the so-called Race Equality Charter. This was created not “bottom-up” by academics, but by Advance HE, an accreditation body with charitable status that is funded “top-down” by university vice-chancellors.

Nonetheless, a “bottom-up” charade is performed by Advance HE because vice-chancellors mandate all newly-appointed academic staff to join the body, supposedly to give their teaching activity a more professional status.

No doubt similar principle-based charters and declarations, driven by the work of other “equality-minded” organisations with charitable status, exist for other public and professional bodies. But why has this cosy blanket of wokery come to cover all?

It is a simple formula: if it can be claimed that everyone else is doing whatever a supposedly external accreditation body demands, then compliance to that norm can be more easily justified and demanded. Furthermore, if everyone does it, then no one is exposed to risk from not doing it.

But more importantly, given that university vice-chancellors are overwhelmingly highly-remunerated white males, they must be able to respond to the charge that such inequality in outcome is the product of their own institutions’ discriminatory practices.

This now becomes very easy to do. For when challenged on this by some coterie of student activists, universities don’t need to defend their personal virtues with arguments that speak to the differences between opportunities and outcomes. They say the diagnosis is accepted, that it is



**Dogeball**

utterly unjust that they enjoy such privilege, but that there is now a collective charter that will stop it happening in future. How neat and tidy is that?

And of course, for an individual academic to challenge the normalisation of this wokery is to invite “cancellation”, or at least the HR department’s equivalent to the trial of Socrates some 2,000 years ago. So much for the advance of higher education.

**Rod Thomas**

NEWCASTLE UPON TYNE

## NEW UNIVERSITY BLUES

In 1966, I joined some of the first undergraduates to read physics at the almost new University of Warwick. My sojourn must, therefore, have overlapped that of politics lecturer, Lincoln Allison. His account of the university at that time (FREE SPEECH: WE SHOULD TRY IT AGAIN, FEBRUARY) is most evocative. I actually attended the meeting he mentions which was addressed by a representative of the South African embassy.

Back in the sixties, we were well up to the challenge of pioneering a new university, but we were hardly assisted by the antics of what became known, somewhat tautologically, as the “loony left”. Sit-ins, sleep-ins, teach-ins, occupations and “demos” were practically continuous.

If it wasn’t the “just cause” of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, it was the infallibili-

ty of the *Thoughts of Chairman Mao*.

Sociologists, with little to challenge them intellectually, would call emergency general meetings at odd hours in an attempt to suggest that the student body as a whole pledged uncritical support to the IRA.

The History faculty made its own contribution. It contained E. P. Thompson, who believed the university should be dedicated to the overthrow of capitalism or, as he put it in *Warwick University Ltd* (1971), “encouraging ‘subversive’ thought and activity, for a dynamic renewal of the whole society in which [the university] operates” (p.166).

When it transpired that the sound and fury of his acolytes signified hardly anything at all to the wider institution, he slunk off for a two-decade sulk.

If the loony left were a pest inside the university, they were a nightmare outside. Since there had been no time for Warwick to generate an academic reputation, garish accounts of their antics were practically the only thing potential employers, for example, had encountered. Happily, half a century has seen this impression superseded.

**Dr Iain Salisbury**

EDGBASTON, BIRMINGHAM

## PLAYING SOLO

I enjoyed Robin Ashenden’s compilation list of his favourite guests across the 80 years of Radio 4’s *Desert Island Discs* (MY PERFECT CASTAWAY, FEBRUARY). One oddity of this otherwise brilliant radio format is that some guests have appeared more than once — as if a single desert island wasn’t enough to contain them.

A further peculiarity was that one of the few so favoured was the pianist, Dame Moura Lympany, whose life and times, whatever her ability to tinkle the ivories, hardly justified her July 1979 encore. Yet, she seized the opportunity and chose recordings of her own work for all eight discs.

I suppose if you’re going to be alone on an island, you might as well embrace the concept.

**Janice Rogers**

LONDON



# The myth of Winston's legacy

## *The European Court of Human Rights was never a Conservative project*

**A**S THE GOVERNMENT makes noises about leaving the European Convention on Human Rights for the umpteenth time, defenders of the Strasbourg regime have added an effective new argument to their rhetorical arsenal. The UK should not leave the ECHR, they say, because the ECHR was a British creation, and even a Tory one.

Leaving the ECHR would be rejecting the sacred legacy of Winston Churchill, and surely no self-respecting Conservative could engage in what amounts to right-wing cancel culture.

It is a line that has been adopted, among others, by Sir John Major, several *Guardian* columnists, and EachOther, a charity that aims "to put the human into human rights" through storytelling, and the brainchild of the author of a recent book about Covid-19 lockdowns which was reviewed in these pages.

One has to admit it is a clever piece of rhetoric. It flatters Conservatives' love for superficial history, invokes the glory days of British power, and fits well with Westminster's obsession with being "world-leading" as a fig leaf for national decline. It is also, as it happens, complete nonsense.

IT IS TRUE THAT, ONCE out of office in 1945, Churchill made rousing speeches in favour of a united Europe, complete with a charter of rights. But he was characteristically vague about whether the UK would join such a federal entity. But safely back in Downing Street, he denied that he was ever a federalist, and indeed never showed the slightest interest in the ECHR, allegedly the result of his exertions.

The other dead Tory enlisted for the effort is David Maxwell Fyfe, later Lord Chancellor Kilmuir. Conventionally, he is best remembered for

complaining to Macmillan that he had been sacked with less notice than would be given to a cook, to which the catty reply was that it was harder to find a good cook than a good minister.

Maxwell Fyfe was also, unusually among senior British lawyers, a genuine enthusiast for the ECHR, which he helped to draft. Now considered one of its "founding fathers", he has enjoyed an unexpected revival as the symbol of the Conservative commitment to the European human rights regime. Some of his descendants have even formed a sort of choir which goes around the country singing a song cycle about how their great-grandfather invented human rights.

Quite what the pro-hanging, anti-coloured immigration Maxwell Fyfe, who according to his wife had an innocent man hanged *pour encourager les autres*, and who insisted he was not "going down in history as the man who made sodomy legal" would have made of his reinvention as a liberal icon by his progeny is best left unimagined.

THE ECHR MAXWELL FYFE negotiated was very different to the version in force today. It contained far fewer rights (the British opposed the inclusion of rights to free movement, asylum, to nationality, and against arbitrary expulsion, none of which made it into the final document). The death penalty was explicitly allowed.

There was a human rights court on paper, but individuals could not petition it unless their country allowed them, and the UK simply refused to accept the jurisdiction of the Court because of the attendant loss of sovereignty, which the Attlee government refused to contemplate.

Even then, some ministers opposed the ECHR because they suspected it was a

**Safely back in Number Ten, Churchill never showed any interest in the ECHR**



right-wing plot to make economic nationalisation illegal (a belief once shared by a young Keir Starmer).

In the end, Attlee's cabinet only agreed to sign on the mistaken advice that the Convention was unlikely to make a difference in practice and because joining would make the UK look less opposed to European integration than it actually was. Such was the Labour government's lack of interest that the foreign secretary did not even bother to go to the signature ceremony, delegating the task to the most junior minister he could find.

EVEN THEN, ALMOST NO politician understood what the ECHR did, and many were horrified once they found out. When, four years after the Convention entered into force, Strasbourg dispatched a commission of investigation to the crown colony of Cyprus, the foreign secretary, Selwyn Lloyd, told officials he "knew very little about it but expressed dismay and incredulity that the Convention could have got us into this fix and even more incredulity that it applies to so many colonies".

Another minister whined plaintively that "we never conceived of the Convention being used against us like this". Lloyd was so enraged by his discovery of what the ECHR did that he wanted the UK to leave it. But officials resisted, successfully arguing that doing so "would expose us to attacks by liberals everywhere".

Even Kilmuir, once in government, found himself embarrassed by his earlier exuberant advocacy of a maximalist convention, and had to explain to the House of Lords why he now opposed Britain submitting itself to Strasbourg. The UK would not accept the European Court until 1966, under Harold Wilson.

There may be good reasons to support Britain's continued membership of the ECHR. That the Convention is somehow a crowning achievement of British conservatism is emphatically not one of them. ●



# Woman About Town



LISA  
HILTON

**M**ESTRE MIGHT BE the most hideous town in Italy. Venice's ugly sister snarls rather than sprawls at the edge of the lagoon, a hopeless tangle of railway, flyover, flimsy high-rise hotels and the curdled bitterness of the millions of tourists who have been conned into believing they



are staying near San Marco. Almost everything in Mestre is recent; everything is decayed. The modern city lies across the water: car-free, human-scale, where children play in the streets and the obligation to walk fosters community. Everything that contemporary urbanism considers desirable is already found in Venice: it is Mestre which belongs to the past.

The Polish poet, Ewa Gorniak Morgan, opens her latest book, *Profession: Venice*, with a reflection on the city as a model for the future, and the launch at the Gritti Palace was packed. Readings were given by the author, the conductor John Axelrod (whose Venetian loft was converted from the convent attic where the celebrated courtesan, Veronica Franco, hid from the Inquisition), and yours truly (whose Venetian flat is currently home to a colony of giant rats).



Anyone who can leaves town as Carnival approaches. The dismal feast revived by the council in the 1970s as a tourist attraction bears no resemblance to the fabled farewell to



the flesh which once made Venice the party capital of Europe. The late art critic Brian Sewell described the “exclusive” carnival balls as catering to the “very middle of the middling classes”, but even these are beyond the reach of most would-be revellers in from

the mainland, who waft glumly through the freezing February fog in nylon costumes wondering where the fun is.

## A small taste of home

AMONG THE LATEST international arrivals in Venice is super-producer William Orbit, whose plan to make Campo San Polo his home was postponed due to the Commune's Carnival ice rink.

Mariah Carey on repeat ten hours a day drove him (temporarily) back to London for a month-long residency at Laylow on the Golborne Road. The club has handed over its entire space for what promises to be a fizzle-popping project combining live performance, film and DJ sets.

William's launch was considerably less sedate than Ewa's, but I was thrilled to see a selection of Marks & Sparks prawn sandwiches amongst the canapes. It's the little things you miss.



**A** PART FROM THE PROFESSIONAL make-up tips, the best thing about fashion shoots is the gossip. In the chair for a feature on Valentino's Tan-Go platforms (fuschia-pink Mary-Janes with a six-inch block heel, already over), I learned which national treasure known for her luscious locks is in truth assembled from “rats” (not the same ones in my walls) and extensions, and the truth behind the skincare billionaire who turns into Cruella de Vil once the cameras stop rolling.

Staggering around Kensington Gardens in the shoes proved precarious; I narrowly missed breaking an ankle before collapsing gratefully onto a wall. A passing gentleman in a marvellous three-piece tweed suit asked if I needed assistance. I reassured him that it was all in the pursuit of fabulousness but he was concerned about the temperature of the bricks. “Piles”, he opined “are not a myth.”

## Show me the money

**P**anto season may be officially over, but I was back in England in time to catch the Today programme debate on the three-year anniversary of Brexit. The



studio audience laughed uproariously every time Jacob Rees-Mogg opened his mouth, but the mirth was cold comfort. “Bregret” might now be a thing, but yet another twee neologism can’t patch over the fact that the joke is still on us. Rees-Mogg was burbling about the £191 billion Brexit has saved the nation, since we do not have to contribute to the EU Covid Recovery Fund. Quick question: if the money has been “saved”, Jacob, where is it?



At least one can still eat well in London. As Jan Morris noted, the standard Venetian menu is fine the first thirty times or so, but the tedium of the restaurant offerings is such that residents scarcely bother dining out.

In London I was able to squeeze in visits to the brilliant Persian Kateh in Maida Vale, Kiku, which might be the best Japanese around and the relatively new Dorian in Notting Hill, where I was treated to a very grand lunch by *Riviera* producer and U2 impresario Paul McGuinness.

Dorian offers a bring-your-own-bottle option whereby patrons can drink their own wine or add it to the restaurant’s list in exchange for a cut. This being Notting Hill, there was some stiff one-upmanship going on, but I was distracted even from a 2000 Lafite by the improbably gleaming complexions of the lady diners, who seemed to have used powdered diamonds as an exfoliant.

The waiting staff were even better-looking than the clients. Paul explained that London’s smarter restaurants are now a sort of finishing school for their patrons’ offspring. At the River Café, apparently, you’re unlikely to find a waitress whose social rank is below a colonel’s daughter.

**Back to Heathrow, where for the first time the lady at check-in asked me if I needed a visa for Italy. Watching the doleful Brits settling in for an hour-long passport queue on the other side was as unfunny as Mr Rees-Mogg. I’m not Bregretful, I’m still furious. ●**

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN MONTGOMERY

## NOVA’S DIARY

“I love this, you know,” says Rishi, leaning back in his chair at that Cabinet table. “It’s things like this that got me into politics in the first place.”

“Spreadsheets?” James looks doubtful.

“Diving into the numbers,” Rishi says, looking at the computer in front of him. “You can’t beat a good Budget.”

“The main thing,” says Jeremy, who lives next door, “is to beat Kwasi’s bad one. Have you thought about the choices I gave you on tax?”

There’s a long silence. “Prime Minister?” says Jeremy again.

“I heard you,” says Rishi, “But I’m still weighing my options. I’ll come back to you next week.” I think I see Jeremy roll his eyes.

“Can we talk about crime?” asks James. “There’s a new study out that says Northern people don’t like it



when their stuff is stolen. It’s a big levelling-up issue, apparently.”

“We need to act on this,” says Rishi, in his special firm voice. “Right away. Let’s have a policy review. And what’s more” he slaps his hand on the table “let’s tell it to report back within six months.”

This is all part of Rishi’s efforts to look more dynamic. After Amber told him last month that a lot of voters thought of him as a management consultant, he was furious. “That’s ridiculous!” he said. “If I’d got onto the McKinsey training scheme, I’d be a *senior* management consultant by now. In fact I’d probably be a partner.”

Since then, Rishi has decided to get a tough-looking outfit like his new friend Vlodymyr. He got one of his tailors to come round to measure him for a sweatshirt, and James is running focus groups on the best colour. Rishi has asked him to narrow it down to four options, and then he says he’ll pick a shade by 2025.

“The thing is, it’s easy for Vlodymyr,” Rishi complains. “He had a Russian invasion. What we need is a single group of people that the whole country hates and blames for everything that’s going wrong. Any ideas, Amber? James – what does the polling suggest?”

They’ve both gone quiet. Maybe they’re still weighing their options. ●

*As told to Robert Hutton*

## Miriam Elia on...



"It's so comforting to see the community thought prison has been built, I feel truly safe now," says Mummy.

Susan and John are silent.

**Simon Heffer** says our shallow and insincere public discourse pales by comparison to the bitter, but profound, politics of the Edwardian era

# HAVE WE LOST OUR MINDS?

**T**HERE IS A PASSAGE IN MARGOT ASQUITH'S diaries, two months into the Great War, where she registers her shock at how the constitutional crisis that followed the People's Budget of 1909 had destroyed normal civilised relations between prominent members of the Liberal and Conservative parties: "politicians losing all sight of truth and courtesy, hurling the foulest charges against their enemy and using the ugliest language; cutting, forgetting and trying to oust all their oldest friends; and Society so flippant, callous, idle and blasphemous".

The Tory-dominated House of Lords had voted for the first time since the reign of Queen Anne to defeat a money bill. A general election provided a mandate for the Bill to pass, but it was also decided to remove the Lords' right of veto to prevent such a situation happening again. That was when things really turned ugly, when a large group of Tory peers — the so-called die-hards — resolved "to die in the last ditch" rather than to see the veto go. In the end, they had to decide between giving way, or facing the creation of enough Liberal peers to swamp them.

Such was the bad feeling that senior politicians would shun each other at parties and prominent hostesses learned not to invite members of opposing front benches to the same dinners. The deterioration in relations started at the top. Lloyd George, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and a charlatan of Johnsonian proportions, was not merely the architect of the offending budget — a legitimate, if controversial, political act — but also a coarse politician who took great pleasure in rubbing the noses of his opponents in it.

**ONE WHO TOOK THE BAIT, AND WHO SHOULD HAVE KNOWN** better, was Lord Curzon, who had a claim to be the grandest man in Britain — not excluding the Sovereign. After a campaign

of vituperation probably not seen in our politics since the eighteenth century, Curzon — appalled at the prospect of so many non-aristocratic men soiling his aristocratic house — backed down. But memories were long and the hostility between the parties continued; and became even worse after Lloyd George's premiership, which ended in the showdown at the Carlton Club in October 1922 when the Tories finally had enough of him.

Yet the climate of political life and discourse earlier in the Edwardian period, before political polarisation led to social polarisation, was very different from that initiated by the crisis, and offers many lessons for the even more greatly debased state of contemporary politics.

Senior politicians did not choose their friends according to their politics. Men of similar class and background mixed cordially; as did men of similar character from different backgrounds. Because they understood and respected each other — and, more importantly, respected the good faith of each other — they could debate fiercely.

There were outbreaks of animosity, for in any House of Commons it is impossible that personalities will not clash — within parties as well as between them. But generally the sense of purpose, seriousness, conviction and decency of that House of Commons was formidable, and it changed Britain.

**ITS MEMBERS WERE CHOSEN FROM A VERY DIFFERENT** pool compared with today's. There were no women, and would not be until 1919. There were two Labour MPs, one of them Keir Hardie, and a few Liberal MPs of humble origins, notably the proto-socialist John Burns. Otherwise, the House was mostly composed of privileged, educated men. However, class and gender were not necessarily relevant to the superior or tone of the Edwardian House of Commons.

Character was, a quality lacking in our present representatives. It might be argued that the difficulty some politicians have in telling the truth, and owning up when they are found out, is the most obvious sign of a lack of character. But there is another: and that is absence of belief, or conviction.

It was common once for politicians to have minds of their own. The fierce division in the Unionist party (as the Tories then termed themselves, in the shadow of the debate on Irish Home Rule) prompted by Joe Chamberlain's advocacy of Imperial Preference — protectionism instead of free trade — exemplified this state of mind.

For Chamberlain, his own personal beliefs trumped his loyalty to his party. He had already dumped one party, the Liberals, in 1886 over Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill. Winston Churchill left the Unionists on the same issue to join the devoutly free-trading Liberals and his numerous biographers have interpreted his actions as indicative of his high principle.



Unionist F. E. Smith addresses a rally

Even though it may have included an element of calculation (the Unionists were imploding over protectionism), Churchill's behaviour does appear typical of the conviction politics of the era.

Although some of his former colleagues detested him for his desertion, that detestation did not really intensify until after the 1909-11 crisis. When he married in 1908, politicians from both sides of the Commons attended his wedding or sent good wishes. Lord Hugh Cecil, one of the most ferocious opponents of the Liberal government in the years to come, was his best man. Churchill signed up willingly to his party's policy of Irish Home Rule; his other Tory best friend was the militant Unionist, F.E. Smith.

But then it typified the Edwardian way of politics that people had sincere beliefs. Rather than beliefs articulated from a script written by their research assistants, chiefs of staff, special advisers or shaped and distilled in a thinktank, they formed their beliefs using their intellect and experience, and their understanding of what would genuinely best serve the public.

What is more, they would fight and argue for these beliefs in a way that did not entail them vilifying the personalities or supposed motivations of those who disagreed with them. This not only meant that, for all the ferocity of argument, they could behave with respect towards each other, but also that the public, in those days reading about the political class in their newspapers, could respect not just them, but the whole political process.

**H**OW UNLIKE TODAY. POLITICIANS AND the political process are now held in increasing contempt. This can have terrible consequences: one thinks of the murders, most recently, of the entirely unprovocative David Amess and Jo Cox. MPs report going to surgeries in stab vests and living in fear of attack. Those are extreme situations, but they have grown out of a climate in which other MPs bring the political class into utter disrepute.

This is not simply through financial irregularities, sexual peccadilloes or the increasingly common problem of lying or refusing to take responsibility for errors. It is because the public realises how little difference there is between the parties in terms of outlook — quite unlike in the Edwardian period — but their similarities are concealed by almost theatrically manufactured outrage, much of it furnished to those who express it by the parties' teenage scriptwriters.

Recently, Keir Starmer admitted the problem with the NHS was not that it needed more money poured into it, but that its management needed reform. The Tories have long said that, but have lacked the guts to do anything about it.

Labour does not believe in cutting taxes; neither does the Conservative party. Labour doesn't believe in selective education; nor is it Conservative policy. Neither party has a coherent plan for social care. Neither front bench will take a lead in crusading for academic freedom or freedom of speech, thus running up the white flag in the culture wars that are poisoning our society.

And both sides say they accept Brexit: but the Conservatives, shamefully, have done almost nothing in the three years of liber-

## We now have a political class deploying fake anger in bogus arguments



ation from the EU to further the deregulatory process Brexit enabled; and Labour has expressed no ideas for what it would do.

This would never have happened in the early years of the last century. Instead of real anger in sincere arguments about making real changes, in which two sides offer a distinct choice to an electorate, we now have a political class deploying fake anger in bogus arguments from which more of the same threatens to emerge, precisely because no genuine choice will be offered.

Such an outcome is inevitable, one must suppose, when so many mediocrities find their way into politics. There are, as a consequence, too many people without convictions in the House of Commons, trying to conduct what passes for political discourse, on top of the rotten apples who fiddle their taxes or break laws or tell outrageous lies or are rather too hands-on with the younger and more attractive research assistants.

**THERE ARE PROFOUND PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES, OF** the sort the Edwardians relished, that need to be debated by intelligent people in power and who know how to exercise it, and not left to a grim variant of civil service government.

Where is the argument about cutting taxation and spending across the board? Or the debate about whether, in this intensely dangerous world, we should be spending less on welfare and more on preparing for warfare? How long must we wait before the bullet is bitten on social care, thereby creating the means to plan for the future of the NHS?

Is there really unanimity among our politicians on the shocking profligacy that is HS2? And what about ending the competition between Labour and the Conservative parties over which can do the better Greta Thunberg impersonation, and instead examine the realities of stopping the sale of petrol and diesel cars by 2030? Climate change policy seems to have become the ultimate example of crucial issues that simply cannot be discussed.

Would our Edwardian forebears have tolerated such farces? No, of course not: so how stupid are we that we seem happy to do so? ●

Simon Heffer is Professor of History at the University of Buckingham and writes for the *Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph*

# Mystic woo as management tool

*Why your “breathwork” is now just as important as your bottom line*

**M**ANY REASONS HAVE been offered for the declining participation of the over-50s in the workplace. But perhaps the most important one — the fact that the modern office has become a madrassa for a cult of mindfulness — has so far been overlooked.

Hardly a week goes by without my salaried friends alerting me to a fresh atrocity. “Every Teams meeting now starts with a minute when we have to close our eyes in order to ‘visualise’ our goals for the call,” complains one pal who runs a successful little business recently acquired by a US tech conglomerate. “I normally take a little peek half way through and the terrifying thing is that everyone else seems to be in a genuine trance.”

Another friend, an executive committee member of a FTSE30 company, told me how she had to play a game of stare-eyes in order to build a “deeper connection” with her colleagues. A dinner companion ruefully described a compulsory management course where he was instructed to unleash his “inner warrior” and his “inner lover” — though, one hopes, not both at the same time.

**THIS WEIRDNESS IS EVEN CREEPING** into the boardroom. We are all now expected to have coaches — and, if we don’t play nicely, we risk the Black Spot in the next “board effectiveness survey”. These coaches, often from the same headhunting outfit that conducts the board survey, invariably peddle a “lite” version of the new theology (“Ned, you must understand that self-knowledge is the key to an impactful contribution in the boardroom ...”)

The thinking that lurks behind all of this nonsense can be traced to the Hindu and Buddhist teachings which travelled to California in the ‘60s, fused with the Me Generation of the ‘70s and then more recently became laundered and legiti-

mised by the so-called insights of behavioural psychology.

Of course you will never hear these corporate Yogis talk about “meditation” — too overtly spiritual. But you might be recommended something called “breathwork” — much more practical and purposeful.

But let’s be clear, mindfulness is a secular religion, and the worrying thing is that in Britain’s businesses it is becoming a compulsory religion. You might even argue that the freedom of worship we have enjoyed in this country since the Restoration is now under threat.

**HOW DID ALL OF THIS HAPPEN?** Well, at this point it is customary for a *Critic* writer to invoke the Wokerati, the Blob or some other liberal conspiracy.

However, in this case the cause is rather more nuanced. Throughout history, the founders of businesses have often been faddists, fond of inflicting their “improving” world views on their workers.

Lord Leverhulme, the Edwardian soap monopolist now invoked as a pioneer of purpose-driven capitalism, believed that ballroom dancing could save the soul and was also a proponent of outdoor sleeping in all weathers.

You really have to pity the poor workers of Port Sunlight who, after a hard day wrapping bars of Lifebuoy, only wanted a quiet pint of mild and a warm bed.

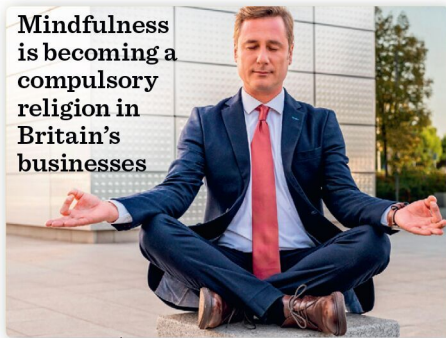
It is only natural then that the CBD micro-dosers behind today’s tech giants should seek to impose their Bay Area sensibilities on their global workforces.

How the bland puddings who make up the managerial classes of our own quoted companies came to be captured by the mindfulness brigade is a different story.

Like so many of the ills of early 21st-century Britain, part of the blame lies with Fred Goodwin.

The implosion of RBS et al led to an

**Mindfulness is becoming a compulsory religion in Britain’s businesses**



obsession among regulators and their fellow travellers at the *Financial Times* about culture. The collapse of these banks was caused by bad cultures, so the argument ran. Therefore, if you could find a way of monitoring and measuring culture you would prevent future financial crises.

Pretty soon, boards were mandated to take an interest in culture, and auditors, who previously confined their work to the numbers in the back of the annual report, started asking questions about how companies measured the purpose and vision statements emblazoned on the cover.

Managements, predictably, panicked. They knew how to drive marketing funnels, sales and earnings, but cultural metrics had never been part of their business school educations. And so, the gurus, the coaches and the Ted Talk charlatans who had hitherto occupied the margins of corporate life were invited in try out their ideas on whole companies.

**EVERY BUSINESS NOW SEEMS** to boast of “behavioural change” programmes with intricate processes, multi-year ambitions, and, of course, a seven- or eight-figure price tag.

Perhaps we will eventually look back on this time as a strange moment of collective madness, like the witch trials or the dancing plagues.

But for now, it is easier for most of us to keep numbing the mantras or, as the data is now showing, to quietly shuffle to the door and join the carefree ranks of the “economically inactive”. ● — *Ned*

# THE KEYBOARD SECRET ARMY

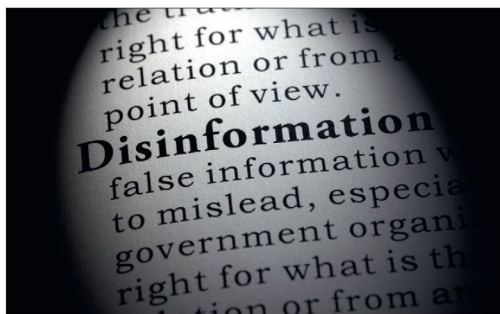
At the heart of the Government and media's reponse to the pandemic was a confused, paranoid and often farcical war against "disinformation". The truth, however, was in short supply.

By Fred Skulthorp

**I**N LATE MARCH 2020 A BRIGADIER from the British Army's 77th Brigade arrived in Whitehall to find a Cabinet Office in disarray. The country was in the early days of lockdown. Polling suggested public support, but who knew what might happen in the weeks and months ahead?

Nothing like lockdown had been tried before and Westminster, incurably online as usual, was paranoid. What might start trending from the trolls on Twitter and Facebook? The brigadier, who had cut his teeth fighting social media disinformation campaigns by hostile foreign actors, reassured the ministers and civil servants he was here to help.

Within a few weeks he and his team, a motley crew of British army reservists, former translators and "cyber experts", were sitting in a safe house somewhere in Berkshire monitoring Twitter and other social media sites for any dodgy takes that might un-



**"Disinformation" came to signal a wider paranoia about populism**

dermine the Government's pandemic response.

Over the next two years, they and other government disinformation and media monitoring units would report on everyone from pub landlords and Conservative MPs to Peter Hitchens's tweets. One unit, tasked with identifying harmful narratives, even flagged up Professor Carl Heneghan, a man who would later advise the Chancellor, Rishi Sunak.

How we arrived at this farcical episode is the story of the rise and fall of the fight against "online disinformation". It's a tale of incompetence and paranoia that saw the concept abused, stretched and confused by a vast network of fact-checkers, social media reporters and "content moderators", from Whitehall to the BBC via Silicon Valley.

**WHAT EXACTLY IS "DISINFORMATION"?** The word itself had smuggled its way through the twentieth century, with origins in 1920s Soviet propaganda. There it was understood to be "false information with the intention to deceive public opinion." Other distinctions have since been made. How readily can disinformation (spread deliberately) be separated from "misinformation" (spread accidentally)? Then there's the casual way the word is thrown around regardless of who is accused. There is (surely?) a difference between Brenda in Bolton tweeting conspiracies about vaccines and an Oxford epidemiologist criticising the government's pandemic policy.

The word's recent history provides some clue as to how tackling disinformation came to be abused during the pandemic. In 2019, the American news network, NPR, declared "disinformation" to be its word of the year and warned it was a "sign of things to come." In the decade that saw Brexit and President Trump, "disinformation" came to signal a wider paranoia about how populism had harnessed social media.

For those appalled by these political developments, "disinformation", alongside the trend away from established news outlets, offered a reassuring means to explain away the populist revolt against globalised liberalism.

Increasingly, a schism emerged among liberals (and many conservatives) between those willing to engage with these criticisms in the real world, and those eager to dismiss Trump and Brexit as the product of bad posting. The rationale even had a dystopian tech angle: algorithmically-amplified disinformation on social media, including that spread by the Kremlin, had played a decisive role in the revolt of the public against the elites.

In 2017, the Moscow bots were even subjected to a US congressional hearing. Russian Tweets, Senator Mark Warner warned, were a "threat to democratic institutions".





**Marianna Spring**  
SPECIALIST DISINFORMATION REPORTER

## Marianna Spring was appointed by the BBC to “fight back” against information that claimed to be reputable news

**THE IDEA WAS INFLUENTIAL IN BRITAIN TOO.** Orwell Prize-winner Carole Cadwalladr and many other prominent journalists argued that Vote Leave’s success was “the biggest electoral fraud in Britain for 100 years”, and had come about by targeting people with dodgy information on Facebook. “Carole Cadwalladr: the dismantler of disinformation” was one strapline for her many podcast appearances.

No one doubted inaccurate news online was a problem, but all this paranoia, increasingly crystallised around the simple concept of “online disinformation”, went a step further. Unchecked posting online and algorithms, they argued, was threatening to tear apart the very foundations of western democracy.

Out of this conspiracy reasoning, the disinformation reporter was born. CNN and NBC pioneered the position with the BBC following suit. Marianna Spring was the Corporation’s first specialist disinformation correspondent, appointed on the eve of lockdown to “fight back against information that claimed to come from a reputable news organisation”.

She seemed like a shrewd acquisition. A young, up-and-coming journalist who had been spotted by Emily Maitlis, she seemed exactly the sort of person the BBC needed to turbo-charge itself into the digital age and help the public get up to speed with all the bad information that would undoubtedly spread at a time of crisis.

In the pandemic, the fighters of disinformation would face their greatest test yet. Unsurprisingly, they failed. Not only did they and the gatekeepers designated to tackle online disinformation end up getting some of their much heralded “fact-checks” completely wrong, they also ended up becoming ardent apologists for government policy, thus helping to further inflame precisely the conspiracy theories they were meant to tackle.

We now know that the flawed logic of the disinformation-tacklers made its way not only into Whitehall but to the content moderators of Facebook and Twitter, where scientists, journalists and other public health experts ended up being wrongly accused of dis/misinformation. To call it Orwellian, or an attack on free speech, fails to appreciate how utterly banal, pointless and avoidable it all was.

**T**O FULLY UNDERSTAND HOW it went wrong, it is necessary to grasp how the BBC’s Disinformation Unit led by Spring exemplified the flaws in the approach. “Totally out of their depth”, was how one unhappy senior BBC journalist described them to me, “a *de facto* mouthpiece for the government”.

Shortly after I wrote for *The Critic* online about this internal BBC discomfort towards the Unit’s work during the pandemic, its former editor, Mike Wendling, got in touch. The accusation by the senior journalist was “baffling”, he protested, since his unit was only interested in tackling “falsifiable rubbish”. Was there an example where they had gone beyond their remit, and as my article argued, ended up unduly promoting government policy?

There was. In one of their articles, the BBC disinformation team claimed to have been fact-checking an NHS doctor who had challenged a proposed vaccine mandate for healthcare staff. In reality, the journalists and the doctor in question were actually engaged in the same approach — prioritising information in various studies to make their point.

The problem with the BBC article was that it weighed in with the false authority of “disinformation”: the implication being that the doctor had been debunked, and thus consigned to the dustbin of nonsense. Funnily enough, the doctor’s initial argument regarding the long-term efficacy of the Covid-19 vaccine versus natural immunity has since gained significant traction within the medical establishment.

Thanks to the work of Big Brother Watch, we now know that this amateur approach to labelling “disinformation” was not just taking place at the BBC, but also amongst Whitehall’s secretive mis/disinformation units.

**BEHIND THE REPORTS AND DOSSIERS SOLEMNLY** circulated around Whitehall, there was no advanced methodology for determining disinformation. This is hardly surprising. The very nature of the pandemic was confusing, not least in relation to some of the unprecedented policies being enacted. From vaccine efficacy to the impact of lockdowns, it was often nigh on

impossible to apply the binary notion of “disinformation” at a time when a deluge of data, scientific studies and evidence were emerging from all over the world.

Where transparency and honesty with regards to what was or wasn’t known might have prevailed, the opposite happened. Whitehall paranoia dictated the absurd idea that dissenting opinion, even that of reputed experts, threatened to undermine public health policy.

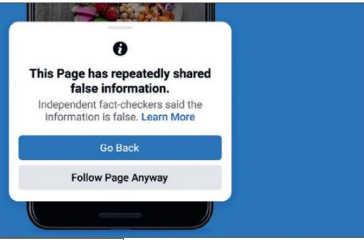
“There is no bright-line category called misinformation,” said the writer Scott Alexander in a recent essay on fake news and the media. Instead, it is an absence of appropriate context, or the prioritising of one piece of information over another which at best misleads rather than outright lies. Of course, those targeted by the disinformation experts were very much guilty of this. But over the course of the pandemic, so too was the government narrative they often found themselves defending.

**I**N ONE INSTANCE, FACEBOOK “fact-checked” an article on the website *UnHerd* for pointing out it was still too early to rule out the possibility that the Covid virus had originated from a laboratory. Soon after, however, the White House also expressed “deep concerns” over the initial WHO exoneration of Wuhan’s laboratories, thereby providing credence to the lab leak theory. Moving in line with the White House, Facebook duly backtracked.

Even the *British Medical Journal* fell foul of the Facebook fact-checkers for publishing a peer-reviewed piece documenting an investigation into clinical trial research practices occurring at Ventavia, a contracted company which assisted Pfizer in their Covid-19 vaccine trials.

Professor Carl Heneghan drew the attention of the dis/misinformation units in Whitehall for pointing out that the government’s “Rule of Six” had little evidential basis.

So, too, did the Tory MP David Davis, for critiquing the gov-



## It was nigh on impossible to apply the binary notion of “disinformation” when a deluge of data was emerging

ernment’s proposed “Covid passport”. A speech criticising the policy Davis gave to the Conservative Party conference was removed from YouTube. Yet, his point regarding the “false reassurance” of vaccine passports had also been made by Professor Robert West, who sat on the government’s SAGE advisory

committee.

Similarly, in America, the so-called Twitter Files have unearthed a cache of micromanagement and “shadow-banning” of opinion, particularly against lockdown’s most prominent critic, Stanford University’s Professor Jay Bhattacharya, that betrayed the same disinformation paranoia in Silicon Valley during the pandemic.

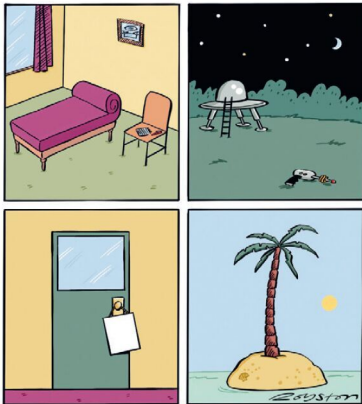
An evolving context and the inevitable progression of scientific consensus aren’t of much interest to tacklers of disinformation, in part because all too often their job is to tell the supposedly gullible public what they simply must not believe. To do otherwise runs the risk of undermining the epistemological certainty demanded by their role.

As such, this too often leads them to punch down rather than up, finding themselves forced to focus on the loony fringes of a much wider dissent (an NHS doctor being one of their more misguided targets). Marianna Spring now has a well-documented reputation for prowling anti-lockdown groups on Facebook and other platforms, waiting to snare someone who believed something appropriately barny.

I’ve witnessed this curious approach to journalism myself, having been sent the content of a bizarre conversation between one of Spring’s colleagues and a member of the public who had apparently been sharing vaccine conspiracies to his 500 Twitter followers. Even the reporter lost interest in pursuing this conspiracy theory after finding out the man had nothing particularly bonkers to say.

**BUT THE POINT REMAINS: IN OBSESSING OVER** bad posting online, the BBC’s Disinformation Unit starts to resemble its own conspiracy theory defined above all by its narrow mindedness. This is something it goes out of its way to service at a time when public trust in the Corporation to provide an impartial account of events, like many other legacy news outlets, is at a record low

### CARTOONISTS JOIN WAVE OF INDUSTRIAL ACTION!



META: CARTOON BY ROYSTON ROBERTSON

following the pandemic.

We should abolish the very concept of the disinformation reporter. Indeed, “disinformation” was so abused over the course of the pandemic, we should stop using the word entirely. Proposing this risks being met with appalled confusion. “You want disinformation to run riot? What about Andrew Bridgen, the anti-vaxxers, The WEF conspiracy theorists?”

Such a reaction betrays the curious mindset of those who defend the cult of disinformation, notably the idea that “normal journalism” has never possessed the power to persuade people they are wrong. Yes, there are a lot of people who need winning over in the aftermath of the pandemic, but is there anything a disinformation reporter can do that a good journalist with a normal title — such as “reporter” — cannot do better?

If we are to move beyond the failed disinformation paradigm, it is worth forcing its most ardent advocates to acknowledge the inadequate worldview the concept often conveys, however much

the fight against “online disinformation” in the age of Brexit and Trump offers a reassuringly comforting cause to champion.

Elon Musk’s Twitter is now firmly in Marianna Spring’s sights, it being apparently complicit in a foiled far-right plot in Germany as well as the storming of the Brazilian Congress. The enduring appeal of this style of reporting seems to be its ability to command a frustrated sense of morality in a world gone astray: there are “trolls” online spreading “disinformation.”

Sometimes they’re Russian. Sometimes they’re far-right, sometimes they’re just misguided, lonely and lost people, who are also magically, massively influential on the online innocents.

As a means of lamenting the ever-declining influence of “trusted news” such as the BBC, this works very nicely. As a means of seeking to understand our present moment, it is itself self-satisfied, misleading and conspiratorial. ●

**Fred Skulthorp is a freelance writer and journalist**

## Freddie Simmons Serial Autobiographer

● FREDDIE SIMMONS PUBLISHED his first volume of memoirs at the early age of 39. *Last in the Sack Race*, a wry and self-deprecatingly humorous account of his misadventures at school, was widely and favourably reviewed, not least by old friends now at large in the world of journalism.

“Mr Simmons”, a man who had once shared a study with him at Charterhouse informed readers of the *Observer*, “has brought off the by no means easy feat of making a success out of failure.”

Three years later a second instalment followed. *You Found Three Questions You Could Answer?* (words supposedly addressed to Freddie by his tutor after his first finals exam) took in such embarrassments as the double third in English Literature he acquired from King’s College, Cambridge and the job interview in which he was unable to remember the name of the prestigious accountancy firm to which he was applying.

ALL THIS WAS TWELVE YEARS AGO. Since that time there have been three more volumes: *Bringing Up the Rear*, which covered his early experience of paid employment and ended with his sacking from the advertising agency for being found

drunk under the boardroom table; *All at Sea* (a disastrous interlude spent working for the publicity department of P&O); and *Not Quite Our Kind of Person*, an affecting, yet still self-deprecatingly humorous summary of his brief first marriage to a minor aristocrat into whose family he signally failed to fit.

Each book has sold several thousand copies. Their effect been to make Freddie, now in his middle fifties, a regular guest on chat shows and a practised supplier of wry and self-deprecatingly humorous essays to Sunday newspapers.

YET THE SUSPICION, at any rate among Freddie’s admirers, that National Treasurdom cannot be far off is balanced by an awareness of the very considerable

gap between his public persona and the almost mythical figure who marauds through his books.

For, however bumbling, useless and complacent he is on the page, Freddie, when brought to a literary festival stage or *The One Show*, turns out to be unexpectedly sensitive, keen not to be reminded of the time he accidentally knocked out one of the umpires while playing cricket for the Captain Scott Invitation XI or mistook a bowl of pot-pourri in the Ernst & Young partners’ dining room for a pre-lunch snack.

Old friends eager to play up to the image Freddie has created for himself are more often than not rebuffed, and he is supposed to have left last year’s school old boys’ dinner in tears.

IT IS ALL VERY ODD. As a Radio 4 producer who invited him onto a comedy panel show with the aim of “having a laugh” and was rewarded by half-an-hour’s polite stonewalling once put it: “People who spend their lives telling everyone they’re an idiot shouldn’t be surprised if they get treated like one.” As for the immediate future, just last week Freddie’s agent was surprised to receive a proposal for a book on the history of Palestine. ●



**MARK ALMOND** asks whether history can teach us anything about Chinese ambition, growing Sino-American tension and what might happen when ...

# The balloon goes up

★ **AS RUSSIAN MILITARY FAILURE IN THE WEST** drives it ever deeper into the arms of the East, how should we understand the situation that confronts the United States, the current hegemonic world power?

Is it comparable to the Cold War that developed after 1945, or should we look back to Anglo-German rivalry before 1914? Does the challenge the Kaiser's Germany offered imperial Britain give us any sort of guide to how Xi Jinping's China threatens America's place in the sun?

Even before Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, it was commonplace to talk about how a "New Cold War", with China and Russia had definitively replaced the post-Cold War optimism of the 90s. Western giddiness that the collapse of communist command economies meant the world was converging on a globalist free market model had ended long before Biden's USA re-embraced traditional American naked economic protectionism.

Since the Covid virus spread worldwide from Wuhan in 2020, Western unease at China has exploded into open disdain for Beijing. The atavistic fear of the "Yellow Peril" has revived. Geopolitical concerns about the expansion of the Chinese military — and especially its naval power — in the South China Sea are matched by suspicion at its economic and infrastructure projects in distant lands, including those in which Chinese influence scarcely if ever touched in the past.

CHINA'S BELT-AND-ROAD PROJECT MAY WELL BE VIEWED as a latter-day Berlin-to-Baghdad Railway — Wilhelmine Germany's bid to free herself from English-speaking economic mastery. In reality, Basra was to have been the terminus of that line so that barrels of its abundant oil could be loaded onto wagons for Central Europe rather than shipped out to the British Empire by the Anglo-Persian oil company, already established across the Shatt in Iran and soon to nestle in Kuwait from 1914. Germany's lack of oil spelled defeat in both 1918 and 1945.

Trans-Eurasian railroads and pipelines are part of Beijing's way out of being trapped and blockaded by the United States. But dilatory Russian approaches to building new infrastructure and its grasping corrupt officialdom were the equivalent of the frustrations Berlin felt with Habsburg bureaucracy.

It is Putin's aggression and apparent reliance on China as a

back door to evade Western sanctions that has revived these fears, as Russia slips ever more into being a Chinese client state. Xi Jinping's assurances to Putin that their countries' relationship has "no limits" is as stark a warning to the West as it ought to be to Putin.

## The Western way of economic war

★ **REAL AS THE CHALLENGES FROM CHINA AND** Russia may well be, Western understanding of them is trapped in a limited intellectual and historical framework.

Reversion to the Cold War model of the decades after 1947 may not offer such useful insights. Overlaying false continuities from the 1950s and 1960s with the "Lessons of Munich" from 1938 only reveals the poverty of historical knowledge and imagination in our leaders and commentariat.

Discussions about the need to end reliance on Russian energy and raw materials after the invasion of Ukraine in February last year, as well as onshoring supply chains outsourced to China in the decades before Covid, reveal how intertwined our "free market" economies have become with theirs. Basic nous and better statecraft should not have required Russian tanks to teach us this lesson.

Putin's Russia is a very different socio-economic system from the Soviet one he grew up in, but today's "Communist" China is a fundamentally different and more comprehensive rival for the West than the Soviet Union

ever was. Bluntly, China works: the USSR did not.

The result has been the West's economic embrace of the East which is so different from the decades before 1989. When President Nixon broke the ice with China in 1972, the People's Republic constituted 0.5 per cent of world trade. Today it is over 20 per cent and rising after the Covid pause.

WESTERNERS ARE TRAPPED IN THE OLD COLD WAR analogy. But, just as Winston Churchill did not invent the "Iron Curtain" metaphor in 1946 (though he may not have known Goebbels had invoked it in the dying days of the Third Reich), so "Cold War" was a familiar concept decades before the Berlin airlift or, later, the Cuban missile crisis.

Already in 1911, the German Social Democrat, Eduard Bernstein, had tried to debunk the growing rivalry between Great



China's President Xi Jinping

# Isn't the potential fatal flaw of Anglo-American thinking about great power rivalries the assumption that, because we have always come out on top hitherto, we are fated to triumph over any adversary if push comes to shove?

Britain and Imperial Germany — each others' major trading partners — which had not prevented the naval arms race. Bernstein wrote in his *The English Peril and the German People* in 1911: "Is it not insane that two nations which year after year peacefully exchange goods amounting to about two billions should be tortured by the fear that the other is only waiting for an opportune moment to attack it?"

In May 1914, Bernstein explicitly warned the Reichstag about the catastrophic risks of "this silent war, this cold war" with Britain. He personally hoped that an end to the naval arms race and economic convergence would enable an Anglo-German alliance against "bad" imperialist states like Russia.

A few years earlier, Norman Angell had published his *Great Illusion*, which is often scoffed at for saying — what he didn't actually say — that war between such intimate trading, financial and technological partners as the British and German empires was impossible. What he said was they should not fight each other because it would cause an insane level of mutual mutilation: "What is the real guarantee of the good behaviour of one state to another? It is the elaborate [economic] interdependence."

In terms of the human cost, Angell was right. But London, at least, found effective ways to neutralise the immediate economic costs which was far harder to do for Berlin.

Like Imperial Germany, China is a resource-poor but highly productive society. The Soviet Union was a treasure house of resources but woefully unproductive with them. If we are looking for historical analogies to today's great power politics — and the Chinese have been too — then how events before 1914 unfolded may be more instructive than the era from Truman to Reagan.

## The Chinese way of learning lessons

★ **DENG XIAOPING FAMOUSLY WARNED HIS** potential successors that, following his successful economic reforms and opening to the West, China had to rise without being noticed. China's leaders have been very conscious of the precedent of Wilhelmine Germany's antagonising of Britain, and other great powers, by its aggressive postures before 1914. Unlike Deng, the Kaiser liked to make waves.

As China carried on opening up in the 1990s despite Tiananmen Square, Washington wanted it to play a bigger role abroad. But the Americans' assumption was that though the Chinese would be "smarter" than the sleazy Russian post-Communists who were happy to sell out their state and society for peanuts, Beijing's boys would nevertheless sell out for a price. When they didn't — and in fact executed CIA agents — Washington realised that unlike Yeltsin's coterie, Deng's men intended to take advan-

tage of free market access to the free world.

Western analysts of China over the last two centuries have oscillated between the poles of being prophets of gloom and prophets of boom. Each grotesque exaggeration has had its day, more than once, but the caricatures of a China doomed to decay and disintegration or of a boundlessly powerful global octopus with tentacles of power and influence reaching everywhere are ever recurrent.

Expectations that China must become more and more like the West have jostled in observers' minds with an unsettling suspicion that somehow it will remain apart from the high road of historical convergence. This gnawing anxiety was best encapsulated by the wisdom of the then US Vice President, Dan Quayle, in May 1989, who *before* the crackdown in Tiananmen Square, sagely observed, "the movement towards democracy in China is irreversible, but that could change".

That change is now too obvious to deny, but its significance for international relations is still clouded in uncertainty. Evidence of growing Sino-American tensions emerge almost daily, from the bizarre episode of the "Balloon that Soared" over America to the expansion of both Chinese and US bases in the South China Sea.

**ALL THIS RECALLS THE ANGLo-GERMAN RIVALRY BEFORE 1914.** This has become the classic example of the "Thucydides Trap" invoked by Xi himself. Two thousand four hundred years ago, the rapid rise of Athens's power in Greece and the seas around it alarmed Sparta whose dominance was eroding. Imperial Germany threatened to displace Edwardian Britain.

In 1911, it was Bernstein's great contemporary, Winston Churchill, as First Lord of the Admiralty, who took a different view of the logical consequences of Germany's mix of an economic boom and growing military power:

The union of a Navy of such great power with the largest Army in Europe will be a most sinister and disquieting fact, especially when we consider these gigantic engines of destruction will not be wielded by a ... democratic Government ... but by a military and bureaucratic oligarchy supported by a powerful Junker landlord class.

Substitute Communist Party for "Junker" and you have today's contrast between democratic capitalist societies and China, whose economy shows that the profit motive can serve authoritarian as well as liberal purposes.

Back in 1914, German ideologists disdained the British as "tradesmen" — *Haendler* — not "heroes" — *Helden* — like the Prussians. Today, of course, Britain's boarded-up high streets

would not earn the contemptuous epithet “nation of shopkeepers” scornfully applied to it by Napoleon and taken up by the Kaiser’s propagandists. In fact, China today has a much better claim to be a nation of shopkeepers and traders. But, like Imperial Germany, it is also a growing military and technological power.

## The West’s a hard nut

★ **INTERCONNECTED ECONOMIES DIDN’T STOP WAR** in 1914. Italy’s Fiat, for instance, built many more vehicles at its Czech subsidiary in the Habsburg Empire in 1915 than it made in Turin when Italy went to war against the Dual Monarchy. Today, Volkswagen assembles more cars in China than at Wolfsburg or anywhere else in the rest of the world put together.

Chancellor Scholz may now have been dragged into supplying tanks to Ukraine, but his solo flight to Beijing last November suggests that he has at least recognised that Germany has real skin in an economic war with China where (unlike Britain for example) Germany has serious market share to lose.

But like Imperial Germany, China has its own supply side problems. Its massively productive industries depend on importing vast quantities of raw materials. Western desires to go Net Zero need Chinese solar panels and lithium batteries to get going, but Chinese *needs* are the oil, minerals and above all food it has to import to sustain its economy.

The Chinese leadership is very conscious of the analogies between their rise in power, both military and economic, *vis-à-vis* the United States and Imperial Germany’s challenge to the British Empire. Xi Jinping has spoken publicly about it, and whole think tanks in China are deferentially devoted to working out how the People’s Republic can avoid the fate of Wilhelmine Germany — all while shepherding America to a peaceful imperial abdication on the model of Britain after 1945.

In addition to studying the lessons for them of Germany’s almost suicidal challenge to the West, China has been analysing how the USA replaced Britain as Top Nation between 1918 and 1945. Awareness of how contemporary Britain became a shadow great power, a kind of postmodern Austria-Hungary to America’s Bismarckian Germany is part of Beijing’s focus.

**BUT PUTIN’S STUMBLING INVASION OF UKRAINE TODAY** puts Russia firmly in the role of Austria-Hungary viz China as a Bismarckian superpower. Just as Vienna hoped in 1914 to suffocate South Slav nationalism inside the monarchy’s borders by crushing Serbia, so Putin, among other purposes, hoped that toppling the pro-Western government in Kiev would discipline all of Russia’s ex-Soviet neighbours around its southern rim. Russia’s decline into client-status, however, makes it vastly more useful and reliable to China as a resource base than the Austro-Hungarian liability ever was to the Kaiser’s Germany.

Yet it isn’t fading foreign empires alone that shape China’s outlook today. Few regimes are more self-conscious about how centuries of imperial glory gave way to decline and humiliation than China’s. Opium wars, unequal treaties, foreign invasions and actual economic decline — not the relatively genteel British downward slope — haunt the Chinese political memory. Ana-



lysing what went wrong for us and right for America is as much on Chinese minds as the warning from Wilhelmine Germany’s fate. China wants the prize America won, which was Britain’s place, not Germany’s fate.

For all the West’s natural advantages — oceans, resources and freedom being not the least of them — there is something offensively smug and complacent about Western assumptions of Chinese provincialism and lack of understanding of the outside world.

This preposterous cast of mind was painfully illustrated when in January 2013, the BBC’s Jeremy Paxman instructed Bai Yang-Song, his counterpart as one of Chinese Central TV’s anchors, on what Chinese journalists could learn from their British counterparts. After completing his lengthy lesson on what Oriental journalists should borrow from British models, Paxman politely asked Bai what he thought a BBC journalist could possibly learn from China. He got the succinct answer, “Chinese.” Our problems here go far beyond our media, and they are not weaknesses the ever-observant Chinese share.

## Nothing is inevitable

★ **FOR ALL THAT THERE ARE MANY CHINESE** experts advising on all aspects of America, Beijing’s policy is made by men whose experience of the USA, the West, indeed the world in general, has been gained on official visits with all the negligible intellectual value those bring with them. How far China’s think tanks shape policy or — like so many Western ones — merely echo their political masters’ predilections remains to be seen. This is little comfort.

If China would like to avoid a collision, it is preparing for one. Some influential voices in Western policy-making circles seem happy to court conflict but haven’t put their influence behind serious preparations for the military, let alone economic consequences of that.

Unlike Admiral Tirpitz who only belatedly realised that trying



## The Chinese leadership is very conscious of the analogies between their rise in power, both military and economic, vis-à-vis the United States and Imperial Germany's challenge to the British Empire

Theodore Roosevelt and Kaiser Wilhelm II during a military review in 1910. After the event, Roosevelt told his wife, "I'm absolutely certain now, that we are all in for it (meaning a European war)."

to imitate the Royal Navy's battle fleet was not the way to cripple Britain and that he should have been building submarines and raiders to attack her commerce, China's rapidly growing People's Liberation Army Navy is trained by self-conscious students of Alfred Mahan, the American prophet of sea power as the vital component of national strength, not least his emphasis on the economic basis of naval power and the use of warships to destroy the other side's capacity to fund war-making.

For all that the Chinese are often accused of xenophobia and cultural superiority, learning from the [potential] enemy is something that they don't shy away from. Even if they take pleasure in inflicting on today's Westerners the sins of their predecessors. Think of how nowadays Washington echoes to bipartisan denunciations of the flow of drugs from China to the USA. Senators Cotton and Schumer waxed just as indignant about fentanyl imports from China as any Chinese mandarin did in 1839 about British opium entering the Celestial Kingdom.

DESPITE MY *DÉFORMATION PROFESSIONELLE* AS AN historian, it is important to see that not everything is foreshadowed by the past. The new Cold War — maybe we should call it "World War Z" — has sinister differences from the old Cold War as well as pre-1914.

Before 1989, all democracies were on the same side — even the "neutrals". I remember, as a bagman smuggling aid to dissidents in the 1980s, how Swedish consulates — not embassies — were very helpful even when Olaf Palme was supposedly (he wasn't!) a fellow-travelling peacenik. Of course, the West hypocritically treated the Shah's Iran or Turkey during its periodic bouts of military rule as part of the "Free World" but, unlike today, all real democracies were fundamentally on the same side, such was the nature of the Soviet threat, at home, to them.

In the Far East, America is reinvigorating its old Cold War alliances with Japan, the Philippines and Australia to hem in China's seaward approaches, as once the Royal Navy's Grand Fleet

closed off German access to the high seas through the Channel or into the North Atlantic from Scapa Flow.

Anglo-American domination of the maritime trade routes to strangle opposing land powers is long-established tradition. Control of global chokepoints like the entrances and exits to the Suez Canal has been a centuries-long fact for London, then Washington. Since so much of China's oil comes via the Strait of Hormuz, current tensions there between the USA and UK and Iran have clear implications for China's energy security.

The Strait of Malacca between Malaysia and Indonesia similarly carry the oil and natural gas of the Middle East on to China but also the container shiploads of China's exports to Europe and Africa. As an American naval officer told the *Financial Times's* Gideon Rachman, "If there's a war, that's where we'd get 'em."

But nowadays not all democracies and market economies are singing from the same hymn sheet. When India's foreign minister was asked reproachfully by a Western journalist why a democracy like his did not fall in line with the Western democracies when it came to sanctioning Putin's Russia and holding the line against autocracies in general, he replied that it was precisely because India was a democracy that it made its own decisions. Lula's Brazil (just like Bolsonaro's) is closer to its undemocratic partners in BRICS than to the Western Bloc. A free and democratic South Africa even conducts naval exercises with the Chinese satrap, Russia.

America's long-term allies in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, even Israel, all openly flout Washington's preference for distancing themselves from China and Russia. Whatever the threat is that China constitutes, it is archly traditional: it's a challenge to American primacy, and not to the internal affairs of allied, let alone avowedly neutral, states.

ALL HISTORICAL ANALOGIES HAVE THEIR LIMITS AND risk trapping us on a "tramlines" view of how events will unfold, when what might happen has too many variables. The invocation of the "lessons of the past" by all players is part, nonetheless, of their understanding the parameters of today's dilemmas, and may guide them into avoiding old mistakes by making new ones.

If both Mao and Deng Xiaoping had forged their political careers as successful revolutionary military commanders, their successors have been civilians, albeit ones who still put on the paramilitary Mao-suit when they want to assert their role as commanders-in-chief of a budding superpower. Might Xi and his cadre feel the need to act assertively as Wilhelm II did precisely because they have in fact ruled peacefully for decades in the shadow of heroic predecessors?

But isn't the potential fatal flaw of Anglo-American thinking about great power rivalries the assumption that because we have always come out on top hitherto, we are fated to triumph over any adversary if push comes to shove? The last Cold War ended with a whimper but the World Wars between 1914 and 1945 destroyed the world order and put a new nation on top. History can repeat itself, and war will be the way. ●

Mark Almond is Director of the Crisis Research Institute

# REALITY CHECK: RUSSIA COULD WIN

**The West insists Ukraine will expel the invaders, but as the military momentum increasingly shifts in Russia's favour, we need to understand exactly what we want out of this war before thousands more die. by Lucas Webber**

**T**HE WEST BELIEVES THE WAR IN Ukraine is, if not won yet, then at least not lost. That Russia's invasion has failed, and that the heroic defence offered up by Ukraine has been a glorious feat of arms, scotching Putin's ambitions. However, the matter of who is winning and who is losing in Ukraine is not the simple morality play we might want it to be. And to see that, we should start at the beginning.

On 24 February 2022, Putin declared the start of Russia's "Special Military Operation" in Ukraine as invading forces attacked on several axes. The large-scale incursion from various directions was meant to disorient and overwhelm the Ukrainians, while the Russian forces amassed around Kiev were seemingly designed to coerce the government into concessions of some kind.

However, this initial approach failed and the mounting human and material cost of maintaining Russian forces in the area prompted Russia to retreat. The conflict then phased into a war of attrition — which Russia was prepared for, whether or not they were prepared for the depth of Anglo-American-led Western support for Ukraine — and it has remained so ever since. Things improved for the Russians in the late spring and over the summer, when they scored big successes in taking Popasna, Lyman, Lysychansk, Severodonetsk, and numerous other towns.

Then, momentum switched again in the autumn as Ukraine, bolstered by that massive Western military and financial aid as well as multifaceted intelligence and targeting support, identified and exploited parts of Russia's defence lines in the Kharkov region that were severely undermanned. The resulting opportunistic offensive caused Russia to hightail from a sizable chunk of territory to preserve men and armour.

Following this, Russia withdrew from Kherson's west bank in the south due to Ukrainian pressure and their own logistical issues. Albeit this allowed them to simplify their defence and free up men and equipment to use elsewhere. Yet it should be noted that throughout this time Russia's Wagner organisation and other aligned personnel continued chipping away in the Donbas, setting the conditions for what are now accelerating gains in and around the strategic city of Bakhmut.

Since the last of Russia's forces crossed the Dnipro River in Kherson, putting a natural barrier between the two sides, the war has gradually swung in Moscow's favour, and Ukraine once again finds itself on the back foot. Russia has now mobilised over 300,000 men, stabilised its lines, significantly hardened its defensive positions with fresh personnel and sprawling trench and barrier systems, and has escalated with an intense strategic air campaign that is, amongst other things, crippling Ukraine's energy grid. Furthermore, its forces are now conducting a string of local offensives — spanning from Zaporizhzhia in the south, along DPR/LPR territories, and up to the Siversk, Lyman, and Kupiansk regions further north.

Ukraine's strongest and most fortified defensive line, which was heavily built up during the post-Maidan civil war era, has been severely compromised with the fall of Soledar and looks set to collapse with Russia inching ever closer to taking Bakhmut. Additionally, it is widely anticipated that Russia is preparing to launch some form of intensified offensive action in the coming weeks or months as it amasses huge amounts of currently uncommitted personnel and armour in and around Ukraine.

Despite its chaotic and blunder-filled start to the war as well as Ukraine's impressive feats in expelling its forces from parts of Kharkov and Kherson, Russia has consolidated its defences and transitioned into a strategy focused on leveraging its considerable firepower advantage with the express purpose of attriting Ukraine's armed forces. When Putin declared war and put forth "demilitarisation" as one of the "Special Military Operation's" key objectives, it was meant in earnest. Ambitions wax in all wars, but this Russian goal was real, not a figleaf.

## HOW THE WAR'S BEING FOUGHT

LT COL (RETD) ALEX VERSHININ OF THE Royal United Services Institute has provided an apt explanation of the two sides' opposing approaches to the conflict, describing how the "Russians are fighting a traditional firepower-centric war of attrition", while "Ukraine is pursuing a terrain-focused war of manoeuvre". Wars of attrition "are won through careful husbandry of one's own resources while destroying the enemy's", he says, and, Russia has "carefully preserved their resources, withdrawing every time the tactical situation turned against them" — also noting that Moscow "entered the war with vast material superiority and a greater industrial base to sustain and replace losses".

He says both strategies appear to work as "Ukraine has recaptured large swaths of territory but exhausted itself during the Autumn offensive", and has "suffered frightful losses and depleted key stockpiles of equipment and ammunition". To make matters worse for the Ukrainians, their "capacity to replace losses



and establish new combat formations ... are rapidly withering”.

Currently, Russia controls over 15 per cent of Ukraine, is on track to take more, holds most of its coastline, and is increasingly degrading the country's energy infrastructure. Ukraine's economy has been decimated while the country is being depopulated, with Statista counting over 17.68 million border crossings to other countries as of 17 January this year, with millions of others internally displaced.

Conversely, Russia has a strong military industrial base, a much larger population than its adversary, a bigger military professional and reserve pool to draw upon for future mobilisations, the ability to consistently launch missile and drone strikes from inside and outside of its lands, a still-functioning economy, and is geographically wrapped around Ukraine, allowing for ease of logistical routes and lines of communication.

The US-led West insists that Ukraine can take back all occu-

tial. Russian motives in commencing the invasion have been widely mischaracterised by the Western press and politicians alike. Moreover, like them or loathe them, the issue of Russia's conception of her vital interests has just been disregarded. And that's analytically asinine.

On 24 February 2022, US President Joe Biden said the invasion “was ... always about naked aggression, about Putin's desire for empire by any means necessary”. Much of the West's pundit class are aligned in this view, believing that if Putin is not stopped in Ukraine, then he will inevitably continue his alleged imperialist drive to new lands. Anne Applebaum claimed Kyiv's defeat would throw NATO into chaos, as “the entire alliance would be forced to spend billions to prepare for the inevitable invasion of Warsaw, Vilnius, or Berlin”.

These narratives are patently ill-founded, since the reality is Russia's intervention in Ukraine was an act of desperation and

Former governor of Chernivtsi Oblast, Serhiy Osachuk (centre), now Lieutenant Colonel of the State Border Guard Service, at the Bakhmut operations room, February 2023



piated territory and inflict enough damage to force Russia to quit. Washington and its allies have slapped heavy sanctions on Russia in hopes of strangling its economy, spur upward domestic anti-war pressure, and try to cause regime change in the Kremlin, with some even talking about Balkanizing the country. These goals seem far-fetched at the moment, given the Russian population's support for the war, the protests fizzling out long ago, the sanctions failing to meet expectations, and Russia's neighbourhood dominance on the escalation ladder.

In 2016, President Barack Obama spoke on this last point, admitting, “The fact is that Ukraine, which is a non-NATO country, is going to be vulnerable to military domination by Russia no matter what we do.” This, combined with the reality that the Moscow elite perceive the Ukraine crisis as an existential one, makes it highly unlikely that Russia will simply roll over, concede defeat, and show itself out via the nearest exit. Leaving would now cause the Russian leadership more trouble than staying.

## EXISTENTIAL WAR

THE UKRAINE CONFLICT IS IN LARGE PART a proxy war and many have called it such. Top American politicians and military authorities have overtly expounded their desire to knock Russia from the ranks of the great powers and weaken it as much as possible through war with Western-backed Ukrainian forces.

But in this particular arena, the balance of resolve favours Russia as it is fighting, in its own backyard, a war seen as existen-

not strength. As John Mearsheimer succinctly explained, Moscow views the policy of the US and its European allies as trying to pry Ukraine away from Russia's sphere of influence and integrate it into the West. Thus establishing a Western bulwark on Russia's border through NATO expansion, EU expansion, and their backing of the 2014 coup to put a friendly government into power. The thought experiment of imagining Chinese penetration of Brazil, say, never mind Mexico should not be difficult. Yet for so many, it's just incomprehensible.

William J. Burns, the director of the CIA and former US ambassador to Russia, understood his host country. In 2008, he sent a cable to the US Joint Chiefs of Staff reminding them that “Ukrainian entry into NATO is the brightest of all red lines for the Russian elite”. This conclusion, he notes, was formed through “more than two and a half years of conversations with key Russian players, from knuckle-draggers in the dark recesses of the Kremlin to Putin's sharpest liberal critics”, during which he was unable to find “anyone who views Ukraine in NATO as anything other than a direct challenge to Russian interests”. More than a decade prior to this, George Kennan purported that NATO expansion approaching Russia would turn out to be “the most fateful error of American policy in the entire post-Cold War era”.

## GOOD AND BAD

MOSCOW BELIEVES THE “COLLECTIVE WEST” is using its territory as a launchpad to subvert, destabilise, and ultimately de-

stroy Russia, and does not want for sympathisers in the West to quote in support of this theory. Ukraine's geographical position lets the US-led West exploit Russia's soft underbelly and long porous border. Western intelligence, NGO, and military activities — such as the arming and training of Ukrainian forces that are interoperable with NATO and geared specifically for fighting Russia — had increasingly fuelled Kremlin anxieties.

It has been argued that Moscow has nothing to fear from this and that a Western-orientated Ukraine partnered with a benign United States poses no threat, but realism meant hearing what Russia actually feared. And not what we told them they ought to.

Putin stated that he believes “the goal of our strategic adversaries is to weaken and break up our country” because “they believe our country is too big and poses a threat”. In his address made while Russian forces began rolling into Ukraine, Putin lamented the NATO “military machine” for the chaos and destruction it has wrought in Serbia, Iraq, Libya, and Syria, rebuking the alliance's claim that is purely defensive and justifying the invasion as preventing Russia from becoming their next victim.

Both belligerents have doubled down on their intent to achieve their respective maximal war aims. In the waning days of January, Major General Kyrylo Budanov, Ukraine's military intelligence chief, told the Washington Post that “we must do everything to ensure that Crimea returns home by summer”.

Around the same time, Zelensky, speaking to the *Financial Times*, held firm, declaring, “We must return all lands, because I believe that the battlefield is the way when there is no diplomacy”.

Meanwhile, Putin, during a meeting with senior Defence Ministry officials to

discuss increasing the country's armed forces to 1.5 million personnel, again staked out his own headline position, vowing that “all the goals set will be achieved”. Likewise, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said in late January that Moscow's course of action in Ukraine is “determined by Russia's core legitimate interests” and the conflict will not end until all objectives are met.

The prospects for a negotiated settlement are dim, and several developments have undermined Moscow's remaining trust in dealing with the US, western Europeans, and Ukrainian leadership. Angela Merkel forthrightly stated that the Minsk agreements enabled Ukraine to buy time to prepare for war against Russia, while former Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko told the BBC that the peace deal “gave Ukraine eight years for building up [its] army, for building up [the] economy, and for building up [a] global pro-Ukrainian, anti-Putin coalition”.

Inevitably much of this is “war rhetoric”, expanding patriotically beyond reality. And lots more is self-serving revisionism by exposed and retired actors such as Merkel. But relations and the potential for peace talks have also been poisoned by the clumsy language of an array of US officials. American Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Victoria Nuland, who was deeply involved in behind-the-scenes political machinations during the 2014 Ukraine crisis, has just accused Putin of being a war crim-

inal and intimated that means are being explored to put him on trial at the Hague. In the same hearing, she spoke about working with the Belarusian opposition and said she is “very gratified to know that Nord Stream 2 is now ... a hunk of metal at the bottom of the sea”.

So, once again, the West, not even this time bombing from 30,000 feet, finds itself in a remote morality play, where we can act out right and wrong with few real consequences for ourselves. Russia, however, finds herself in deep waters, with the US and UK supporting the formidable Ukrainian resistance. Despite occasional talk in the West about providing “off-ramps”, Moscow seems to think her best option is to push through, not look for a way out.

The US-led West understands that the war's momentum is increasingly shifting in Russia's favour and has moved with urgent haste to ramp up weapons, armour, and equipment provisions to Ukrainian forces. However, the new packages only account for a small fraction of what Russia has already destroyed.

## WHAT WILL COME

MOST FACTORS INDICATE THAT RUSSIA will likely achieve some sort of favourable outcome in Ukraine, but history tells us war can be highly unpredictable. Even countries fighting existential wars can lose, and in this conflict, one or the other is bound to. Ukraine's military has dug deep, fought valiantly, and proven their ability to inflict pain on occupying Russian forces.

In the same way, they have demonstrated on multiple occasions their capacity to conduct effective offensives to reclaim swaths of annexed territory. It is worth noting that the latest batch of Western military aid is intended to equip an armoured Ukrainian force able to try and punch through Russian defences in the coming months.

As of now, things are looking grim for the Ukrainians as their defensive lines are crumbling under intense onslaught. The Russians have unquestionably regained the initiative, are bolstering their military industrial output, have found it no more impossible to draw up more men than they have to keep their economy going, and are making advances across sections of the entire front. We should reflect more soberly that the Anglo-American way of war has for a long time rested on London, then Washington, being able to ultimately sanction any other economy effectively. The rise of China makes this an infinitely trickier proposition, especially as regards Russia. Russia is holding a massive pool of mobilised and recruited forces in reserve along with an abundance of armour that is not currently committed to the battlefield. Moscow is preparing for a long, gruelling war.

There is no way to know exactly how this will play out, but what is certain is that things are about to get much worse for the people of Ukraine, many more thousands of people will be killed, and the country will take decades to recover. We should know what we want out of Ukraine before too many more of them are killed. Because as things stand, they will be, and only in Putin's dismal favour. ●

Lucas Webber is the co-founder and editor of *Militant Wire*

**THINGS ARE  
LOOKING  
GRIM FOR THE  
UKRAINIANS  
AS THEIR  
DEFENSIVE  
LINES ARE  
CRUMBLING**

# Follow the ball

## *The commercialisation of football offers a model for post-industrial success*

**S**IR JIM RATCLIFFE is arguably Britain's top industrialist, with estimates of his net worth heading towards £15 billion. Given his remarkable business career, government (and ex-government) ministers would be wise to pay attention to his latest moves. They might even learn why some countries have successful economies and others do not.

Last month Ratcliffe's company, Ineos Group, let it be known that it is entering the investment process for Manchester United. The football club is for sale. Its existing owners, the Glazer family from the United States, are said to be ready to hand over control for £5 billion. Ineos Group is only one of a number of potential bidders, with newspapers reporting that other contenders come from North America, the Middle East and the Far East.

The Glazers — whose original fortune came from shopping malls — made a shrewd decision when they bought Manchester United in 2005 for \$942 million. They could see that a media revolution was under way, with the advance of technology making it feasible to broadcast programmes all over the world. In other words, the potential audience for Manchester United was not the capacity crowd of 74,000 at Old Trafford, but — theoretically — the world's entire adult population.

Of course, a proportion of that population does not like football, and in poor countries many people do not yet have a television set, computer or mobile phone. But the beautiful game is acquiring more followers, including in the USA. Moreover, assuming continued catch-up improvements in living standards in developing countries, practically everyone is likely to have access to a screen within 40 years from now.

According to FIFA, the audience for the 2018 World

Cup was more than 3.5 billion or "over half the world". The Glazers' insight was that the broadcasting rights to one of the UK's top teams would soar as a global audience emerged. As they borrowed to buy Manchester United, the value of their investment has probably increased ten-fold since 2005.

IF INEOS DOES BUY Manchester United, will its value increase five-fold or ten-fold in the next twenty years? As the Glazers are selling, they have plainly decided that it won't.

Ratcliffe's interest may be sentimental to a degree, and perhaps he will be happy if Manchester United wins more matches and does not lose money. But a serious commercial motive should not be overlooked or under-estimated.

The globalisation of the world economy may be going into reverse, but the globalisation of broadcasting is in its early stages. English is the world language, and England's Premier League has fans in North America, the Middle East and the Far East ... as all those possible foreign investors realise.

I watched the World Cup final at the Four Seasons Hotel in Marrakech, surrounded mostly by France fans. The CNN sports programme gave the results of the English Premier League matches, but not of top matches in other countries. Language must be the heart of the explanation. Premier League clubs have an incumbent fan base in dozens of countries.

AS I SAID, SIR JIM Ratcliffe may be Britain's most outstanding industrialist. What does the globalisation of football have to do with his industrial strategy? The answer is "a great deal". Growth and prosperity have been hampered

## Bidding for Manchester United: Sir Jim Ratcliffe



in the North of England, as in other parts of the UK, by an anti-business Conservative government which, particularly since 2016, has loaded extra energy and labour costs on companies year after year.

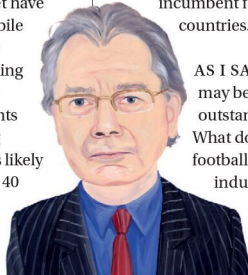
In this context the commercialisation of football is a remarkable achievement and a positive development for the future. Britain would be lucky if Ratcliffe could do with football, and perhaps international broadcasting, as he has done with petrochemicals, where Ineos is a world leader.

The British state has done next to nothing to promote football as a source of employment and added value. Market forces and greedy investors have done their work, and any supposed government "industrial policy" has been beside the point. As football is part of the service sector, its rise might be seen as an aspect of the de-industrialisation of the UK. And so what? Is a Manchester of football stadiums worse than a Manchester of cotton mills?

HOWEVER, SOME POLITICIANS do not see it that way. Greg Clark, business secretary from 2016 to 2019, has just written the foreword to a pamphlet *Making the Change* for the Centre for Social Justice. The pamphlet laments that manufacturing has fallen, as a share of national output, from 25 per cent in the 1970s to 9 per cent today, with the decline proceeding "more rapidly than any other industrialised nation".

Does Greg Clark or the CSJ believe the nation's prosperity would be greater if the ratio were 15 or 20 per cent? How do they know? Is it not obvious that, since the 1970s, people and companies in all rich nations have moved away from low-value-added manufacturing in order to keep themselves relatively rich by global standards?

Mr Clark should take note that one of Britain's top industrialists is switching some of his attention from petrochemicals to football. ●



The curious case of a carefully-tended article about a controversial academic raises questions about the objectivity of the world's most popular encyclopedia

# Who watches the Wikipedia editors?

**P**RIYAMVADA GOPAL, THE PROFESSOR OF Postcolonial Studies in the English faculty at Cambridge University, is best known to the wider public as a Brahmin purveyor of highly personal abuse against those, particularly ethnic minorities, who disagree with her view of her adopted country as a racist hell-hole that is full, unfortunately, of white people — as well as bigoted college porters who will not address her by her proper academic title.

But until very recently, readers of her Wikipedia page would have known none of this. For years, a particularly devoted fan of Professor Gopal, going by the evocative *nom de plume* PostcolonialLitNerd, has been tenderly editing her Wikipedia article, removing anything that might be offensive to the reputation of her (I take the liberty of assuming their anonymous gender) scholarly idol.

Instead of an article about an inexplicably highly-promoted academic with a paper-thin scholarly publication record (three books, only one at a top-tier academic press, but many tweets) and a potty mouth, the reader would have learned that Professor Gopal was voted “one of the world’s top 50 thinkers by *Prospect* magazine”, had contributed to no fewer than 12 publications as a public intellectual, and so on.

Negative information about Gopal, and there is a lot of it, was systematically erased or twisted. When she compared Tony (now Lord) Sewell to Joseph Goebbels because he had the temerity to argue the UK is not a systemically racist country, PostcolonialLitNerd edited the article to claim that Gopal “referenced” rather than “compared” the two, and inserted personal attacks on Sewell for good measure.

When an editor added a section outlining how Gopal was accused of using anti-Semitic dog-whistles in her attack on some Cambridge student journalists (attacking undergradu-

ates being the sign of a healthy academic personality), PostcolonialLitNerd said the section was being given “undue weight” and gutted it. Eventually, she simply deleted the whole section while no one was watching.

When the journalist David Aaronovitch wrote that Gopal was “the Torquemada of the New Woke Inquisition”, an editor added it to the article to illustrate the contentious nature of her reputation. The quote was swiftly excised as a “slur”. Despite numerous attempts to re-insert it, it was deleted by PostcolonialLitNerd and her supporters each time.

In early 2022, PostcolonialLitNerd was permanently banned from Wikipedia. The site’s administrators had discovered that one of the editors who, like PostcolonialLitNerd, only edited Gopal’s article and nothing else, was in fact none other than PostcolonialLitNerd herself. So, a “sockpuppet” in Wikipedia’s intricate lingo, which is very much forbidden. No sooner was she gone than two other newly-created accounts, who also had a strange fixation with improving Gopal’s reputation, were banned for being PostcolonialLitNerd’s sockpuppets. And then, another three accounts were banned.

As of February 2023, nine accounts have been banned for being run by the person behind PostcolonialLitNerd. Over the course of many hours across four years, they ensured that whenever someone looked up Gopal online, they would be presented with the beatific portrait of a high-flying academic anti-racist against whom no sin has been recorded.

**THERE IS NO EVIDENCE THAT POSTCOLONIAL-LitNerd is anything but a slightly obsessed fan of academic decolonisation and of Priya Gopal, instead of being Priya Gopal herself.** But far better people than her (as well as newspaper columnists) have been known to engage in the practice of Wikipedia self-promotion.

As the default online source of information for much of the world, having a good Wikipedia article is worth its weight in gold; and if you cannot be



Whenever someone looked up Gopal online, they would be presented with the beatific portrait of a high-flying academic

User:Postcol

User page Talk

From Wikipedia, the free ency



Category: Wikipedia sock

WIKIPEDIA  
The Free Encyclopedia

User contributions fo

For PostcolonialLitNerd (1 sock log) (show)

This account is currently blocked. (Click

• 11:16, 22 January 2022 (GMT) Sumat (d

investigations/PostcolonialLitNerd

View full log

Search for contributions

- 06:04, 22 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 06:21, 22 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 12:35, 21 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 12:33, 21 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 12:18, 20 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- *page to avoid self warning!* (Flag: vinty
- 03:27, 20 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 03:26, 20 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 03:17, 19 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 04:02, 18 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 02:16, 16 January 2022 (GMT) H... (-)
- 02:32, 16 August 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 06:41, 8 August 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 07:20, 20 July 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 07:08, 14 July 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- *is unambiguously explicit about this!* (-)
- 04:36, 8 July 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 04:23, 8 July 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 04:19, 26 June 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 06:17, 23 June 2021 (GMT) H... (-)
- 06:15, 23 June 2021 (GMT) H... (-)

Priyamvada Gopal

Hey PostcolonialLitNerd, do

No. (PostcolonialLitNerd

Can you explain why

(talk) 05:34, 13 April

I would like to kn

Atchom (talk) 23

User:PostcolonialLitNerd re

Page: Priyamvada Gopal (edit) talk his h

User being reported: PostcolonialLitNerd

Previous version reverted to [2022] (b

professional victim with a persecution co

title of the user's revert:

1, 23 April (-)

2, 21 April (-)

3, 22 April (-)

4, 22 April (-)

5, 23 April (-)

6, 25 April (-)

7, 29 April (-)

8, 30 April (-)

9, 3 March (-)

10, 8 May (-)

12, 4 May (-)

Diff of edit warning / SRB warning: [2022]

Diff of attempt to resolve dispute on ar

Diff of ANEW notice posted to user's t

Comments:

This is slow edit warning against multiple

User:Acquiesce, User:Atchom, and User:

series and has reached something like tw

Furthermore, PostcolonialLitNerd is a WP:

talk page where multiple users have raso

In addition, PostcolonialLitNerd has been

page with selective page (27081), (2091),



yclopedia

This account has been blocked indefinitely because CheckUser evidence confirms that the account's owner has abusively used multiple accounts.

(Account information: block log - CentralAuth - suspected sockpuppets - confirmed sockpuppets - sockpuppet investigations casepage)

ckpuppeters

Search Wikipedia

Create account Log in

or PostcolonialLitNerd

Help

log in / register

Block details: The latest block log entry is provided below for reference.

Block 1 (control) blocked PostcolonialLitNerd (talk) (1 control) with an expiration time of indefinite (account creation blocked) @[[checkuser:block account]]: Abusing multiple accounts. Please see: [en:en:Wikipedia:Sockpuppet](#)

- 4895) ... Talk:Priyamvada Gopal ( -Anti-Semitism row) section)
-191) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Anti-Semitism dispute: Moved references to the end of the sentence. Shortened the sentence for concision.)
-670) ... Talk:Priyamvada Gopal ( -Anti-Semitism row) section)
-3,524) ... Priyamvada Gopal (No consensus for previous version. Neutrality issues. Updated citations.)
-934) ... Priyamvada Gopal (No slanted and poor word economy. Reinstated the previous, more concise and neutral version. Updated citations and templates again for verification. Please use talk a link or fix web host. Reverted)
-80) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -clarity (lit): Moved "Brahmin family" to different sentence) (Tag: Reverted)
-1,331) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Anti-Semitism row: Reinstated the previous, more concise neutral version. Updated citations.) (Tag: adding a link or fix web host. Reverted)
-145) ... Tony Sewell, Baron Sewell of Sanderstead ( -Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities: removed sentence - no source) (Tag: Reverted)
-42) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Criticism of David Abulafia and claim of anti-Semitism: updated information and phrasing) (Tag: Reverted)
-4,977) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Criticism of David Abulafia and claim of anti-Semitism: added information and phrasing) (Tag: Reverted)
-277) ... Priyamvada Gopal (detail: updated citations)
-14) ... Priyamvada Gopal (detail) (Tag: Reverted)
-1) ... Priyamvada Gopal
-1) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Churchill, empire and race: sentence)
-1) ... Priyamvada Gopal (detail:broken lit: removed internal link)
Priyamvada Gopal (Unid revision 1032932107 by Xanthippe (talk)) The wiki editor is not casting judgement. Gopal has stated that she is a Brahmin and comes from a Brahmin family. The citation (Tag: Undo)
Priyamvada Gopal ( -Churchill, empire and race)
Priyamvada Gopal (Ignored: Churchill, empire and race)
Priyamvada Gopal (cleanup)
-1) ... Priyamvada Gopal ( -Churchill, empire and race: merged sentences)
-265) ... Nigel Biggar ( -Colonisation: Changed title to fit section content and added more detail.)

1 [ edit ]
you have a relationship you should disclose with Priyamvada Gopal? Plikavom (talk) 06:22, 5 April 2021 (UTC) [ reply ]
d (talk) 06:26, 7 April 2021 (UTC) [ reply ]
ny every one of your 60+ edits is about Priyamvada Gopal and you have never edited another topic on Wikipedia? Xanthippe 11:2021 (UTC). [ reply ]
now as well. If you only edit one article in three years, and only with a certain editorial slant, others are bound to have questions. 03:51, 16 April 2021 (UTC) [ reply ]

ported by User:Plikavom (Result: Blocked) (edit)

ony links (edit | log)
link - (confirm) - deleted content - logs - filter log - block user - block log
-1) ... "Depending on your point of view, Priyamvada Gopal is either a warrior for racial justice or a
-1) ... quote and framing of controversies as "media attention"

Wikipedia's records show Professor Gopal's entry was repeatedly edited by a devoted fan going by the nom de plume PostcolonialLitNerd, who was subsequently banned from the site

ite talk pages: this section and below
talk page: [25]42

users. PostcolonialLitNerd is the only one reverting this version in and is reverted by myself, User:Chinojama,
-15) PostcolonialLitNerd might not have reached 4 reverts in 24 hours, but they've got up to 3 reverts a couple of
ed reverts total on this content.
-1) ... only edit this article. see: Wikipedia:Conflict of interest/Policio:board/Priyamvada Gopal and the user's
of concerns about their involvement.
-1) ... combative against other users and BLP journalists on talk and has engaged in blatant canvassing on the talk
-1) ... "I will continue to revert edits that are unjust and harmful" in 2021) ... was indirectly removed by 137) ...

bothered to embellish your article yourself, there are consultants who will do so in return for a fee.

To take one notorious example, back when he was a rising star of British journalism, Johann Hari was caught in flagrante editing his own Wikipedia entry to make him seem like one of the "essential writers of our times", as well as engaging in character assassination against his enemies, which helped to end his career (that and the discovery of his persistent plagiarism and fabrication). Many more self-hagiographers remain undetected and virtually undetectable, thanks to the website's inbuilt anonymity.

Wikipedia once seemed like a ludicrous concept. Encyclopaedias were big things written by fellows from minor Oxbridge colleges and sold by door-to-door salesmen to aspirational middle-class households. The idea of delegating the task of summarising the world's knowledge to anyone with an Internet connection seemed impossibly utopian and a recipe for disaster.

But Jimmy Wales, who has a claim to being the most influential British citizen (although he was American when he founded Wikipedia) on the Internet until Sir Nick Clegg decamped to San Francisco to run Facebook had read one of Hayek's essays against central planning as an undergraduate, which made him obsessed about the possibility of the decentralised creation of knowledge.

IN 2000, WALES FOUNDED NUPEDIA, a collaborative online encyclopaedia with peer review. Articles would be written — for free — by subject experts, then reviewed and revised by other subject experts. The final product would be free for the world to use as they saw fit. But experts had better things to do: when Nupedia shut down after three years, only 24 articles had been finalised.

To his surprise, the runaway success was Wikipedia, the free-for-all website Wales and co-founder Larry Sanger had initially intended as a supplement to Nupedia. As it turned out, there are plenty of weirdos — and "weirdo" is an apt description for most regular Wikipedia editors — who were keen to spend long hours editing an online encyclopaedia for no fee and no credit.

By 2004, Wikipedia had a million articles in 100 languages; in 2006, English Wikipedia gained its millionth article (on Jordanhill railway station in Scotland). Today, it has 6.6 million.

Wikipedia's inexorable rise was first welcomed with gentle condescension, then alarm. Commercial encyclopaedia publishers dismissed it as a repository of falsehoods. And there was a lot of it in Wikipedia's early days. An ex-boyfriend of mine from university used to regale me with tales of how he inserted romances with

obscure Welsh footballers into the biographies of Motown singers.

All of this was no use. A few years after its launch, respectable institutions — courts, newspapers, national governments — began citing Wikipedia. Print encyclopaedias, who could not compete, shut down one after the other. Survivors, such as the legendary Encyclopaedia Britannica, sank into irrelevance.

For many bodies, Wikipedia has become the repository of their institutional memory. Long-standing errors made on the website are republished by respectable institutions as fact, which then are used by Wikipedia editors to buttress the veracity of the original claim. No institution is immune: I am reliably informed that Buckingham Palace conferred at least one non-existent title on the late Queen on the strength of a Wikipedia article alone.

Even experts err: the occasional mistake does not destroy Wikipedia's usefulness, although Wikipedia can destroy whole cultures. In 2020, it was discovered that almost every article on Scots Wikipedia was written by an American teenager who did not speak Scots, with potentially catastrophic ramifications for the publicly subsidised pseudo-language's future.

But when it comes to open politics, it's another story entirely. On almost any political topic, Wikipedia is guaranteed to skew left. And given every activist's favourite slogan being "everything is political", this means a big chunk of the world's most used source of reference information has become the bastion of left-wing thought. In 2021, co-founder Sanger went so far as to say Wikipedia is now full of progressive propaganda.

**TO UNDERSTAND WHY WIKIPEDIA IS STRUCTURALLY** left-wing, one first has to understand Wikipedia editors. The typical Wikipedia editor is a man (fewer than 10 per cent are women) who works in a desk job which involves being online a lot (IT workers have always been over-represented), lives in a first-world country, and who has leftist politics. In other words, the



Wikipedia guidelines often make coverage of topics from a non-liberal perspective impossible

typical Wikipedia editor is a *Guardian* reader (online edition, not print).

I've assumed — her interest in literature is suggestive — that like me, PostcolonialLitNerd is female. We therefore are markedly in the minority in terms of people who take an interest in the "talk pages" of Wikipedia entries, with all the structural disadvantages that entails. Hence my sisterly desire in these pages to applaud her effort to break free from the male gaze of discrimination. Whoever she is.

To be a successful Wikipedia editor, you have to master the maze

of rules which undergird the website. Some are very sensible: try to avoid libelling the living, as they might sue. But much of the lore Wikipedia has already generated about itself is arcane and self-contradictory. Unsurprisingly, "edit wars" among the neurotic editors are frequent, some lasting for years. They are settled through attrition and a multi-tier court-like system with its own rules of procedure and precedents. Little surprise that normal people, and most women, largely tend to stick to reading Wikipedia instead of editing it.

This demographic skew shapes what gets covered on Wikipedia, and how. Some of the coverage bias is generally harmless. Articles on Japanese anime series, for example, are often longer and better than those on British prime ministers. Anyone who has played a single match of first-class cricket, no matter how obscure, will have a lovingly-written biography.

**A**LL OF THIS IS LESS FUNNY WHEN IT comes to politics. Just about every conservative politician of any note will have a Wikipedia article with long condemnatory sections chronicling in detail every time some left-wing activist has subjectively criticized them for something. Wikipedia ostensibly has strong rules to enforce neutrality on its pages, but editors get around them simply by couching everything in bloodless indirect speech ("it has been alleged that Mr Jones is literally Hitler").

Sometimes, Wikipedia editors collectively lose their minds on a political topic, with predictable results. There is a 23,000 word article on the FBI's search of Donald Trump's Mar-a-Lago residence last year. The entire article on Plato is less than 10,000 words long.

Wikipedia's own guidelines, largely produced by its most active editors, often make coverage of many topics from a non-liberal point of view literally impossible. Its policy on articles about transgender people, for example, mandates the use of (publicly-reported) gender self-ID, of the third-person "they" pronoun



The Laughing Policeman, 2023

if the subject uses non-traditional pronouns, and discourages “deadnaming” (the allegedly harmful practice of referring to a person by their pre-gender change name) in most circumstances. The self-ID policy was first enacted in 2006, putting Wikipedia squarely in the vanguard of the gender revolution.

**ANOTHER KEY WIKIPEDIA GUIDELINE** is the one on reliable sources. As an encyclopaedia, Wikipedia relies almost entirely on secondary sources considered reliable for the sourcing of its articles, only allowing primary sources in limited circumstances and forbidding the use of original research in article-writing.

But like everything else, whether a source is considered reliable or not is subject to community consensus. In practice, Wikipedia editors heavily favour legacy media outlets whose content is freely accessible online (relevant academic literature, paywalled and harder to understand, is often ignored). Articles from websites such as *BBC News*, the *Guardian*, and *The New York Times*, are accepted uncritically because they are on the “reliable sources list”, despite their obvious political skew.

Right-wing publications naturally fare less well under this system. If they are cited in an article, some editor or another will inevitably slap the qualifier “right-wing” in front of the quote to signal they are not trusted. In 2017, editors voted to ban citations to the *Daily Mail*, with the result that if, for example, a government minister makes a policy announcement in the *Mail*, it cannot be referred to until another “reliable” outlet has referred to the *Mail* article.

To some readers of austere monthly print magazines, all of this may seem impossibly arcane, the tittle-tattle of an online subculture of little relevance. But make no mistake: Wikipedia today occupies a hegemonic position as the world’s most influential repository of general knowledge and information. The fact that English Wikipedia’s roughly 6,000 regular editors (who make more than 100 edits a month) control the tenor of its content should alarm anyone who wishes to counter the progressive left’s cultural hegemony.

Meanwhile, after years of manipulation, some stability has returned to Priyamvada Gopal’s Wikipedia page, for now.

The worst of the Gopal apologia has been removed, but much remains. Of the article introduction’s 147 words, exactly two are critical of her. In every section which may reflect badly on Gopal’s intellect or moral character, defences of Gopal by her allies are given pride of place, while her critics are relegated to curt mentions sandwiched between “rebuttals”.

For most people seeking information on Gopal online, her Wikipedia article will be their first port of call. Reading it, they will know little of her race-baiting and online abuse hurling. Instead, they will get a sanitised description of a respectable senior Cambridge academic who inexplicably finds herself the target of attacks from the media, the government and Jewish students, through no fault of her own. As far as the Internet is concerned, that will be the version of record.

Gopal’s entry dearly mattered to someone, and she, or conceivably he, has edited it assiduously. It should matter to you too. Beware editors. ●

## TITANIA McGRATH’S WOKE WORLD

# Double rapists can be ladies, too



● **THE PENIS IS A PHALIC SYMBOL.** As such, it is inherently problematic. Unless it is attached to a woman, in which case it is empowering.

Take the recent case of Isla Bryson, often deadnamed in the media as “Adam Graham the Double Rapist”. This courageous young woman was all set to be housed in a female prison in Scotland when some transphobes started complaining.

Even Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP’s reliably progressive leader, claimed that she couldn’t be sure whether Isla Bryson was actually a woman. This is an outrage. Just because Isla has a penis, testicles and a track record of sexual assault doesn’t make her any less of a lady.

Only a bigot would deny Isla’s lived experience. If you look closely at some of the photographs of her in the press, you can clearly see that she is wearing pink nail varnish and lipstick. What more proof of her womanhood do you need?

Besides, as SNP politician Shona Robison has pointed out: “There is no evidence that predatory and abusive men have ever had to pretend to be anything



else to carry out abusive and predatory behaviour”. And with the exception of all those Scout masters and priests and teachers and serial killers and sex offenders who have lied about their identity to gain access to their victims, there are quite literally NO examples.

“But Isla Bryson is a dangerous criminal!” scream the transphobes. Well, given that our justice system was created in order to oppress the most marginalised in our society, I actually do not think it is physically possible for a trans person to commit a crime.

In any case, “if you accept that evidence, that she is transitioning” as Isla’s defence lawyer pointed out in court “that goes a long way to acquitting her of these charges.” Rape is a crime of male aggression. Isla Bryson is a woman. Therefore, she cannot be guilty.

That there was even a trial in the first place just goes to show how transphobic our society has become. Isla Bryson identifies as innocent, and that’s good enough for me. ●

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# It's only human nature

*It's naïve to think life is all about laughing and loving, while ignoring our wider flaws*

**“P**EOPLE LIKE COLDPLAY and voted for the Nazis. You can't trust people, Jeremy.”

Super Hans, the crack-addicted dispenser of violence and wisdom in the noughties sitcom *Peep Show* and the Tory cleric, Jonathan Swift, might not be obvious bedfellows. True, they both share a profound talent for the scatological: Hans memorably compared the act of giving birth to “frogs coming out an arsehole” whilst one of Swift's most popular poems reaches a denouement when he realises that “Celia shits!”

Both loved ecclesiastical politics; Swift's career as a Tory propagandist stalling as Dean of St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin, due to the above crudities, whereas Hans loved nothing more than “kicking back with a bit of Barchester”.

Crucially, though, both had healthily low opinions of human nature, almost postmodern in their misanthropy. Super Hans's critique of public taste and democracy sits comfortably alongside Swift's general treatise on the human condition in Book IV of *Gulliver's Travels*, where it is concluded that humans were “the most pernicious Race of little odious Vermin that Nature ever suffered to crawl upon the Surface of the Earth”. Neither analysis, alas, is popular today.

HUMAN NATURE HAS BECOME the domain of living, laughing and loving. Our sole purpose is the pursuit of pleasure and the minimisation of pain and the only way we can assess the value of humanity as a whole is on the basis by which that pursuit is enabled. That we are good and rational and, most importantly today, have a right to pursue these ends is taken for granted. The problem is that, as Swift and Super



Hans knew, it isn't true.

A cursory look at the history of humanity should be more than enough. Yet we have had people who read history at university at the forefront of government for a number of years and remain stuck in a rut around human nature. How many public policy mistakes have been the result of the basic miscalculation that people are good and rational and will behave accordingly?

From the right-to-buy scheme to Covid marshals, the last 40-odd years of British politics are littered with ideas that were presented as sensible in the abstract until the knotty reality of human nature got involved.

Globally, things are even worse. Canada's euthanasia policy provides a solid example. Originally marketed as a rational choice for sensible adults and therefore an indisputable moral good, it is now being used to kill the poor and the mentally ill as well as the physically sick and the elderly.

IT IS NO COINCIDENCE THAT those who advocate most strongly for these sorts of measures are, themselves, of an age and social background that means they are routinely furthest away from the messy outworking of human nature — until the inevitability of death creeps up on them.

Pointing out the wider flaws in human nature does not equate to a call for technocracy — the clarion call of a *Times* column that “if only we could get the grown-ups in charge again”. It requires a revisionism worthy of our most maniacal online historians to think that the very people who most actively advanced a naïve view of the human condition remain the best hope.

Again, the philosophy of our governing, commenting and culturally-dominant classes is the problem here. It's very easy to believe people are fundamentally sensible

**How many public policy mistakes have been the result of the basic miscalculation that people are good and rational?**



and good and trustworthy when you believe yourself to be so as well.

No, lack of charity begins at home. Indeed, part of the failure of any real criticism of the status quo — which has been attempted from left and right, religious and non-religious sources — is that advocates of such critiques are almost never able to convince anyone that they are prepared to apply such diagnoses to themselves.

One can dress up in the gown and bands of historic moral chastisement all one wants, but if that isn't accompanied by a sense of the irony of that action and of personal introspection around one's own language, action and mores, then you might as well go back to shouting at strangers at bus stops.

AS A CLERGYMAN, I AM often asked whether I think the story of Adam and Eve is true. My main response is to paraphrase Pontius Pilate and say it is dependent on whatever “truth” means. What I know to be true is its diagnosis of human nature: that it is fallen and in need of some form of redemption.

What I also know to be true is that it applies, first and foremost, to me and my nature. As another unlikely postmodernist in this regard, Dr Johnson, put it, “I hate mankind, for I think myself one of the best of them, and I know how bad I am.”

The endless task of attempting to address that, ironically, leads to much more laughing, loving and, well, living than believing that such pursuits are moral goods in, and of, themselves. ●

Fergus Butler-Gallie's new book, *Touching Cloth*, is out this month



# Surrogacy and the rise of the female patriarch

*Most modern feminists blithely ignore the exploitation of less-privileged women as "wombs for hire" for the rich and powerful*

**Victoria Smith**

**P**ARIS HILTON HAS A BABY. I didn't think this news would interest me. It's been two decades since I watched her and fellow heiress, Nicole Ritchie, pretend to do "real jobs" — the kind other people do to survive — on *The Simple Life*.

I quite liked the two of them. They seemed to have a sense of their own ridiculousness and of the injustice of their social position. Unlike today's nepo babies, they were willing to play their privilege for laughs.

Now, at the age of 41, Hilton has become a mother. But not in the way most women do: getting pregnant and giving birth, or adopting. Instead, she has followed in the footsteps of fellow celebrities such as Grimes, Rebel Wilson and Kim Kardashian by hiring another woman to bear a child for her. According to the *Daily Mail*, Hilton even turned to Kardashian for advice, getting a recommendation for a doctor for the egg extraction process who would ensure the new baby was biologically hers.

Mainstream feminist opprobrium has been muted. That this story has flown under the radar might seem surprising, given the type of transgression that does get picked up. Today's feminist is hyper-conscious of privilege, constantly asking "if your feminism isn't centring the most marginalised, what is it even for?"

Employ a cleaner and you're offloading your dirty work onto poorer women; run a successful business and you're a Lean-In girlboss exploiting your workers in the name of female empow-

erment. Use your wealth and status to claim ownership of the contents of another woman's womb, though — positioning yourself as the Biblical Sarah in relation to the slave Hagar, or *The Handmaid's Tale's* Serena Joy in relation to Offred — and you're fine.

**ON THE FACE OF IT, THIS IS BIZARRE.** If a single act could exemplify the one per cent woman treating a less-privileged woman just as badly as men have treated women throughout history, it is this. No other form of exploitation is so sex-specific, so central to the distortion of male-female power relations. If there is such a thing as a female patriarch, it is the rich woman who outsources and appropriates female reproductive labour.

Globally, surrogacy is on the rise. Even in the UK, where surrogates can only receive expenses and legal parenthood cannot be transferred until after the birth, the number of people acquiring children by this route has quadrupled over the past ten years, with two-thirds of applicants being mixed-sex couples.

Unlike opposition to abortion restrictions, opposition to surrogacy is extremely niche. Far from being identified as a conservative, exploitative practice with Old Testament roots, surrogacy has acquired the sheen of progressivism. Partly because of its association with LGBTQ+ couples, who nonetheless remain a minority of those using it, it is positioned as a kinder, more inclusive way of creating a family.

What's more, neither oppressive social norms nor the inconveniences of pregnancy and birth need stand in the way of acquiring a baby of one's own. You just need someone on the outside. Someone who is less of a person, more a vessel for hire. If anyone objects, you can suggest that they simply do not want people like you to reproduce.

**IT IS NOT DIFFICULT TO SEE HOW** this rose-tinted narrative has emerged. Due to what the philosopher Mary O'Brien termed "the alienation of the male seed", men have traditionally relied on compulsory heterosexuality, the patriarchal nuclear family and restrictions on female sexual activity to acquire children they can be (relatively) sure are biologically their own. In this sense, patriarchy is not about policing sexual mores; it is about the control of resources.

This understanding ought to be basic feminism. However, a combination of new reproductive technologies and calls for gender liberation have turned the analysis on its head. It is as though there was never anything wrong with patriarchy's objectives, just with its methods. Today we are told we can dispense with the bad stuff (the loveless marriage! The prudery! The vaginal prolapse!) while keeping the good (the continuation of your noble lineage!). Passing on one's genetic heritage need not come at the expense of being one's true self.

An old-style feminist, I am no cheerleader for traditional marriage or placing limits on how



**If there are female patriarchs, they are rich women who outsource childbirth**

many people a woman may sleep with. Even so, I see problems here.

Biology is not destiny, insofar as a woman's capacity to give birth should not force her into a life of domestic drudgery. But gestating babies and giving birth remain — how shall I put it? — *a thing*. Human beings can't have everything; being your true self cannot come at the expense of other people's selves and bodies. The trouble is, the commercial surrogacy movement is absolutist. Unlike people like me, it never says "no, you can't have this." That makes it very attractive.

IN OCTOBER LAST YEAR, THE *GUARDIAN* featured a gay couple who view access to affordable surrogates through the lens of reproductive justice. "We are expected to be OK with not having children," they complain, as though the whole heteropatriarchal edifice they believe themselves to be dismantling does not have its origins in men seeking a way to circumvent this "not being OK." The photograph illustrating the piece showed two male hands clasped in solidarity, a naked pregnant belly alone in the background. Poor men. Mean, disembodied uterus-owner.

Then there's a 2020 *New York Times* article on "The Fight for Fertility Equality," which announces that "a movement has formed around the idea that one's ability to build a family should not be determined by wealth, sexuality, gender or biology". To me this sounds completely insane.

The existence of babies is wholly dependent on boring old biology. Then again, I would say that. I am one of those plebs who gestated her own offspring instead of getting someone else to do it. I am one of the throwbacks who considers the act of gestation socially, politically and emotionally meaningful. This is an embarrassing, unfashionable thing for a twenty-first century feminist to admit.

While radical feminists have held the line with a critique of

"We are expected to be OK with not having children: how gay parenthood through surrogacy became a battleground"



**No one can put a price on the physical and emotional cost of surrogacy**

surrogacy already present in works such as Gina Correa's *The Mother Machine* (1985) and Andrea Dworkin's *Right-Wing Women* (1983), today's liberal feminists have bought the myth that commercial surrogacy is liberatory. The title of Sophie Lewis's 2019 family abolition manifesto is even *Full Surrogacy Now!*

I doubt someone like Lewis will ever find herself in the role of walking womb for the rich and famous, her body invaded, her health compromised, her emotional life disregarded. That said, I do not think liberal feminists set out to redefine a subset of women, as opposed to all women, as a broad mare underclass. It is a symptom of modern-day individualism, of the co-opting of "privilege" narratives to favour the already privileged, but also of feminism's fraught relationship with motherhood and the body.

**PREGNANCY AND BIRTH ARE SUI GENERIS.** Nothing else is remotely like them. I think this is why so many brilliant, creative feminist thinkers have disagreed so strongly about what they mean — and why one cannot say any of them were wholly right or wrong.

The 1970s saw the publication of Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex*, in which the author declared pregnancy to be "barbaric," quoted a friend comparing labour to "shitting a pumpkin," and dreamed of a time when fetuses could be grown in artificial wombs. It also saw the publication of Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born*, which celebrated female reproductive power and reimagined birth as "one experience of liberating ourselves from fear, passivity, and alienation from our bodies."

In her 1983 work, *The Politics of Reproduction*, O'Brien pointed out that under patriarchy, the abstract concept of male potency is elevated, while the female body is degraded. "Menstruation and pregnancy," she wrote, "have been at times 'decorously' shrouded, at other times bravely waved as the flag of the potent male ... All the while, men have fashioned their world with a multiplicity of phallic symbols which even Freud could not catalogue exhaustively."

I think she is right. The female reproductive role is denigrated because it is envied. We see this in the way men are regarded as the creators of worlds, while women are demoted from life-givers to potting soil. Female inferiority is socially constructed, rooted in male projection. Yet knowing this does not make those who get pregnant any less vulnerable to violence and exploitation. It does not make giving birth feel any less like "shitting a pumpkin". These are difficult contradictions to manage.

"The body," wrote Rich, "has been made so problematic for women that it has often seemed easier to shrug it off and travel as a disembodied spirit." In *Of Woman Born*, she wished to offer a narrative of resistance. Alas, part of the nineties backlash against maternal feminism — against writers such as Rich — involved encouraging women to step back from their bodies all over again.



"I won't be back at my usual time."

**S**UPPORTED BY THE INCREASING popularity of queer theory, the analyses of those such as Firestone were reduced to a cheap association between pregnancy and that which is base, animalistic and non-intellectual. Meanwhile, conservative efforts to force women back into a subordinate role in the home made many younger feminists wary of asserting that female reproductive experience might be significant to women's emotional lives.

As a young woman in the 1990s, I felt a great attraction towards this division between (superior, male) mind and (inferior, female) body. It fuelled my own nonchalance regarding surrogacy. In 1998, Katha Pollitt wrote of the Baby M case, in which a woman changed her mind about relinquishing her child. "When Mary Beth Whitehead signed her contract," wrote Pollitt, "she was promising something it is not in anyone's power to promise: not to fall in love with her baby."

But to my younger self, the ability "not to fall in love" with a baby you could be carrying for a client seemed the measure of true intellectual detachment. You, like a man, need not be governed by your lowly position as a breeder. The distinction between your mind — your true, special self — and whatever might be happening to your reproductive organs could be pristine and perfect.

Naturally, for most women who think this way, the question of signing away maternal love is hypothetical. They will not be commercial surrogates themselves, but the insistence that they could be — and if they were, that their essential selves would remain untouched by reproductive/maternal experience — becomes something upon which their claim to full personhood relies.

They can persuade themselves that surrogates are not harmed by the process because to see harm would be to deny the surrogate agency (which is very similar to the way in which the abuse of prostituted women is justified). "Women are not just their bodies" becomes "these women's bodies do not matter at all". Having experienced pregnancy and birth, I no longer believe this. These experiences change you. It represents a failure of empathy on my part, a feminist failure, no less, that I couldn't see it before.

**RECENTLY I READ IN THE STUDENT NEWSPAPER** *Varsity* about a Cambridge student who described her experience of gender dysphoria. "I wanted to be a physicist," she wrote, "not a baby-making machine". I found this incredibly sad. Such a viewpoint represents not just the intractability of female discomfort with our bodies, but the persistence of a sex class hierarchy many have given up trying to dismantle, instead seeking individual flight. We might have agreed that women, or at least, those "assigned female at birth", are not baby-making machines. What has not been agreed is that "baby-making machines" do not exist.

The final ascent of the female patriarch has come against a

Someone must be very proud of the slogan "SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED", for it is relayed countless times — ad nauseam, in fact — over public address systems in British trains and stations.

The slogan has the effect that a squeaky piece of chalk had on me as a child — it sent shivers down my spine and made me clench my jaw and grind my teeth. It is preceded by "If you see anything that doesn't look right, call the British Transport Police ...". Recently, however, it was changed on at least one train to "If you see anything unusual, call the British Transport Police ...".

Something unusual — like a well-dressed person, for example? You can go a long way on British trains before you see a well-dressed person, probably longer than you can see someone being aggressive.

Nevertheless, if everyone who saw something unusual called the BTP, it would soon be inundated by calls.

**SEE IT, SAY IT, SORTED:** what does "sorted" mean in the context of the British police? If the experience of countless millions is anything to go by, it means "sorted" as far as the police are concerned, that is to say an incident is given, often somewhat reluctantly, a crime number.

I say reluctantly because a crime number for a crime that the police have no intention of investigating, let alone solving, messes up the statistics with which to deceive the public.

Sorted, indeed! One would have thought that the police were as efficient as a modern diesel car. The slogan is not only vulgar, but an implicit lie. ●

backdrop of women no longer being permitted to have a class politics in relation to the body. Trans activists, with the support of politicians and organisations that nominally represent women, have decreed that having words that describe who gets pregnant is exclusionary. Instead, we must use dehumanising terms such as "uterus-haver", "breeder" and "gestator", words for spare part people, on hand to provide services when required.

To elevate women — to grant them true equality — one must disassociate them from pregnancy and birth, activities for the lower orders. Feminists are no longer compelled to defend women as a group uniquely vulnerable to reproductive exploitation because such a definition of women no longer exists. And yet, the exploitation still happens. The babies are still born, to someone whose name denotes neither personhood (woman) nor a relationship (mother).

In *The Simple Life*, the viewer knew Paris Hilton was not really working. She coasted, while those around her did things of value, which made the programme strangely powerful. You saw the injustice, right there. No one sees the woman who provided Hilton with a child. No one can put a price on the risk, the physical and emotional cost, or the lifetime aftermath. The detail has to remain invisible, otherwise what we see would be grotesque.

Hilton and fellow female patriarchs might have outsourced the role of "baby-making machine", but that does not make them more human. It makes them more like men. Feminism can do better than that. If all women matter, we must. ●

**Victoria Smith is a feminist writer with a particular interest in motherhood. Her book *Hags: The Demonisation of Middle-Aged Women* is published in March**

CHRISTOPHER SNOWDON

# The roots of school rage

*Many of the most trenchant opponents of grammar schools enjoyed the benefits of a private education*

**I**N MARCH 2000, PARENTS IN RIPON, North Yorkshire voted by 1,493 to 747 to retain the city's grammar school. The vote had been held under a clause in the Schools Standards and Framework Act (1998) which effectively banned new grammar schools from opening and created a mechanism by which existing grammar schools could be abolished. The Campaign for State Education had forced the ballot in the hope of making Ripon Grammar School the first of the remaining 166 grammar schools to fall. Instead, it became an historical footnote as the only such referendum to be held.

It is surprising that Peter Hitchens does not mention this event in his recent book, *A Revolution Betrayed: How Egalitarians Wrecked the British Education System*, since it supports his view that grammar schools were never unpopular. No stranger to a lost cause, Hitchens champions selection by ability and would like to see grammar schools return in great numbers. Despite occasional promises from Conservative leaders to revive the eleven-plus exam, this is even less likely than Hitchens's dream of abolishing British Summer Time and flinging cannabis users in prison. He admits that the battle is "utterly lost".

The book is an invigorating read nonetheless and made me consider my own position. I happened to be a pupil at Ripon Grammar between 1987 and 1994. For many years, I had mixed feelings about both the school and the whole system of selective education with its glaring, arbitrary inequities. It was not obvious that a grammar school education had made me the man I am and it was not necessarily to its credit if it had. To praise the grammar school system felt like defending my own privilege. To condemn it felt like kicking the ladder away.

While remaining on the fence, I was struck by how many of the grammar schools' most trenchant opponents had enjoyed the benefits of a private education and had sent their own children to either a private school or a carefully selected faith school in a leafy area. When Shirley Williams was dismantling the grammar school system as education secretary in the 1970s,

her daughter was famously attending the highly selective Godolphin and Latimer School (which to avoid Williams's policies became an independent school). It is always wise to pay more attention to people's revealed preferences than their stated preferences.

Perhaps there is an element of confirmation bias, but I have also been struck down the years by how many successful people rose from very humble beginnings through the grammar

schools. There are far too many to list, but they include Alan Bennett, Melvyn Bragg, Michael Caine, David Frost, Albert Finney, David Hockney, Mick Jagger, Elton John, Ben Kingsley, Andrew Neil, Dennis Potter, Michael Parkinson, Alan Rickman, Janet Street-Porter, Victoria Wood and all the Beatles except Ringo. And that is without mentioning anyone involved in politics, business, academia or sport.

**DEFENDERS OF THE GRAMMAR SCHOOL SYSTEM** are sometimes accused of arguing from anecdote, as I am here, but is it mere coincidence that Britain had an unbroken run of grammar school-educated prime ministers between 1964 and 1997? Before 1964, they were almost all public schoolboys.

Since 1997, they have been mostly public schoolboys again. Comprehensives have given us just one and a half prime

## If grammars are no better and no worse than comprehensive schools, why are so many people bothered about the issue?

ministers: Liz Truss and Theresa May, the latter attending a grammar school which became a comprehensive while she was there. In 2015, 50 years after the comprehensive school revolution began, the *Guardian* proudly appointed the first editor in its history to have been educated at a state school. It was Katherine Viner, one of my fellow Old Riponians.

What does any of this prove? Perhaps nothing. Perhaps all these people would have lifted themselves to the top by their own efforts. There is plenty of evidence from the social sciences for opponents of grammar schools to cite in their favour. For every claim in support of selection by ability there is at least one study from an educational think tank to rebut it.

According to much of the academic literature, grammar schools do not take their fair share of children from poor backgrounds; they neither help nor hinder social mobility to any great degree; their pupils do not gain any social or emotional advantages over children who attend non-selective schools, and they have worse self-esteem; they get better grades but this is only because of genetic differences, family



**The demise of grammars has exacerbated socio-economic disparities**

wealth or prior attainment; they are more likely to go to a good university, but only for the same reasons. Essentially, the whole thing is a con. Grammar schools simply cream off the kids who are destined for success and then take the credit when they get the grades they would have got anyway.

**IF ALL THIS WERE TRUE AND GRAMMAR SCHOOLS** were basically useless, why are so many people bothered about the issue? If they are no better and no worse than other schools, why does it matter how many there are? If they don't offer anyone a leg up in life, why does it matter how many of their pupils come from poor backgrounds? In disparaging *everything* about grammar schools, egalitarian academics turn them into a non-issue.

But let us assume, as other evidence suggests, that grammar schools provide a better standard of education than the average non-selective school and bestow advantages on those who attend them. The question then is whether such a system is inherently unfair and socially undesirable.

It is an inescapable fact that grammar schools, as they currently exist, admit a disproportionately large number of children who attended private primary schools and admit disproportionately few children from low-income families. According to Comprehensive Future, one of several pressure groups lobbying for the abolition of the remaining grammars, only five per cent of grammar school children are eligible for free school meals as compared to 22 per cent in non-selective schools. By contrast, 11 per cent of their pupils went to a private primary school despite only 5 per cent of children in the general population having done so.

There is, however, no evidence of deliberate discrimination

by the grammar schools. Pupils are admitted on merit. Children from poorer families are less likely to take the eleven-plus and are less likely to pass it when they do.

There is no point being squeamish about the reasons for this. Grammar schools have always taken more pupils from the middle class than from the very bottom of the income distribution because, as Hitchens explains, "the middle class is not a caste but a shifting body that you may join and leave. As it was in the 1950s, it existed as a result of education and ambition. It was hardly surprising that it valued education very highly and tried to secure it for its offspring."

But it was not just the middle class who did well from the grammar schools. Children from the skilled working class benefitted to a similar degree and for the same reasons. It is true that children from the *unskilled* working class, whose parents were less likely to have books at home and who did not encourage their children to take the eleven-plus, were admitted less often but it is difficult to see what the grammar schools could have done about this other than to abandon selection altogether and cease being grammar schools.

**TO THE DELIGHT OF PROGRESSIVE EDUCATIONALISTS,** this is exactly what nine out of ten grammar schools did after 1965 when the infamous Circular 10/65 told local authorities to convert their grammars to comprehensives. Whittled down from 1,300 at their peak to just 163 today, the demise of grammar schools has greatly exacerbated the socio-economic disparities in selection that egalitarians always associated with them. Now a scarce resource, affluent parents are prepared to pay a great deal for private tuition and expensive houses in the right catchment area for a chance to win their child a golden ticket.

For these reasons, it is wholly unfair to judge the grammar school system by how it works today rather than on how it performed before it was sabotaged. Even if academic research into grammar schools was not conducted by people who blatantly have an axe to grind, assessing the impact of grammar schools *as they currently exist* is like studying the impact of monasteries during the reign of Elizabeth I.

Grammar schools were set up to provide an academic education for the academically-minded. What egalitarians demanded of them could never be delivered. It was inevitable that some children who would have benefitted from a grammar school education would miss out, especially after the baby boom created more bright children than could be squeezed into the limited number of places available, but, as Hitchens says, the grammar schools “were not and could not be a sort of rescue mission, searching out wasted talent in every corner”.

**ONE OF THE MAIN CONSEQUENCES** of the idealistic assault on selection by ability was that grammars in many towns and cities, including Manchester, Leeds and Bradford, went private. Schools you were unlikely to attend if your parents were in the bottom ten per cent of the income distribution became inaccessible without a bursary unless your parents were in the top 20 per cent. This does not feel very egalitarian.

In the name of equality, we could continue the frenzy of destruction and abolish the

private schools. Unless you believe that selection by parental wealth is fairer than selection by ability, this is the logical conclusion to the reforms that began in the 1960s. Hitchens says this is a non-starter because private schools “could only be abolished by a totalitarian state”, but this doesn’t ring true.

It would be difficult to enforce a ban on private *tuition*, but a ban on private *schools* would be easy enough. Hitchens is right when he says that leftists who call for their abolition are usually soothing their consciences, safe in the knowledge that it will never happen, but the reason it will never happen is not that Britain lacks a Gestapo. It is because the political elite rely on private schools for their own children and grandchildren. Politicians hate nothing more than the charge of hypocrisy but many of them would sooner be seen as a phoney than send their child to an average comprehensive.

**IN THE RHETORIC OF THOSE WHO OPPOSE** grammar schools, selection at age eleven consigns the majority of children to the “scrapheap”. This reflects lingering disdain for secondary modern schools which have all but disappeared (the former secondary modern in Ripon is now a well-regarded academy). Hitchens is too hard on comprehensive schools,

most of which are pretty good these days and many of which are excellent, but it would be strange if *supporters* of comprehensive education thought of them as the scrapheap.

If they did, why would they want every child to be condemned to it? And if some of them are substandard, surely there are better ways to improve them than forcing the most academically-minded children into them in the hope that, by some osmosis, they will lift their peers.

**THE TRAGEDY IS THAT WHAT THE** grammar schools did well (and still do) could have been done by any school. It did not cost money; grammar schools get less funding than comprehensives. Half the battle was ignoring post-war educational fads and retaining discipline. This, admittedly, was easier when the pupils had been handpicked, but the exceptional performance of the inner city Michaela Community School shows that it can still be done. Headteacher Katharine Birbalingh once put up a sign reading: “Private School Ethos - No Fees”. It could have been the slogan of the grammar schools.

I remain open to the possibility that the whole issue is a red herring. Insofar as educational standards have declined since the 1950s, there are plausible explanations that have

nothing to do with grammar schools. And yet the fanaticism of those who wish to abolish grammar schools and the revealed preferences of politicians who claim to support comprehensive

education draws me to Hitchens’s cause. Anthony Crosland, Labour’s education secretary in 1965, famously said: “If it’s the last thing I do, I’m going to destroy every fucking grammar school in England.” It almost goes without saying that he was a former public schoolboy. Why such fervour? Why such rage?

The grammar schools took children from the lower-middle and skilled working classes and made the best of their talents. They did not, and could not, do it for everyone, but they made it possible for children whose parents could not afford a private education to compete with the privately-educated later in life. This, I suspect, is why so many former public schoolboys and girls hated them with such a passion and still cannot bear them even in their greatly diminished numbers today.

The grammar schools were a threat to the private schools and to the life chances of those who bought their way into them. And so the people at the top of the ladder removed a few rungs below them. It may not have been a conscious decision by the privileged to entrench their social position. But whatever the intention, that was the result. ●

**Christopher Snowdon is the head of lifestyle economics at the Institute of Economic Affairs**



No stranger to a lost cause: Peter Hitchens

## Many politicians would rather be seen as a hypocrite than send their child to an average comprehensive school

# Enough to drive you insane

*The driving test logjam is a depressing symptom of national dysfunction*

**H**AVING GROWN UP in pedestrian-friendly cities, I managed to reach the grand old age of 24 before deciding it made sense to learn to drive. I chose a poor time for it, though: this was early 2020, so no sooner had I booked my theory test than all lessons and tests were cancelled.

In the brief interval between the lifting of the first lockdown and the introduction of “tiers” (remember those?), I managed to pass a theory test. But more cancellations and postponements followed, so it was another full year before I had a shot at the practical, which to my intense regret I did not pass.

By this time many others were in the same boat, and a whole cohort of new learners had also joined the queue. This meant that what should have been a simple matter of rebooking and having another go in a few months’ time had become almost impossible.

To be clear, I do not mean that wait times for a test were prohibitively long. I mean there weren’t any. The DVLA so far has not succumbed to offering appointments comically far in the future à la NHS surgeries, and will only allow you to book tests a maximum of 24 weeks away.

So after entering your details and briefly being held in a queue to access the booking site, you are told that there are no slots available. Nada. Please check again another time. It’s now a year and a half since the last lockdown ended, and I’m no closer to being a driver — in fact, I’m further away, since my theory pass certificate was valid for two years and has now expired.

OTHERS ARE LESS easily put off. A PhD student friend of mine began waking early to check the

DVLA website on Mondays at 6 am, when the latest cancellations are made available to rebook, an experience he described as “like trying to get Glastonbury tickets”. After ten weeks of 05:50 alarms, he finally managed to secure a test across the country, in Lincoln.

To get by train to Lincoln from Oxford means going into and across London and then out again, a journey of around five hours which he duly booked, as well as a few nights of cheap accommodation.

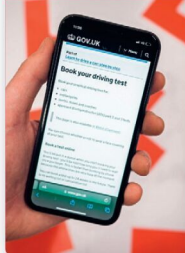
Next, he set about trying to find a local driving instructor who could take him to be tested, as well as providing some lessons in the preceding days to get to grips with the geography of the area, but phone call after phone call came up empty.

In desperation, he found somebody in Leicester who would do it in exchange for a substantial deposit for the test, the lessons, and the drive time between Leicester and Lincoln, plus a surcharge covering the increased price of petrol at the time. And then a few days before the scheduled date, my friend’s test was cancelled without explanation. Back to square one, and a thousand pounds poorer.

WE’VE BECOME USED TO headlines about dangerously long waits for ambulances, about crime being effectively legal when police lack the resources to pursue charges. This particular failed public service may be less pressing, but that doesn’t mean it is without consequence. When young people cannot learn to drive, they are left in limbo with adult milestones out of reach.

There’s a reason that “you’re a virgin who can’t drive” is one of the sickest burns in cinema history. To be unable to drive is infantilising. If you can’t drive, you’re restricted in where you can live (many cheaper areas

**We no longer assume things will work, but instead plan on the basis they won’t**



are off the menu), and on the types of job you can take. In an emergency, you can’t drive a loved one to hospital.

For my recent house move, I was unable to rent a van and do it myself. Instead I had to cobble together favours from various friends and my mother. It’s limiting, and it makes things more expensive. To paraphrase *Fiddler on the Roof*’s Tevye the milkman: there’s no shame in being an adult unable to drive, but it’s no great honour either.

OVER THE LAST FEW years, we’ve often heard that

we are living in unprecedented times. But when it comes to driving tests, there *is* a historical precedent. During the Second World War, the requirement to pass a driving test was suspended. Afterwards, the most pragmatic step was to award licences to those who’d by then been driving for years without one.

My preferred solution would be the recruitment of enough examiners to double the capacity of the system until normal service is restored: easier said than done, but surely not beyond the wit of man. Whichever way we choose, this service would be infinitely easier and cheaper to fix than the NHS, but even here, the path of least resistance is to do nothing and allow it to remain broken.

THERE’S SOMETHING VERY depressing about a public service that is not just overwhelmed by demand, but *not functional* — not communicating anything other than “computer says no”.

We develop a grim kind of learned helplessness, no longer expecting in principle that things ought to work, instead planning on the assumption that they won’t. This is what it feels like to live through decline. Oh, the aqueduct? No, it hasn’t delivered water in years, but at least the bricks will be handy for repairing the pigsty. ●



A bill to legalise prostitution in South Africa is being promoted as a boon for women's rights. It will instead lead to an explosion in the sex trade and more sexual violence

# A gift to pimps and traffickers

Julie Bindel

**I**N THE COMING MONTHS, SOUTH AFRICA'S parliament will vote on a bill that could result in the blanket decriminalisation of its entire sex trade, making it the first African country to do so.

The Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Bill — also known as the Jeffery Bill — which proposes removing all criminal penalties relating to prostitution, including pimping and brothel-owning, has been approved at the first stage. Its supporters are keen to highlight the least contentious component of the new law: those selling sex — primarily women and girls — will no longer be arrested, a move I and other feminists have supported for decades.

According to lobbyists for so called “sex workers’ rights”, removing all laws relating to the sex trade will significantly reduce violence and stigmatisation of women involved in prostitution. But, as someone with forensic knowledge of the global sex trade, I can confidently state that they are wrong.

Despite the bill being presented as a way to advance the rights of the women involved, the proposed law is based on a serious lack of knowledge and understanding of the realities of prostitution. It is no wonder: no sex trade survivor-led organisations calling for the abolition of the sex trade were consulted during its drafting.

Rather than afford better protection for the women, blanket decriminalisation leads to an increased market. The industry is not contained; but rather spills out beyond the legal, registered street zones and indoor markets. Rather than be given rights in the “workplace”, pimps are as brutal as ever. Pimps are reclassified as businessmen. Abuse suffered by the women is, under this regime, called an “occupational hazard”. Support for the women to leave prostitution becomes almost non-existent.

Incredibly, the bill would repeal “any conspiracy to induce a female to engage in sexual acts, and kidnapping for purposes of sexual acts against a person’s will, including if such female is

under the age of 16”, and “the ability to punish any parent or guardian who procures or attempts to procure a child to engage in prostitution” (the definition of child sex trafficking).

**SOUTH AFRICA HAS AMONG THE HIGHEST** rape incidence in the world. Domestic violence refuges are underfunded by government, and rape crisis centres and police facilities for victims to report sexual assault are under threat of closure.

The country's rate of domestic violence is five times the global average, and it also ranks fourth in the world for femicide — the murder of women and girls by men. Men being given the green light to buy and sell the most disenfranchised women will result in more sexual violence and murders, from pimps and punters alike.

Feminist activists are revolting against decriminalisation. More than 200 human rights organisations have signed an open letter to President Cyril Ramaphosa, explaining normalising prostitution would be a disaster for South Africa as it will mark a return to old-style regulatory policies from the colonial era.

The signatories, which include the author and activist Gloria Steinem, cite the devastating harms a decriminalised sex trade would unleash in South Africa. An estimated 131,000 to 182,000 individuals (up to 1 per cent of South Africa's adult female population) currently work in prostitution, almost all disenfranchised black women and girls. If the bill passes, that number is bound to increase.

“This Bill does not address the violence, terror, trauma, or even death that we suffer at the hands of sex buyers, pimps, or because of the system of prostitution itself,” says Mickey Meji of SESP (Survivor Empowerment and Support Programme) based in Cape Town. “In fact, the Jeffery Bill would condemn generations of poor and vulnerable black women and girls to the sex trade with the blessing of my government.”

Meji, a Black South African sex trade survivor has the support of international abolitionists, such as the Coalition against Trafficking in Women (CATW).

“The South African government would in effect authorise and profit from the sexual exploitation of women, girls, and marginalised groups in violation of its Constitution and commitments under international law,” said Taina Bien-Aimé, CATW's executive director. “This Bill is a gift to sex traffickers and brothel owners.”

**MEJI WAS CAUGHT UP IN THE BRUTAL SYSTEM** of prostitution in South Africa for almost a decade, and now campaigns for the introduction of the Nordic Model, a legal framework whereby the prostituted person (almost always a woman) is decriminalised and helped to exit the sex trade, while the punter is criminalised. Sweden adopted the law in 1999, and since then a number of other countries have followed suit, including Norway, France, the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, and, more recently, Israel.

The aim of the law is to shift the burden of responsibility from the prostituted person to those who are paying for sexual services and, in the longer term, deter men from paying for sex.



It is this law that critics of the Jeffery Bill wish to see in South Africa. “When I say that I imagine a world without prostitution, I am treated as though I am saying we can do without air, or water,” says Meji. “But who does prostitution serve? Not the women, who are doing this out of desperation, often with a violent pimp behind her, but the men that abuse us for their own selfish pleasures.”

“It is impossible to divorce our history of apartheid and racism with the way black women are treated in the sex trade,” says Meji, “because this is a form of slavery — dehumanising women so they can be bought and sold for the pleasure of men.”

**SWEAT (SEX WORKERS EDUCATION AND ADVOCACY Taskforce)** is the leading pro-prostitution NGO in South Africa. It has been campaigning for decriminalisation since 2000. Dudu Ndlovu, a gender studies student who was previously a volunteer at the organisation but no longer supports its aims, says that, “to be a black woman and be prostituted in post-Apartheid South Africa is to be reminded that you’re nothing, when we are now supposed to be liberated.”

It is time for South Africa to address the issue of prostitution from a perspective based on equality between women and men, racial and social justice, but pro-prostitution activists such as SWEAT claim that removing all laws relating to the sex trade will allow for “sex work” to be seen as a profession and give the workers the right to join unions and have employment rights. But unionisation has proved impossible in legalised regimes. Men who pay for sex want to do what they want, how they want. So how can so-called workers’ rights help?

Countries that have decriminalised prostitution have seen the sex trade explode, with many, including Germany, including its profits in its Gross Domestic Product. Under such legislative framework, as we can see in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark and Nevada, USA, the illegal market grows alongside the legal side, and trafficking and underage prostitution all increase.



“My former bosses at S.W.E.A.T. accuse me of working for the right wing and say that talking away decision-making from women is dangerous. What is dangerous is white and privileged men, and academics, promoting the sex trade as a way of life for poor and black women.”

— Mickey Meji  
Prostitution Survivor & Activist, Embrace Dignity South Africa

**DURING THE COLONIAL CONQUESTS**, women’s bodies were treated as merchandise. The sexual and economic exploitation of black South African women was used by the colonisers to satisfy the male demand for access to women’s bodies.

The Spanish Conquistadors organised, regulated and industrialised the sex trade in Latin America.

The British colonial forces set up the systems of legal prostitution in India and the French colonial forces did so in their colonies. It was for this reason that most anti-colonial leaders put an end to the systems of legal prostitution following independence.

Jonathan Machler, CEO of the NGO CAP International (Coalition to Abolish Prostitution) says that the proposed legislation sends a “devastating” message to the women and girls of South Africa. “Rather than providing a socio-economic safety net that ensures socio-economic rights and access to decent work,” says Machler, “we are accepting that legalising the endless exploitation of women’s bodies by men is a way of subsistence ... Decriminalisation will further normalise and legitimise such oppression.”

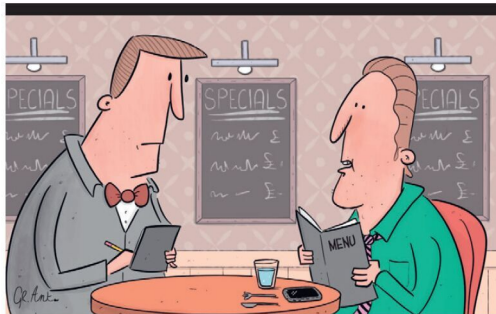
Public consultations to the bill ended on 31 January, and it is currently going through the parliamentary process, but campaigners are still confident that, with a growing number of supporters worldwide, it can be stopped. According to Mickey Meji, there is a network of over 40 organisations supporting the bill across South Africa, which includes every single one of the LGBTQ organisations.

At first glance, this could be because they share the same funding streams with HIV prevention services aimed at gay men, because prostituted women are also a high risk group. But the theory promoted in 2014 by the medical journal *The Lancet*, that global decriminalisation significantly reduces new HIV infection rates, has been debunked. The researchers failed to take account of the fact that the prostitution market spirals under decriminalisation and legalisation.

**SOUTH AFRICA STILL, IN MANY WAYS**, operates as an apartheid state, with the poorest black women and girls being coerced into prostitution to meet the desires of white, wealthy men. This is not the country Nelson Mandela wanted when he succeeded in liberating his country from gross inequality and violent racism. As he said in a speech in 2005:

For every woman and girl violently attacked, we reduce our humanity. For every woman forced into unprotected sex, because men demand this, we destroy dignity and pride. Every woman who has to sell her life for sex, we condemn to a lifetime in prison. For every moment we remain silent, we conspire against our women. ●

**Julie Bindel** is a journalist, author and feminist campaigner. Her latest book is *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth*



“Do you have anything that looks vegan, but is made from meat?”

CARTOON BY GRANT MEIKLE

# Rainer Zitelmann is that rare thing, an unabashed champion of capitalism, says Daniel Johnson

**N**OT MANY PEOPLE LIKE THE WORD “capitalism” — not even capitalists. “Capital,” meaning assets or funds, is a medieval concept; “capitalist” evolved in the eighteenth century to denote those who own capital. When the idea of “the capitalist mode of production”, or “capitalism”, emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, it was promoted by socialists: Louis Blanc, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and, of course, Karl Marx.

They and their successors elaborated the concept of capitalism in order to destroy it. Despite failing in this objective, anti-capitalists have done a good job tarnishing its reputation. Defenders of capitalism have usually preferred to use more neutral terms, such as “market economy”. Ludwig von Mises preferred “liberalism” — but that word has been hijacked by the Left.

An exception is Rainer Zitelmann, the German historian, sociologist and journalist. He is not only an unabashed champion of capitalism, but is not afraid to use the word. Yet even he acknowledges a deep-seated resistance, especially among educated elites, to the notion that capitalism is superior, both at a practical and an ethical level, to any of the alternatives. Many of his 26 books address aspects of anti-capitalism. Zitelmann’s latest volume, however, tackles it head-on.

*In Defence of Capitalism: Debunking the Myths* is a systematic attempt to refute ten of the most common misconceptions about capitalism. It also dissects the claims still made for socialism, while analysing popular perceptions of capitalism in the United States, Britain and elsewhere. In his final chapter, the author discusses anti-capitalism as a political religion.

**SO WHAT IS THE SOURCE OF THE** anti-capitalist mythology? Zitelmann argues that for many, “the word itself is synonymous with evil”. Such a demonology is only plausible when capitalism is compared, not to actually existing alternatives, such as feudalism or communism, but to utopian ones.

Demystified and shorn of its sinister connotations, capitalism is defined by Zitelmann as “an economic system based on private ownership and competition, in which companies themselves are free to determine what and how much they produce, aided in their decisions by the prices set by the market”. The key players are entrepreneurs, the most successful of whom are thus the villains of anti-capitalist myths. Critiques of capitalism stem from the resentment of intellectuals, most of



whom are academics paid by the taxpayer. The tap-root of anti-capitalist ideology is the politics of envy.

The contrast between rich and poor is as old as humanity. The poor are always with us, but so, too, are the rich — and they are richer than ever. It is no surprise, therefore, that capitalism is blamed for hunger and poverty. Yet until the rise of capitalism, more than 90 per cent of humanity lived in abject poverty. Today, that figure is nearer 10 per cent. And although poverty has risen slightly due to the pandemic and Ukraine war, there is astonishing consistency in the rise of global prosperity.

That basic fact, however, is invariably absent from anti-capitalist rhetoric. Its stock-in-trade is marketing doomsday: crises and catastrophes occur more than 3,000 times in Marx’s works. His intellectual heirs, such as Slavoj Žižek or Thomas Piketty, are still doing good business with such prophecies.

Let us focus, therefore, on the most popular form of catastrophism today: environmentalism. Capitalism must be — and is — blamed by most green activists for climate change and its consequences. An egregious example is Naomi Klein, whose book *This Changes Everything* appeared in 2014 with the unsubtle subtitle *Capitalism vs The Climate*.

As Zitelmann points out, anti-capitalists like Klein are not interested in measures to mitigate climate change that are compatible with capitalism because their purpose is to overthrow it: environmentalism is only a means to that end. This anti-capitalist agenda is also espoused by the activists of movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Just Stop Oil.

Yet as Zitelmann observes, there is a direct correlation

between economic freedom and environmental performance. No capitalism, no green revolution. Nor is it true that free capitalist countries export their polluting industries to the unfree Third World. The economist Daniel Fernández Méndez sums up the evidence bluntly: “Capitalism suits the environment.”

**B**UT ISN'T CAPITALISM RESPONSIBLE FOR the reckless and unsustainable consumption of the world's limited resources? No, explains Zitelmann. Until around the 1970s, there was a correlation between growth and consumption of energy and raw materials. But this has become decoupled from capitalism in its latest phase, that of “dematerialisation”. The smartphone, for instance, has replaced dozens of other resource-hungry devices. Under capitalism, “technology liberates the environment”.

None of this implies that the state is no longer needed to regulate the market. Like past defenders of capitalism, such as Hayek and Friedman, Zitelmann is no anarchist. But he offers a telling example to illustrate how politically-inspired government meddling can damage the environment.

Angela Merkel's decision to close down the German nuclear industry has left her compatriots exposed to Putin's blackmail, forcing them to burn toxic brown coal instead. Not only has Berlin squandered its environmental leadership role, but it has ended up with (as the *Wall Street Journal* put it) “the world's dumbest energy policy”.

The environment is a prime example of the moral case for capitalism. Not only does the market create the wealth and technological progress needed to solve global problems, it also fosters ethical societies that take responsibility for humanity. The philosopher Hans Jonas called for “the imperative of responsibility”. But it is only the free world that recognises such an imperative. Capitalism turns out to be a necessary, though not sufficient, prerequisite for any kind of humanitarian action. The coalition of the willing that is now helping Ukraine to defend itself against brutal assault consists solely of democracies with capitalist economies.

**BUT ISN'T PUTIN'S RUSSIA ALSO CAPITALIST?** Zitelmann does not address this problem directly in this book. But he has an excellent chapter, which draws on his magnum opus on Nazi Germany, *Hitler's National Socialism*, to explain why the claim that capitalism always carries a risk of fascism is a myth. The Nazis began as — and in many ways remained — an anti-capitalist movement, which tolerated private ownership of capital only in the service of the state.

Putin's Russia bears many similarities, with oligarchs permitted to make vast fortunes only as tools of the regime. In conversation, Zitelmann explains that in 2003 Putin arrested and expropriated Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the richest but least compliant of the oligarchs, in order to intimidate the rest.

Under Putin, Russia's crony capitalism morphed into a kleptocracy. A kleptocracy is not only more brutal and corrupt but far less efficient than a free market system. As Khodork-

ovsky (now leading an anti-war committee of Russians in exile) puts it: “Putin is incapable of winning this war simply because Russia under his leadership fell below 10 per cent of the European economy.”

**ANOTHER MYTH ZITELMANN DEBUNKS** is that capitalism causes wars. If anything, the opposite is true: capitalism abhors conflict and peace facilitates capitalism. Yes, markets have cyclical fluctuations, but most economic crises are triggered by state intervention, usually driven by political imperatives. Similarly, Zitelmann disposes of the myth that capitalism allows the rich to dominate politics. The antidote to tycoons who try to buy influence is less government, not more.

Having refuted many other anti-capitalist myths, including such *idées fixes* as the notion that capitalism promotes greed and selfishness, or inequality and monopolies, Zitelmann briefly examines socialism. He focuses particularly on Cambodia under the Khmer Rouge, which in four years wiped out up to a quarter of the country's population amid unimaginable suffering. Yet its planned economy was the work of Paris-educated intellectuals. The Venezuela of Hugo Chavez provides a more recent cautionary tale.

However, it is capitalism, not socialism, that gets a bad press. Zitelmann has commissioned public opinion surveys on attitudes to capitalism in many countries, at his own (considerable) expense. Here he focuses mainly on the USA and Britain. Americans see capitalism positively, but even they regard it as a rich man's game. Women are slightly more sceptical than men and the young are especially critical.

**THE BRITISH, UNSURPRISINGLY, ARE SOMEWHAT** less comfortable with the free market. Compared to Americans, their ambivalence is less influenced by age, education or income than by politics. While 86 per cent of far-Left Britons associate capitalism with environmental degradation, even on the moderate Right 56 per cent do so too.

Nearly three-quarters of Britons associate capitalism with greed; 69 per cent with corruption. Almost half of British anti-capitalists on both Left and Right see politicians as powerless puppets. They are thus much more likely to believe in conspiracy theories than pro-capitalists.

Compared to most other Europeans, the British are remarkably free of resentment towards the rich. Yet we are just as suspicious of capitalism as the French or Germans. Of 21 nations surveyed, just five — Poland, the United States, the Czech Republic, Japan and South Korea — see capitalism positively.

The author asked me: “Who is the British Rainer Zitelmann?” I fear there is no good answer. Three decades after Margaret Thatcher, the British not only lack politicians capable of making the case for capitalism, but intellectuals too. The land that gave birth to modern capitalism still needs a historian from Berlin to teach us why we need it. ●

Daniel Johnson is the founding editor of *TheArticle*

**Robin Aitken** says the Corporation remains mired in liberal groupthink that undermines its duty to provide impartial news coverage

# CAN THE BBC BE SAVED FROM ITSELF?

**I** BELONG TO THAT SMALL BAND OF OBSESSIVES

who think that one of the most important issues facing the country is reform of the BBC. For more than 20 years now — since the time I was a reporter on the *Today* programme — I have been agitating to get the BBC to live up to its promise to be impartial. It has been a long and frustrating road and, in moments of self-doubt, an awkward question nags away: is the BBC reformable?

From its inception, a century ago, the idea of a national broadcaster provoked the ire of the powerful newspaper barons who saw it as a threat to their dominance. Throughout its existence Tory MPs have been getting to their feet in the House of Commons to denounce the BBC as unpatriotic and subversive. Yet, life has gone on much as before.

But in recent years there has been a growing awareness among people on the right of politics that the tone of the BBC's programming, across all genres from news to drama, is skewed in a progressive liberal direction.

Dominic Cummings saw it clearly when he wrote in 2004 that the BBC was the "mortal enemy" of the Conservative Party. Leaving aside the party label, if conservatism is about treasuring and preserving those good things handed down to us then can it be said that the BBC treasures and helps preserve what is best in the national culture?

The paradox is that one of the good things that has been handed down to us is the BBC itself. Thoughtful conservatives do not lightly seek to destroy institutions which represent continuity and tradition. Institutional memory is valuable. The BBC has sometimes bound the nation together and, through its World Service, has often effectively projected British values abroad.

Yet, that proud record of achievement doesn't disguise the fact that the BBC is currently failing in its most important function — to provide a fair and balanced news service.

**THE BREXIT PSYCHODRAMA FOCUSED** many minds because the BBC left no one in any doubt about what side it was on. Meticulous work done by the media monitoring outfit News-Watch is conclusive: over many years before and after the 2016 referendum, the BBC's coverage has demonstrated massive bias towards interviewees and storylines favouring EU membership.

This partisanship was a strategic error. The BBC backed the losing side and, mired in the Jimmy Savile and Martin Bashir scandals, found itself confronting a hostile government. Boris Johnson's culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, made outspoken public criticisms of the BBC, froze its licence fee and spoke of ending that privilege altogether.

When Dominic Cummings was still in Downing Street, root and branch reform seemed possible, but the opportunity was squandered. When Cummings made his lockdown sortie to Barnard Castle, the BBC pounced; the news department inflated the story into a national scandal. Eventually Johnson sacked his *consigliere*. Although Dorries still seemed determined to take on the BBC, the opportunity passed with Johnson's defenestration.

Does the current government have the stomach, and enough political capital, for a fight with the Corporation? The opportunity is still there: the BBC Charter mid-term review is due later this year. The Charter is renewed every ten years (next in 2027) but imposing a half-term report was seen by the Tories as a way of keeping the BBC in check. How might the Culture Secretary, Lucy Frazer, use the opportunity to force the Corporation to reform itself?

Ending the licence fee and forcing the BBC to move to a subscription-based model is often touted as one possibility. If the BBC was no longer guaranteed its income via what amounts to a poll tax, would it be more responsive to audience demands? The threat of cancelled subscriptions would put pressure on the Corporation to clean up its act.

But would this work? Untethered from the licence fee, might the BBC drift off into a commercial world free not only from all government control but from even the pretence of impartiality? The BBC's allies argue that ending the licence fee would not only severely weaken the BBC but also undercut its claims of "universality".

**ENDING THE LICENCE FEE IS THE NUCLEAR OPTION, BUT** there are other reforms that could help. One is the complaints mechanism, which seems more concerned with preventing reputational damage to the BBC than engaging with complaints.

I have bitter experience of this. In March 2020, I lodged a complaint alleging Remain bias in BBC news output during the 2019 election campaign; this complaint has been shunted to and fro between the BBC's Executive Complaints Unit and Ofcom and to date — three whole years later — I have had no resolution. That suggests a wilful refusal to engage with the substance of a complaint that goes to the heart of impartiality.





Whenever criticisms are made about it, the BBC goes into defence mode. Last December, the History Reclaimed group issued a report looking at BBC history programming. The report highlighted six programmes which demonstrated what it argued were inaccuracies, tendentious opinions and serious omissions.

For example, coverage about the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes claimed they were “looted”. In fact, they were reparations for a brutal massacre of British officials. History Reclaimed said that this new item “sums up all that is wrong with the BBC’s treatment of British history: tendentious language, distorted interpretation and deliberate omission of facts ... listeners are not given objective facts to enable them to form a view. On the contrary they are made the objects of one-sided propaganda.”

History Reclaimed numbers among its members some of the most distinguished historians in the country so they might have been expecting, at the very least, a courteous hearing from the BBC. Instead, a “BBC spokesperson” could hardly have been more dismissive: “Cherry-picking a handful of examples or highlighting genuine mistakes in thousands of hours of output on TV and radio does not constitute analysis and is not a true representation of BBC content.”

**TIM DAVIE, THE BBC’S DIRECTOR GENERAL, CAME INTO** the job in the autumn of 2020 pledging to restore the BBC’s reputation for impartiality. Since then, there have been various initiatives and reviews which have delved into the internal culture at the BBC and made recommendations about how trust and impartiality could be restored.

Output in specific topic areas was to be subjected to periodic review (the first was published in January on the BBC’s treatment of economics, and found that many BBC reporters had a poor grasp of the basics). In future, individual programmes will also be scrutinised. But what, so far, has been the result?

Someone close to the process and very senior in the BBC tells me that, to date, they can see almost no change; the internal culture, the groupthink that predominates remains wholly undis-

turbed. This person has detected a new confidence among BBC executives that they can ride out the antagonism of the Tory party who, they hope and expect, will be turfed out of office some time next year. They think all they have to do is stall for time and wait for a new Labour administration and all will be well again.

This seems all too plausible. I have always believed the BBC could be reformed because it is in the Corporation’s own self-interest. Making permanent enemies of conservatives seems an unwise strategy for an institution which, ultimately, relies on cross-party political support. But now my faith in reform is waning. Does the BBC even understand the conservative case and its arguments? Is it sincere about the need for reform?

So far, there has been very little evidence of real change. The new Culture Secretary, Lucy Frazer (*left*), has an opportunity to shape the BBC’s future and the forthcoming mid-term review is probably the last chance the Tories will have, perhaps for many years, to effect real change at the BBC.

**ONE THING SHE SHOULD DO IS PRESS THE CORPORATION** to open up to diversity of opinion. History Reclaimed’s idea of an expert panel to oversee history programmes is a good one which could be used as a model for other programme areas. The key to reforming the BBC is to disrupt the groupthink which dominates its internal culture.

Likewise, the BBC’s complaints procedure needs a complete overhaul. At the moment the Corporation, in the shape of the Executive Complaints Unit, marks its own homework. Unsurprisingly only a tiny fraction of the complaints it considers are upheld. It is too much to expect the Corporation to honestly appraise its own faults; there needs to be more scrutiny by outsiders armed with tough sanctions.

Scrapping the licence fee would at a stroke remove the government’s most potent weapon — the ability to control the BBC’s revenue. It would also change, irrevocably, the nature of the BBC, turning it from a public service broadcaster into just another broadcast platform. As such it might well prosper given the BBC’s deep reservoir of creative talent. But something which proper conservatives should value would have been lost.

My own preference would be to take a leaf out of Dominic Cummings’s playbook. In early 2020, in the wake of Johnson’s stunning general election triumph, Cummings decreed that no government ministers would be offered for interview on any BBC programme. This proved salutary; it was a mark of the government’s grave displeasure at the Corporation’s Remain bias and it stymied the BBC’s current affairs programming which is obliged to balance its political output (impossible in the absence of the government). This is a tactic which could be used again to drive home the point that reform is essential and non-negotiable. Will any of this happen? For the BBC’s sake — as well as the good health of our politics — we must hope so. ●

**Robin Aitken is a journalist who worked for many years at the BBC**

**ALEXANDER LARMAN** says cult novelist Henry Green, who was once widely lauded as the finest writer of his generation, should be rescued from undeserved obscurity

# An off-kilter visionary

**I**N 1952, W.H. AUDEN WAS ASKED by *Life* magazine to name his favourite writer. He was spoilt for choice: he could have singled out Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, E.M. Forster, J.R.R. Tolkien — who he was a great admirer of — or any number of internationally famous and lauded figures, including some women, too. But his choice was far more unconventional.

Auden said simply that “Henry Green is the finest living English novelist.”

It was a tremendous accolade from one of the greatest poets of the twentieth century, but, unknown to Auden — and perhaps to Green — his nominee would not write another novel in the remaining two decades of his life. (Coincidentally, Auden and Green died a matter of a few weeks apart, at the end of 1973.) The endorsement therefore became a quasi-epitaph for the career of a man described, probably aptly, by the American satirist Terry Southern as “a writer’s writer’s writer.”

Apart from Patrick Hamilton, there is no other twentieth-century British novelist whose cult reputation has never translated into mainstream recognition. Despite the endorsements of an eclectic range of writers including John Updike and his friend-cum-rival Evelyn Waugh, T.S. Eliot and Anthony Burgess, Green remains an obscure figure, whose brilliant writing has never been appreciated to the extent it deserves.

**ALTHOUGH HE WAS LOOSELY** associated with the Modernist movement, Green cannot be pigeonholed or forced into any kind of literary straitjacket. Instead, his poetic and magnetic novels defy conventional categorisation, and remain the connoisseur’s choice, even as they reflect their author’s unorthodox and ultimately disappointing life.

Waugh came across Green when they were Oxford contemporaries. He pronounced his friend “lean, dark and singular”. Both were hard-drinking, clubbable men with literary ambitions, but Waugh — a lifelong parvenu who both admired and detested those wealthier and grander than he was — recognised the presence of an extraordinary talent almost as soon as they met. He was consumed by both jealousy and admiration.

Green — or Henry Yorke, as he had been christened — had been educated in the conventional upper-class fashion. He had been schoolfriends at Eton with Anthony Powell (another life-long admirer). It was at Eton that he began what would become

his first novel, *Blindness*, a semi-autobiographical study of a young man, John Haye, who is accidentally blinded while attending the prestigious public school Noat. Although slight in comparison to what would come later, it already displayed Green’s effortless facility for combining witty social satire with poetic flair.

It was published in 1926, when Green was 21, and Waugh wrote to him through gritted teeth to say “at the risk of appearing officious, I am impelled to write to you and tell you how very much I like it. It is extraordinary to me that anyone of our generation could have written so fine a book, and at Oxford of all places.”

His praise was not unconditional, however. He sneered at his friend’s *nom de plume*, saying privately, “From motives inscrutable to his friends, the author of *Living* chooses to publish his work under a pseudonym of peculiar drabness.”

Green might have been expected to become the toast of literary London, but instead he headed to Birmingham to his family’s

beer-bottling factory, and began working on the shop floor. Although he swiftly rose to become managing director, his experiences of ordinary working-class life — atypical for a man of his background — inspired his 1929 second novel *Living*, which made Green, in one critic’s words, “an honorary member of a literary movement to which he never belonged”.

Just like his Eton compatriot George Orwell — another man who changed his name to find success as a writer — Green was a chameleonic figure who was equally at home, or equally ill at ease, among Birmingham factory workers as he was in Champagne-swilling high society.



**IN THE SAME YEAR** He published *Living*, Green married his second cousin, the Hon. Adelaide Biddulph, who rejoiced in the nickname of “Dig”. Waugh wrote to him in backhanded congratulatory fashion, saying “I do think it extraordinary to be called ‘Diggy’ ... you must be married at once very obtrusively — a fashionable wedding is worth a four-column review in the *Times Literary Supplement* to a novelist.” His advice was not taken.

Green’s third novel, *Party Going*, would not appear for another ten years, at the end of the “low dishonest decade” that Auden lamented in “September 1, 1939”. It concerned the fortunes of another sector of society altogether, the idle wealthy, who find themselves stranded in a railway hotel while



waiting for a train to take them to a party. Its mixture of apparent naturalism with overarching mythic symbolism would inspire T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*, and Eliot, the acknowledged Grand Master of the modernist movement, was impressed: he later said to *The Times* that Green's writing was proof that "the creative advance in our age is in prose fiction".

Yet Green refused to play the literary game. Perhaps appropriately, he so loathed having his photograph taken that his first (Cecil Beaton-shot) official author portrait was simply of the back of his head.

The Second World War became a strangely fecund time for his writing, while many of his contemporaries found themselves depressed and frightened by it. Green was often heard to remark of some situation or other "It will make a good book one day," and the extraordinary series of novels he wrote over the next decade, including his masterpieces *Back*, *Loving* and *Concluding*, justified his comment that his prose represented "a long intimacy between strangers with no direct appeal to what both may have known".

Green had, by this stage, become one of the most incisive chroniclers of English society. *Loving's* examination of the intertwined fortunes of characters in an Irish country house both above and below stairs was a direct influence on *Upstairs, Downstairs* and *Gosford Park*, as well as, regrettably, on *Downton Abbey*. And *Back's* story of a young English amputee who becomes involved in a strange, almost incestuous relationship with the half-sister of a woman he once loved is rich both in beautifully observed writing and dark psychological detail. Both are unforgettable.

**TO READ GREEN'S NOVELS IS NOT TO BE AMUSED** and cosseted, as one might be by reading Waugh or Powell, but to step into an off-kilter literary world where everything is faintly but noticeably awry. Harold Pinter once said, in a rare and much-regretted moment of candour, that his plays were about "the weasel underneath the cocktail cabinet". Green's books offer a similar degree of displacement — if, that is, the cocktail cabinet is poisoned, the weasel is rabid and the house is on fire.



Unfortunately, as with Patrick Hamilton, Green's undeniable talent was soon to be usurped by the bottle. Waugh might have remarked in early 1946, of a dinner with Green and Dig, that there was "no hospitality of any kind ... their parsimony has become morbid," but when their friends were not there, both of them would immerse themselves in drink with a grim relish.

In Green's case, the unfortunate effect was to stifle his talent entirely and ensure his last novel, 1952's *Doting*, would be followed by two decades of silence, during which time he expressed reactionary Conservative views and developed a near-obsession with the workings of the Ottoman Empire.

It may have been a pose, like Waugh's adoption of the Blimpish country squire persona, but alcohol stifled and blunted what Maurice Bowra called Green's "piercing insight, stripping men and ideas of their disguises and going straight to some central point."

His friendships with other writers endured, but never to the same degree as they had flourished at Oxford and during the war. Shortly before his own death on 10 April 1966, Waugh sardonically wrote, "Bright young Henry Yorke I hear is quite decrepit."

The most famous picture of Green, taken later in life, shows a man looking askance at the camera, as if to show his continued distaste for the demands of publicity.

He wanted to be left alone, and, long before his death he was, even as the likes of Terry Southern prostrated themselves before him. Rebecca West said, "He was a truly original writer, his prose was fresh-minted, he drove his bloodless scalpel inches deeper into the brain and heart, none of it had been said before." Yet, at the same time, West sorrowfully concluded "He is nearly forgotten."

**LITTLE HAS CHANGED.** Today, there seems little likelihood of a Green resurgence, unless something unexpected occurs. Although most of his books are in print, with admiring introductions from D.J. Taylor and Sebastian

Faulks, he is too distinctive and strange a talent to be forced into respectability by the Vintage Classics of this world. There is no definitive biography and no film adaptations of his work.

Instead, his off-kilter worldview remains true to his view, expressed in his autobiography, *Pack My Bag*, that prose is "a gathering web of insinuations which go further than names however shared can ever go," and that "it should slowly appeal to feelings unexpressed, it should in the end draw tears out of the stone." Few who have come to know, and love, Green's work could disagree with such an apt summation. ●

**Alexander Larman is an author and journalist. His latest book is *The Windsors at War***

**Isaac Sligh** goes in search of  
Crusaders in chainmail and a city of  
the dead in the Caucasus Mountains

**O**N THE EVE OF STALIN'S GREAT TERROR in 1935, the Jazz-Age globetrotter Richard Halliburton made a pit stop in Tbilisi, the capital of what was then the Soviet Republic of Georgia and a vibrant meeting place of East and West in the foothills of the Caucasus Mountains.

Halliburton had escaped from his state-appointed Intourist guides for long enough to score a massive scoop by interviewing the killer of the Romanov family, Peter Ermakov, in Siberia. The notes from that interview, he claimed, had to be sewn into the coat linings of friends and smuggled across the Soviet border.

While in Tbilisi, Halliburton heard a story whispered in the city's basement taverns and tea rooms of an event that had taken place during the First World War. In his travelogue *Seven League Boots*, he writes:

In the spring of 1915, some months after Russia's declaration of war against Turkey, a band of twelfth-century Crusaders, covered from head to foot in rusty chain armour and carrying shields and broadswords came riding on horseback down the main avenue [of Tbilisi]. People's eyes almost popped out of their heads. Obviously this was no cinema company going on location. These were Crusaders — or their ghosts. The incredible troop clanked up to the governor's palace. 'Where's the war?' They asked. 'We hear there's a war.'

They had heard in April 1915 that there was a war. It had been declared in September 1914. The news took seven months to reach the last of the Crusaders. ... [Legend] declares that this race came, 800 years ago, from Lorraine, more than 2,000 miles away. The argument is borne out by the fact that their chain armour is in the French style, while their otherwise incomprehensible speech still contains six or eight good German words.

"As yet no historian has found any reason to believe that the legend is not based entirely on fact," he hedged. Clearly one should take this tale with a hefty lump of salt. But to Halliburton's credit, he resolved to take a camera and notepad



Khevsur warriors dressed in chainmail; right, Halliburton

# Land of ghosts and legends

on the days-long trek up the treacherous, icebound road to far Khevsureti, the isolated mountain valley from which these wayward Crusaders supposedly marched.

With crampons strapped to their feet for extra traction, Halliburton and an assistant made it safely to Khevsureti, stumbling upon the surviving holdouts of the tribal culture of the Khevsurs. In villages of crude rock towers clinging to the sides of mountain gorges, these mysterious people waged blood feuds between clans with arson and sword duels, held bardic contests, and honoured the ancient gods and spirits of the mountains.

**ENTIRE VILLAGES GATHERED OUTSIDE THEIR HOMES** to watch the two strangers pass. The mayor of one Khevsur village put the travellers up for the night, and on a plateau above the locals treated them to a friendly contest between swordsmen bedecked, to Halliburton's delight, in suits of chainmail.

No longer did the locals go to battle dressed in this armour, and they had forgotten how to oil and polish the raiment of their ancestors. Yet hanging in the dimly lit corners of shepherds' cabins and homesteads, Halliburton saw rusty suits of what he took to be old Crusader armour. He fell asleep that night with visions of Godfrey de Bouillon and Richard the Lionheart sallying through his head.

Awaking in the morning, Halliburton could find no one among







Bear's Cross: "a panoramic view over the grey-and-green, desolate valleys"

ANASTASIA MAGONOVA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

the hearty mountain peasantry "alive with the crusader spirit"; none but one, that is: "a bespectacled Soviet commissar," sent to the mountains "to save the Khevsoorians [sic] from capitalism." The Bolshevik proudly gave Halliburton a tour of his efforts to Sovietize the local folk, showing off the school and a textbook with pictures of American capitalists brandishing diamond rings and smoking cigars, strangling the proletariat with lengths of stock market ticker tape. The commissar then led a group of Khevsurs in a rendition of *The Internationale*.

**NEARLY A CENTURY LATER, THERE IS LITTLE TRACE OF** either commissars or Crusaders in Khevsureti. I began my own journey exploring the region in the summer of 2021 in search of another legend in the mountains of Khevsureti — Anatori, a necropolis lying just three miles from the border with the Russian state of Chechnya. In a country brimming with myth and legend, where every village has its own ruined castle on the hill and a story of a past king or saint to accompany it, remote Khevsureti seemed to be a final, mysterious frontier.

The ancients felt similarly. These mountains have long been a litmus test for the great conquerors. The Caucasus, Marco Polo wrote, is "the country beyond which Alexander could not pass." For the Greeks and Romans, it was the northeastern limit of their Mediterranean world.

As our taxi scraped and shuddered its way up towards Khevsureti, I pondered how the memory of the ancient conquerors lives on in the names of the local men. We had commissioned a driver from the streets of Tbilisi named Timur — from Timur the Lame, the fourteenth-century warlord who ravaged the Middle East and brought an end to Georgia's brief

Golden Age, during which Tbilisi held sway over swaths of modern-day Turkey, Armenia, and Azerbaijan.

Our Timur bore a passing resemblance to a swarthier James Mason, salt-and-pepper hair slicked back and a foul-smelling Russian cigarette never far from his hand. On his regular smoke breaks along the way, he walked, just like his namesake, with a pronounced limp — his takeaway, he told me, from a car accident some 20 years ago, just a stone's throw down the street from Stalin's birthplace in the town of Gori.

**EACH YEAR THE FROSTS OF OCTOBER BEGIN A PERIOD OF** total isolation for Khevsureti that lasts until the thaws of April. It being the summer, we could reach Khevsureti's heart via a six-hour drive from Tbilisi up a road that transitions from bumpy asphalt to gravel to crushed slate and dust. This trail winds its way for miles through the upper reaches of the Caucasus Mountains, a single path alongside staggering cliff faces and precarious drops down to raging, brown rivers below.

Once we made our final climb to the pass of Datvis Jvari ("Bear's Cross"), we were almost 9,000 feet above sea level. From this dizzying vantage point on a bare mountaintop, we took in a panoramic view over the grey-and-green, desolate valleys below. We had entered Khevsureti.

Less than 2,000 people call this region home, and they managed to hide themselves quite well in villages at the far end of long gorges and creek beds. For the final hour or so of our drive, we encountered no more than one or two other vehicles on the road, and no structures save for an occasional abandoned shepherd's hut. Straining my eyes as far as I could see yielded no signs of life — no smokestacks billowing in the



Above, Shatili, and right, symbols carved above a window

distance, no mobile phone towers blinking from distant mountaintops. I could sympathise with Alexander's stopping here.

**FINALLY, WE PULLED INTO THE MAIN SETTLEMENT OF Shatili**, home to a few dozen homesteads and guesthouses. Halliburton's commissar had his way, and today's Khevsurs have abandoned their cold, stone homes of old in favour of cheaply-built concrete houses.

We stopped by one of them and a Khevsurian family came to greet us. Soon the family was boiling a pot of *khinkali*, a delicacy popular throughout Georgia but with a particular spiritual home here in the mountains. Here is another oddity of history washed up like a starfish in the tidal pool of the Caucasus: these fat, juicy soup dumplings, stuffed with spiced lamb and other meats, gripped by the twisted nub at top and sucked dry for their delicate broth, likely came to Georgia in the saddlebags of Turkish or Mongol invaders in the Middle Ages. The pagans of these mountains, the tradition goes, took the crescent-shaped dumplings and twisted them into the sacred shape of the sun.

Sated, we travelled a mile down a dirt road to view the 20 or so towers of the old village of Shatili, slumbering on a hillside above. The tallest of its grey slate towers, stacked without mortar, jut up 50 or 60 feet from the rock-strewn hillside. We walked through the quiet, overgrown streets which slope steeply up the mountainside. Each time the way was blocked, we trespassed through the deserted living room of a Khevsur tower, climbing up rickety old ladders and ducking beneath the collapsed floors to make our way to the next street level above.

What would have been a bustling village in Halliburton's day is desolate now. Above many of the doorways are the shapes of human hands and suns carved crudely into the rock; pagan symbols of gods and spirits that are hundreds of years old. The vestiges of a pantheon still survive here in local folklore and, to some extent, belief, with gods and goddesses of fertility and war

intermingled with the memory of saints and historical figures.

Khevsurs make pilgrimages to the shrines of these gods on hilltops throughout the region, and animal sacrifice still takes place — one local informed me that Khevsur boys kill bulls and dip their hands in the blood as a rite of passage, a kind of second baptism that coexists with the Christian one.

Many of the stranger rituals have died out since Halliburton's time. Young Khevsur paramours were once permitted to meet in ceremonial secrecy and lie together at night, though pregnancy was to be avoided at all costs. In or out of wedlock, the Khevsurs viewed childbirth with great superstition, and women decamped to isolated huts to give birth. The 1911 *Encyclopedia Britannica* relates that the husband would then parade around the hut firing off a rifle. After a month of postpartum quarantine, the mother left the hut, which was then set on fire.

**WHEN WE TURNED AROUND AT THE TOP OF SHATILI**, the view stretched back over a few hundred feet of hillside to the road below. Here we gained access to a small plateau with a rock church and an adjacent shrine to the local gods. A nearby graveyard stretched off into the woods, its tombs marked by strange pyramids of slate, stacked like rock cairns.

We were startled by a bark from an inquisitive dog on a nearby rooftop, followed shortly by his owner, a man in his mid-twenties named Giorgi. Smiling, he invited us to clamber up to his rooftop eyrie for a pot of tea and a view spanning miles into the distance across a valley that has seen countless battles — memorialised in the great Georgian poems which tell how Chechens, Dagestanis, Ingush and myriad other tribes made their way through Khevsureti, whether to raid for sheep and cattle, bring home slaves, or push further to the Georgian heartland beyond.

Five miles up the road from Shatili lies a desolate spot that seems ripped from the pages of such a poem, and the object of my search. Here, at an obscure waypoint on the map called

Anatori, not a soul could be seen for miles. An overgrown path led to a small group of four or five short, thin houses built from slate, perched on the very edge of a cliff above a swollen river. The mountain poet Vazha Pshavela opens a poem next to these very waters:

The river moans in its dark ravine  
Turbid, with grief at its heart.  
The mountains too are bowed down,  
Laving face and hands in the water

So moans the river at Anatori. As I peered through the small, grated windows of the structures, I saw vaults dug into the ground two or three feet deep, and rows of shelves a few feet off the ground. On some of these were the remains of human skeletons; down below, heaps of bones. Perched on the windowsills of these death-houses were small icons and the remains of melted wax dripped from prayer candles from the locals who still visit.

The tradition, the locals told me, is that a plague swept through Khevsureti at the end of the eighteenth century. What was then the small village of Anatori was home to a few hundred souls; one after another, the villagers began to sicken and die.

The Anatorians took up a curious practice: when a villager became ill, he would use his last remaining strength to walk to the crossroads outside of town, where he joined his sick neighbours in the building of these crude stone houses — what they likely knew would become their own graves. Then, turning their faces to the sky as Khevsurs have long done before death, the villagers lay down on the rock benches to die.

Whether they did this in a conscientious attempt to quarantine, as the locals have it, or because of the Khevsurs' ritualistic anxiety about the body, as the anthropological evidence suggests to me, the real reason behind this strange impulse to build before dying is lost to history.

**B**ACK IN SHATILI, I ASKED GIORGI about this strange city of the dead. "Those are our ancestors," Giorgi nodded, and he told me a tale of one young boy who was tending sheep in a neighbouring valley. Returning some time later, he found all of his relatives dead and sealed up in Anatori's tombs.

Like that boy from long ago, Giorgi had also returned home to a desolate village and a depopulated Khevsureti. His surname, Chincharauli, points back to a legendary founder of a Khevsurian village. He told me that he was born in Tbilisi to a family that was forcibly removed from Khevsureti during Stalin's depopulation of the area in the 1950s. Those vibrant communities Halliburton encountered in the 1930s were all but wiped out a few years later by Georgia's most famous native

son, who broke the back of his own homeland.

Giorgi's uncle first brought him here to see his ancestral lands and his family's old tower at the age of 15. "I remember that day so well," Giorgi told me. "The castle-city of Shatili, the soaring mountains: I felt I had stepped into a fairy tale. I liked it so much and felt so good here, I didn't want to go back."

Surrounded by sights and sounds he had only heard of in poetry, folksong, and grandparents' stories, he became determined to build a new life in the mountains among the abandoned homesteads of his ancestors. He transferred to the tiny high school in New Shatili and began acquainting himself with the traditional lifestyle of the Khevsurs.

He renovated the crumbling tower that generations of his ancestors grew up in, where he now lives with his wife and runs a small cafe for tourists who pass through. And he remains there to this day, perched atop the roof of the Chincharauli tower, waiting to share stories from Khevsur history and the rich oral tradition.



A tomb at the necropolis of Anatori

**SAYING GOODBYE TO** Khevsureti, we followed the little dirt road out,

eventually catching sight of the Aragvi river and descending south past the birth-house of Vazha Pshavela in Pshavi into the green valleys of Dusheti; past the holy city of Mtskheta, where the Georgian Kings were crowned beside the shrine of Christ's Mantle; past where the Aragvi flows into the Mtkvari, Georgia's greatest river, and sweeps dramatically to the west; past the hill that watches over this union, atop which St. Nino first converted the Georgians in the fifth century; past the low rapids that flow into the capital; past the bridge that Pompey built when his legion marched through Georgia in the first century BC; and finally past the patchwork roofs, the pointed cupolas, the tangled staircases, and the rickety balconies of Old Tbilisi.

The story of the Khevsurs' Crusader ancestors is a fable. Yet if a group of Khevsurs did not ride into the capital one day en masse with sabers gleaming in the early days of the First World War, their story is certainly a synthesis of many such experiences throughout Georgian history, of urban Georgians encountering their mountain cousins, of expeditions for honour and for gain.

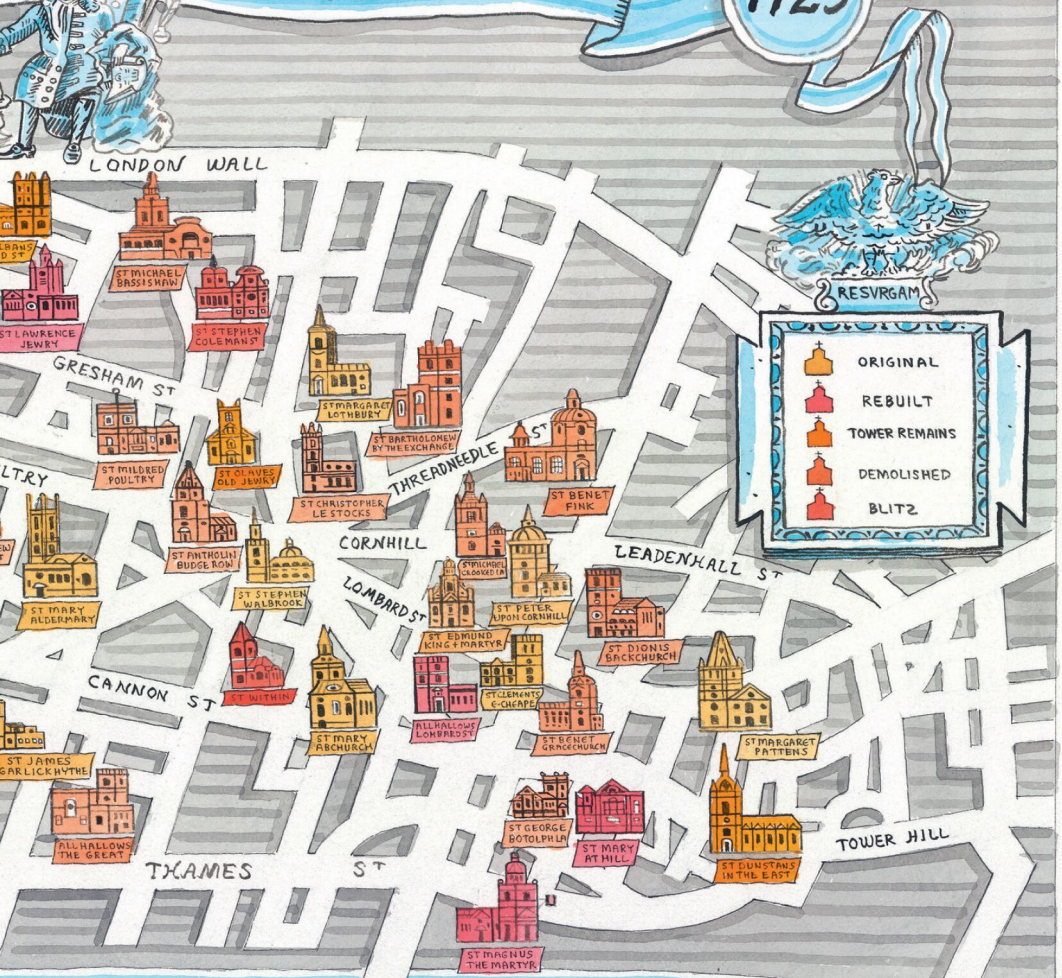
The proof is in how the myth repeats itself to this day — its DNA intertwined with Giorgi and Timur and all who call this country home. The national flag, a red-and-white Jerusalem Cross, streamed from the tops of armoured cars that hurtled down desert roads when Georgia fielded the largest contingent of troops per capita in the NATO mission to Afghanistan. Georgian soldiers recalled how Afghani villagers would stop them in the street as they went about their daily patrols and ask, "Are you Crusaders?" ●

Isaac Sligh is Associate Editor of *The New Criterion*



# 'S CITY CHURCHES

1723



- JANE BREWER
- NICHOLAS HANKSMOOR
- SAMUEL PEYPS
- JOHN AUBREY
- ELIZABETH WILBRAHAM
- MARGARET CAVENISH

AD23

# STUDIO

Normandy's English Connection  
Written and photographed by  
Matthew Lloyd Roberts

**F**OR ENGLISH TRAVELLERS to France in the first half of the eighteenth century, Normandy held a certain allure and familiarity. Despite the many marked differences that came with crossing the channel, Englishmen felt themselves unexpectedly at home in Normandy. Projecting a medieval history that lingered in the popular imagination onto their built environment, one such gentleman wrote in a published travel account of 1701 that “All public Buildings, and some private in Roan [Rouen], are built by the *English*.”

The antiquary and librarian Andrew Ducarel declared that “NORMANDY does so nearly resemble OLD ENGLAND, that we could scarce believe ourselves to be in FRANCE,” commenting on a vernacular architecture of half-timber and thatch he recognised from his travels in Hertfordshire and Rutland.

The foundations of such insistent recognition lie in a feeling of shared cultural heritage between this region of France and England, most strongly expressed by Ducarel when he visits the tapestry at Bayeux, relating a hardly believable account of the ignorance of its custodians. Everywhere Ducarel looks, he sees something familiar: the castle at Caen is said “both in stile and manner of building so much to resemble ROCHESTER castle”. The Abbey of St Stephen is an unmistakable cousin to St Alban’s, “having the same kind of little arched work towards the top”.

FOR MANY OF THESE ENGLISH VISITORS, Normandy felt like a version of home frozen in time: neither reformation nor revolution had yet swept away its great monastic foundations; Rouen was growing, but certainly not at the rate of many English cities in this period. They felt this former exclave could offer them a view into a lost, shared past.

Ducarel wasn’t wrong when he recognised these family resemblances. After the conquest, Norman building projects brought a sweeping wave of increasingly formalised Romanesque building practices to the British Isles which are instantly recognisable in the French province from which the dynasty hailed. They brought a delectable lingua franca of mouldings, whose fanciful anglicised names — Canterbury Billet, N. Hinksey Chevron, Romsey Cable, Upton S. Leonard Nail Head — can’t disguise their continental roots. Equally unmistakable is the shared material palette from which so many buildings of that period were built on both sides of the channel.

The vast quarries at Caen have been churning out an oolitic limestone that verges between clotted cream and brilliant white for a millennium. Its use in major building projects in England after the Norman conquest was a projection of power, but also a question of practicality. So great are the labour-saving advantages of transporting stone by water, that travel from Caen to London



Far left, St Joseph's Church, Le Havre; the crowning glory of Auguste Perret's post-war reconstruction

Left, William I's ruined abbey at Jumièges

Below, twentieth-century concrete silos on the banks of the Seine echo the scalloped keep of Château Gaillard at Les Andelys



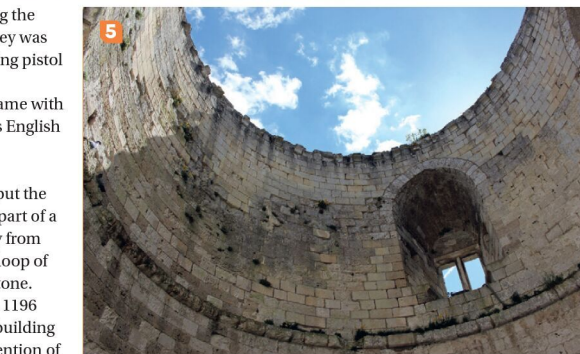
# STUDIO

— or any number of building projects in the southeast of England — was significantly less expensive than transporting stone overland within the British Isles.

The ruined Abbey at Jumièges in Normandy [2] is perhaps the most visible expression of this connection. Everywhere the motifs of Anglo-Norman Romanesque architecture peer out of its hulking remains; its great crossing tower shorn clean off, stark white stone rendering the deep shadows of its sharp cut arches ever darker. The abbey was completed in 1067, its consecration by William I the starting pistol of a campaign of similar building projects for this newly-established sovereign over the narrow sea. Its ruination came with the French revolution: it was spared the fate of many of its English cousins for only a couple of centuries.

MORE THAN A CENTURY AFTER Guillaume le Bâtarde put the finishing touches on Jumièges, Richard the Lionheart, as part of a long-running campaign to protect his claim to Normandy from the avaricious Philip II, chose another tight, meandering loop of the Seine to throw up another great edifice of Caen limestone.

Château Gaillard [4] [5], at Les Andelys was built from 1196 using the most cutting-edge practices of crusader castle-building honed in the Middle East, despite being in direct contravention of the Treaty of Louviers. Its construction was hindered by ill omens, including a rain of blood, and it was ultimately pointless, as the French crown regained control of Normandy in 1204. It became a haven for bandits in the 16th century, leading the French crown to condemn and undermine it, but its silhouette nevertheless looms over the Seine valley, particularly the strange, curvaceously scalloped profile of its keep, which bears a family resemblance to



the 20th century's concrete silos which dot the riverside below [3].

This landscape plays a vital role in one of the great novels of the nineteenth century, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. The provincial dreariness of Emma Bovary's marriage to the reticent, dowdy Charles is relieved by the bright lights of Rouen, and her affair with the initially diffident Léon. Rouen, with its belching factory chimneys, rumbling foundries and church chimes in the mist, ushers her into a heightened, dizzying and ultimately perilous state.

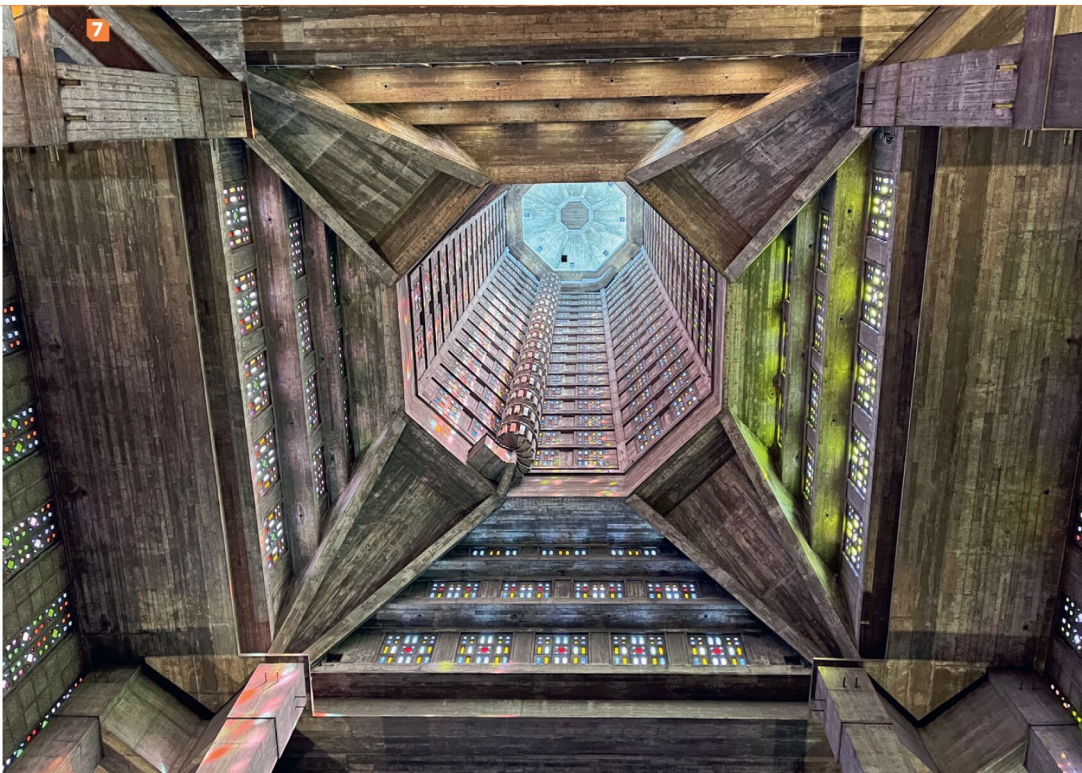
Her love grew in the presence of this vastness, and expanded with tumult to the vague murmurings that rose towards her. She poured it out upon the square, on the walks, on the streets, and the old Norman city outspread before her eyes as an enormous capital, as a Babylon into which she was entering.

Much of Flaubert's Rouen suffered catastrophic damage during the Second World War, a process of ruination that prompted a contested and intriguingly varied approach to post-war rebuilding. The singular highlight is the replacement of the bombed-out sixteenth-century church of St Vincent with Louis Arretche's Church of Saint Joan of Arc [6]. This square in the centre of the city was the site of Joan of Arc's burning for heresy by English authorities in 1431, the beginning of the end of the Hundred Years' War.

Arretche's building is a remarkable upturned ship's hull rendered in tightly-knit slate tile, like dragon's scales. The church







7

**Auguste Perret's reconstruction of Le Havre assured the city UNESCO world heritage status**

was built 1969-79 and incorporates the Flamboyant Gothic stained glass of St Vincent, preserved from destruction by allied shelling.

Adjoining the church and its generous loggia is a marketplace, filled with some of the best seafood vendors in the city, sitting under a canopy of upswept peaks, said to conjure up the flames that licked the pyre of the young martyr. The tight grain of this reconstruction scheme was typical of the rebuilding of Rouen's old city masterminded by

Jacques Gréber, and contrasts sharply with the single skyscraper and broad *tabula rasa* modernism of the city's left bank.

THE WAR SCARRED MUCH OF NORMANDY, but nowhere more so than Le Havre, one of France's mightiest ports, today handling well over 70 million tonnes of cargo annually. The job of rebuilding the city fell to Auguste Perret, an architect in his seventies who had pioneered the use of reinforced concrete in the early twentieth century with his brothers Gustave and Claude. At Le Havre, Perret had a free rein, and the results assured the city

UNESCO world heritage status. His rigorously abstracted classical blocks cluster into squares and loggias, creating shade and space for outdoor seating and protection from the rain.

The crowning glory of Perret's scheme is the church of St Joseph [1] [7]. Its huge octagonal tower evokes the geometries of the Westwerk at Jumièges, but nothing can prepare you for the interior. The shaft of the building is filled with the most wondrous array of stained glass by Marguerite Huré, continuously arrayed for more than 100 metres above you.

Inside, the air is thick with colour as the intensity of scale makes the vast board-marked concrete of the structure buzz; it feels like standing inside a rainbow. It is an overwhelming sensory experience in the best traditions of the French gothic; easily on par with Paris's Sainte-Chapelle. Like my 18th-century predecessors, I find myself looking for the family resemblances to Perret's work in the British built environment: the first phase of Coventry's reconstruction after the war, the churches he inspired in the New Towns of Stevenage and Harlow. However, much like the patterns of influence in previous ages, there is something so particular in the landscapes and townscape of Normandy that make such comparisons, however valid, feel rather trite. ●

**Matthew Lloyd Roberts is an architectural historian and produces the podcast *About Buildings and Cities***

# Dark obsessions of the Demon Dog

Dan Jones is an historian, novelist, TV presenter and journalist

**Dan Jones**

ONE SUNDAY MORNING IN THE summer of 1958, Lee Earle Ellroy pulled up in a taxi outside his mother's house in El Monte, California. He was surprised to see the place surrounded by police cars. As he stepped out of the cab, instinct told him what had happened. A policeman's hand on his shoulder confirmed it. "Son, your mother's been killed."

A photographer was on the scene and hustled Ellroy to a nearby toolshed, where, after a little prompting, he started mugging for the camera. Shortly afterwards, Ellroy's father arrived, and took him by bus to his own apartment in Los Angeles. Many years later, Ellroy would recall in his memoir, *My Dark Places*, what he felt on that bus ride: relief. He wanted to live in LA with his father, not El Monte with his mother. Now he was free to do so. "Some unknown killer just brought me a brand-new, beautiful life." He was 10 years old.

That was 65 years ago. Today, Ellroy (pseudonymously "James", never Lee) is one of the most distinguished writers of American crime and historical fiction. *Love Me Fierce in Danger*, a new biography by the British writer Steven Powell, explores the extraordinary extent to which Ellroy's life and work have been framed by those events in 1958: his mother Jean's brutal, unsolved strangling, and his own subsequent exposure to the seedy underbelly of Hollywood, via Armand, his philandering, unreliable father.

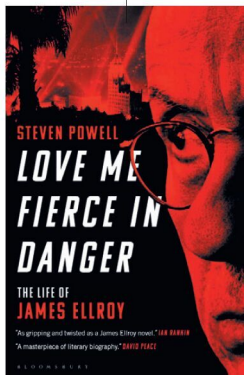
**DRAWING ON MANY HOURS OF INTERVIEWS** and Ellroy's own extensive autobiographical writing, Powell shows how the self-styled Demon Dog of American crime fiction has nursed lifelong obsessions with death, violence, misogyny, police work, celebrity, voyeurism, grift, trauma and failed relationships. His fixations have made him rich and famous. At times they have destroyed his sanity.

Big, bad and backstoried, Ellroy is an obvious candidate for a biography: so obvious that he has already written two himself. *My Dark Places* charted his search for his mother's killer; *The Hilliker Curse* explored his ruinous relationships with women. Powell quotes heavily from both, supplementing them with his own research and providing new tidbits, such as the identity of Ellroy's mother's first husband. By and large, though, his job is to repeat and refine wild tales Ellroy has already commodified.

There are plenty of them. As a child, Ellroy was exposed to his mother's boozy promiscuity and his father's slovenliness and womanising. (Armand Ellroy was Rita Hayworth's manager and, so he claimed, her lover; his dying words to Ellroy were: "Try to pick up every waitress who serves you.")

As a teenager Ellroy postured as a neo-Nazi and was kicked out of school. He burgled his female classmates' homes to steal their panties. He became a booze and drug fiend. Later he faked insanity to escape the army, after which he was often homeless or in jail for petty crimes. He worked in a porn store. He lost his virginity to a communist while high on cough syrup. Aged 27, substance abuse nearly killed him. In between all this he found time to read hundreds of detective novels.

After his brush with death, Ellroy got sober, found work as a golf caddy, and began writing his own crime books. But it took him until his forties to find his voice, his confidence, and a mainstream publisher (Sonny Mehta at Knopf) prepared to back his grand ambition and tolerate his intense personality. In the late 1980s his career began to blossom. Yet his struggles with grief and addiction, along with an ugly combination of cluelessness, coerciveness and cruelty towards the many women in his life, would remain constants into old age.

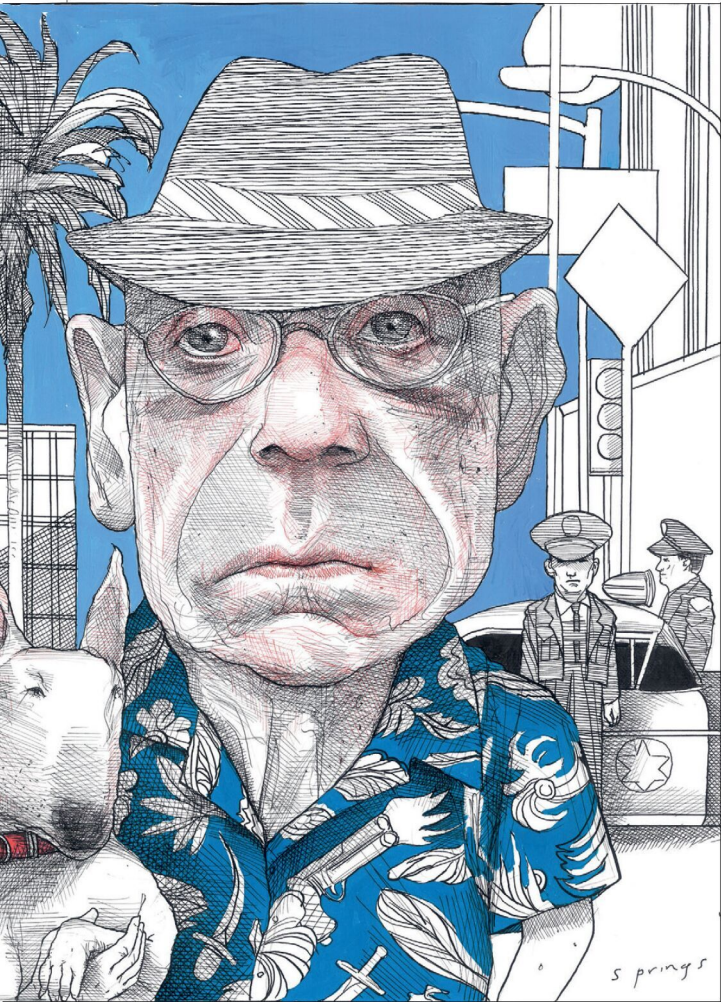


**Love Me Fierce in Danger:**  
The Life of James Ellroy  
Steven Powell  
(Bloomsbury, £14.99)

**DESPITE, OR, PERHAPS, BECAUSE OF ALL THIS**, Ellroy's books are unique, viciously funny and, at their best, slightly terrifying. His most famous work is *LA Confidential*, which became a successful movie. His finest works are *The Black Dahlia* and *American Tabloid*; the former exploring the torture-murder of Elizabeth Short in 1947, the latter reimagining events leading up to the JFK assassination in 1963.

In both, Ellroy's fictional characters thrash around in the pigsty of history, rubbing up against grotesque caricatures of real-life police chiefs, politicians and starlets. Particularly memorable creations include LA police chief Bill Parker as a whisky-gargling Bible basher, JFK as a sexually incompetent hophead, and

**At his best, Ellroy is a bullshit-calling bullet-headed doyen of the American right. At his most boorish, his “Dog” persona is an exercise in fascism as performance art**



This sort of talk has become harder to defend in recent years. When self-reflective, Ellroy describes himself as a “Tory mystic.” But in attention-seeking mode he claims to be “the foul owl with the death growl, the slick trick with the donkey dick, the white knight of the far right”, etc. His justification for carrying on as he does, implicitly accepted by Powell, is that he is speaking the authentic language of the time and place he mentally inhabits: 1950s LA.

To what extent is this just schtick? Needless to say, Ellroy has never pandered to any *bien-pensant* notions of political correctness. At his best, he is an uncompromising, bullshit-calling, bullet-headed doyen of the intelligent American right. He is a moralistic Lutheran, a champion of police departments, a devotee of classical music and high literature, and a scourge of the prissy, morally bankrupt hypocrisy of the liberal left. At his most boorish, however, his “Dog” persona, accessorised with loud Hawaiian shirts, owl spectacles and a nailbrush moustache, is an exercise in fascism as performance art. Powell hints that in private Ellroy is a calmer, kinder, more sensitive soul. We will have to take his word for it.

**PAINSTAKINGLY RESEARCHED** and occasionally revelatory, *Love Me Fierce in Danger* takes its title from a line in Ellroy’s *White Jazz*, though it is also the name of a short, typically obsessive love poem he wrote to Helen Knode, his second ex-wife and current partner. The book is billed by its publisher as “the first critical biography” of Ellroy. “Scholarly” might have been a better choice of adjective.

True, the book contains several passages of literary analysis. Yet if there is critique, there is little censure. Powell seldom offers more than mild reproof to Ellroy, no matter how badly his subject behaves. This is unsurprising. Powell has spent his career writing

Liberace as the owner of a rapey leopard.

Carrying all this along is Ellroy’s distinctive, experimental prose style, which has varied over the years, but is generally terse, slangy, staccato, rhyming, alliterative, and gleefully packed with racial epithets and slurs. His preferred voice is that of the mid-century scandal-rag hack, who drags his readers into a celebrity sewer, revealing, as Ellroy likes to put it: “who’s a nympho, who’s a homo, who’s a dipso, who fucks black people”.

about Ellroy and plainly enjoys his access to the author. Like many people who have grown close to Ellroy over the years, Powell seems dazzled by “Dog’s” outside personality, prodigious work ethic and monstrous talent.

In other words, he is a fan, rather than a true critic. Accordingly, *Love Me Fierce in Danger* reads as a book for other fans, initiated and inured to the World of Ellroy. There is room yet for a truly critical biography of the Demon Dog. But it won’t be this much fun. ●

NIGEL  
BIGGAR

COLONIALISM

A MORAL  
RECKONING

Colonialism:  
A Moral  
Reckoning  
Nigel Biggar  
(Harper  
Collins, £25)

The Critic Books

# The British empire, for good and ill

Robert Lyman

**T**HIS IS AN IMPORTANT, TIMELY and brave book. It is the first serious counterblast against the hysterical and ahistorical orthodoxy that has placed a stranglehold on public discourse over the British Empire, and will prove to be an indispensable handbook in the battles to come.

It will no doubt be rejected out of hand by those who hold the view that imperialism and its sister “ism”, colonialism, are morally irredeemable and that therefore the sort of exercise undertaken by Biggar is itself morally suspect. Others will see this as yet another attack by reactionary “right-wingers” on what all right-thinking people *should* think.

In this context, the task Biggar has taken on is considerable, given that the vast bulk of the post-colonial conversation, in both academia and the media, seems to hold that as empire must involve the use of military violence and economic rapacity, it must therefore be evil and condemned without trial. There is no “innocent until proven guilty” for the British Empire.

This is the simplistic argument, so compelling in its naivety, offered by the spoonful to our children every day in schools and which is *de rigueur* in the academy. Today’s *zeitgeist* seems to be that because empire is so self-evidently evil we must redeem ourselves by means of a national cleansing programme of decolonisation and the repatriation of the empire’s war loot, from the Elgin Marbles to the Benin Bronzes and beyond.

This book is a head-on challenge to those who hold these views to reconsider their perspective with a reasoned explanation of the British Empire other than from the progressive playbook. The danger of not undertaking such a work is to damn much of history to a morally inferior place relative to the exalted ethical world we inhabit.

It is easy to be full of righteous indignation at the horrors of our country’s racist and brutal past, but do we understand the past sufficiently well to pass such judgement? Do we believe that we are morally superior to our forebears? The arrogance — and ignorance — of this assertion needs to be called out.

**THE BOOK IS A CAREFUL ANALYSIS** of empire from an ethical perspective, examining a set of moral questions. This includes whether the British Empire was driven by lust or greed; whether it was racist and condoned, supported or encouraged slavery; whether it was based on the conquest of land; whether it entailed

genocide and or economic exploitation; whether its lack of democracy make it illegitimate, and whether it was intrinsically and/or systemically violent.

Biggar’s proposition is simple: that we look at Britain’s history without assuming the zero-sum position that imperialism and colonialism were inherently bad, that motives and agency need to be considered and that good did flow from bad, as well as bad from good.

Whether he succeeds depends on the reader’s willfulness or ability to appreciate these moral or ethical propositions, and to re-evaluate accordingly. In the view of this reviewer he has mounted a coolly dispassionate defence of his proposition, challenging the hysteria of those who suggest that the British Empire was the apotheosis of evil. Biggar’s calm dissection of these inflated claims allows us to see that they say much more about the motivations, assumptions and political ideologies of those who hold these views than they do about what history presents to us as the realities of a morally imperfect past.

**HE REMINDS US THAT BRITISH** imperialism had no single wellspring. Most of us can easily dismiss the notion that it was a product of an aggressive, buccaneering state keen to enrich itself at the expense of peoples less able to defend themselves. But equally, it is as untrue that economic motives drove all imperialist or colonial endeavour, or that economics (business, trade and commerce) was the primary force which sustained the colonial regimes that followed.

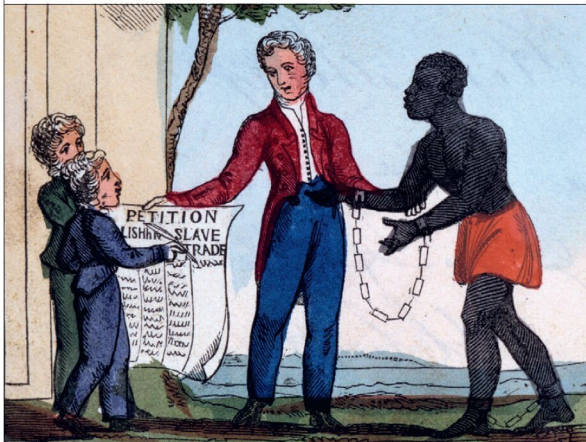
As Biggar asserts, both imperialism and colonialism were driven from different motivations at different times. Each ran different journeys, with different outcomes depending on circumstances. The assertion that there is a single defining imperative for each instance of imperial initiative or colonial endeavour simply does not accord with the facts.

While other issues played a part, it was social, religious and political motives which drove the colonial endeavour in the New World from the 1620s: security and religion drove the subjugation of Catholic (and therefore Royalist) Ireland in the 1650s; social and administrative factors led to the settlement in Australia from 1788; and social and religious imperatives drove the colonisation of New Zealand in the 1840s.

In circumstances where trade and the security of trade was the primary motive for imperialism — think of Clive in the 1750s, for example — a wide variety of outcomes ensued. Some occurred as a natural consequence of imperialism. In India, Clive’s defeat of the Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah in 1757 was in support of a palace coup that put Siraj’s uncle Mir Jafar on the throne of Bengal, thus allowing the East India Company the favoured trading status that Siraj had previously rejected.

This led in time to the Company taking over the administrative functions of the Bengal state (*zamindars* collected both rents for themselves and taxes for the

**Biggar has challenged us all to recognise that motives, context and agency are crucial if we are to both understand the past and evaluate the present**



The Petition for Abolishing the Slave-Trade  
 "Come, listen to my plaintive ditty,/Ye tender hearts, and children dear!/And, should it move your souls to pity,/Oh! try to end the griefs you hear."  
 From Amelia Opie "The Black Man's Lament; or How to Make Sugar", London, 1826

Robert Lyman is the author of *A War of Empires: Japan, India, Burma & Britain 1941-45*

government) and, to seek to protect its new prerogatives, providing security from both internal (civil disorder and lawlessness) and external threats (the Mahratta raiders, for example). So we see the incremental, almost accidental, accrual of power that began in the early 1600s, step into colonial administration 150 years later leading to the transfer of power across a swathe of the sub-continent to the British Crown in 1858.

**B**IGGAR'S ARGUMENT IS THAT, running in parallel with this expansion came a host of other consequences, not all of which can be judged "bad". We may not like what prompted the colonial enterprise at the outset (not all of which was morally contentious, such as the need to trade), but we cannot deny that good things, as well as bad, followed thereafter.

Britain was a late entrant to the slave trade, for example, following the pattern of others. Horror ensued, but a great moral and political reversal then took place in Britain — largely a product of the Enlightenment and the "Great Evangelical Awakening" in the late eighteenth century (think of the Wesley brothers, George Whitefield and John Newton, the ex-slave trader) — which saw the country turn its back on slavery and lead the world for a century and a half, at great financial cost, to seek to suppress it across the globe. Any consideration of Britain's role in the slave trade must be balanced, Biggar rightly asserts, with considerations of the country's massive effort to eradicate it.

As he argues, the "basic problem with the anti-colonialist's equation of British colonialism with slavery, and their consequent demand for cultural 'decolonisation',

is that it requires amnesia about everything that has happened since 1787". It requires us to overlook how widely popular in Britain was the abolitionist cause from the closing decades of the eighteenth century. The uncomfortable reality for anti-slavery campaigners is that for "the second half of its life, *anti-slavery*, not slavery, was at the heart of imperial policy".

Accordingly, this is a helpful and timely contribution to a public conversation about the nature of empire and colonialism that is dominated by many highly-charged assumptions, assertions and correlations ("fascism", "genocide", "racism", "state violence", "oppression" and others). The book is to be applauded for its careful handling of a range of complex and sometimes emotionally-charged questions.

**FOR MY MONEY, MUCH OF THE** current public debate about empire needs to be focused less on the intrinsic morality of what happened (because I am suspicious of the motives of those pressing modern political and ideological interpretations on the past) and more on the quality of governance that was provided across the various imperial projects that made up the experience of empire, and it is in this that Biggar excels.

In most cases the quality of civic administration across the empire was exceptional, in a few it was abysmal. I agree with Biggar that a remarkable legacy of the British exercise of empire was to introduce standards of probity in public administration that were unparalleled in the history of imperialism, even if this legacy was tarnished by the horrors, for instance, of Amritsar and the Bengal famine. India, along with most other parts of the empire, received its independence as a "going concern" from its imperial parent in 1947.

One measure of its success is the remarkable extent to which India retained the civic structures it inherited. It is fascinating to see how the people of the Naga Hills in Assam were irritated by the arrival of the British in the 1870s (because they inhibited the traditional culture of inter-tribal warfare and headhunting) but angered by their departure in 1947. That rancour about Britain leaving exists to this day. The history of colonialism and imperialism is complicated.

Biggar has challenged all of us to recognise that motives, context and agency are crucial if we are to both understand the past and evaluate the present. In particular, his book challenges the motives of those who seek to destroy Britain's faith in itself by asserting dogmatically that its past is nothing to be proud of and that we have no right to assert moral virtue as a nation because of our past. His book will set the cat among the pigeons, but only if the pigeons are prepared to have their orthodoxy challenged. ●

LOOKING  
TO SEA



A complete and compelling book  
"Looking to Sea: Britain Through the Eyes of its Artists"

BRITAIN THROUGH THE EYES OF ITS ARTISTS

LILY LE BRUN

Looking to Sea:  
Britain  
Through the  
Eyes of its  
Artists  
Lily Le Brun  
(Sceptre, £25)

The Critic Books

## Rich portrait of our island nation

Patrick Galbraith

**S**OME SAY THE ANSWER is the village of Coton in Derbyshire. Others reckon that Aylesbury, in Buckinghamshire, is the furthest you can get from the sea. But whatever the answer is, we in Britain are sort of sea people. The ocean unites us, just as it separates us from the rest of the world. But there is so much more to it than that.

In the final chapter of her elegant and endlessly interesting debut, Lily Le Brun writes that in John Akomfrah's acclaimed film installation, *Vertigo Sea*, a roaring collage of water and land, the ocean comes to represent "migration, conquest, travel, and flight". In the nine chapters that precede her exploration of Akomfrah's work, each of them considering a piece of art that captures the sea and the artist who created it, Le Brun adds loneliness, war, social ostracisation, patriotism, and motherhood to the many meanings of the sea.

Le Brun, an arts journalist currently living in Paris, is clearly fascinated by the lives of those who created the great works that explore the sea around our shores. In one of her strongest chapters, "*Seascapes — Ships Sailing Past the Longships: Alfred Wallis*", which paints a troubling picture of the way the art world interacts with and potentially exploits "primitive" artists, Le Brun quotes Wallis — who had been a fisherman himself — as saying, in reference to his depictions of the water, "I do not put collers wha do not belong I Think it spoils the pictures."

His words are striking in a book that explores so many different notions of the sea and so many different artistic interactions with it, from Tracey Emin's *Beach Hut* to Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach*. But the remarkable thing about Le Brun's book is the way that it gives validity to them all and creates a sense of the sea as an endless canvas where all "collers" exist. It is both a constant in our collective British consciousness and something that is forever changing.

**THE GREAT CHALLENGE OF WRITING** a book like *Looking to Sea* is striking a sort of balance — it is as much a rich compendium of social history as it is a hard consideration of art itself. We learn, for example, both about the techniques Bridget Riley used to create her work, putting shapes "through their paces", as well as about the extraordinary number of ramblers in the 1930s who used to get night trains out of London to walk in the wilds, their wanderings being a sort of antidote to the urbanisation of England. But Le Brun walks



the tightrope well, without either the art as an act or the context in which it was created blotting out the other.

There are, it's true, lots of young writers who do first person ramblings badly. We don't always want to hear about how it made them feel and whether that trip to the country made it all better again, but Le Brun is good at the first person. There is a light saltiness about her rainy trip to Dymchurch that I wanted more of. "I take shelter in an empty fish-and-chip restaurant on the high street until the downpour eases. When I emerge hardly anyone is around. I soon begin to feel self-conscious. What was I expecting to find?" Those flashes of wry honesty are very welcome.

Most of the works she considers chronicle a moment. Martin Parr's *The Last Resort* captured Liver-

NEVILLE ELDER/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES



Tracey Emin's *Beach Hut*, Ships Sailing Past the Longships by Alfred Wallis, Martin Parr's *The Last Resort* and Vanessa Bell's *Studland Beach*

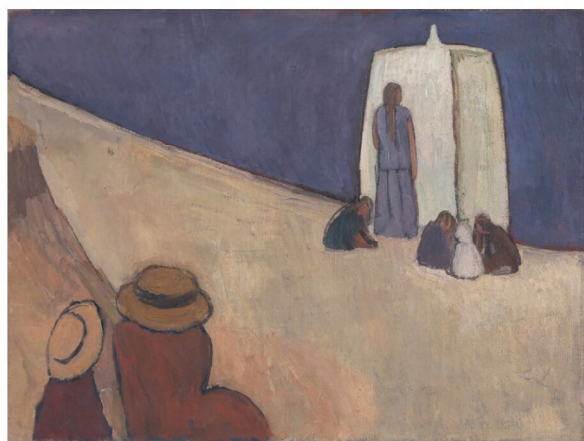
**This is a book that goes in search of England and finds it to be a complicated, dark and wonderful country**

Patrick Galbraith is the author of *In Search of One Last Song: Britain's Disappearing Birds and the People Trying to Save Them*

pool's New Brighton in 1986, but what is it like today? According to the *Wirral Globe* anyway, dogging there is now so prolific that it is putting people off their fish and chips. It would be interesting to hear it, though, from Le Brun.

**IN A SENSE LE BRUN'S SIMPLE STRUCTURE** — ten paintings by ten artists you've probably heard of — obscures the complexity and intrigue of *Looking to Sea*. At points, it's almost nature writing, and the way it considers art's role in engaging with the environment crisis is fascinating — artists for whom the sea is a subject have found themselves with a subject that is very sick. Yet, the range of Le Brun's forensic gaze is remarkable.

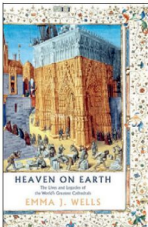
She writes very perceptively about T.S. Eliot, and



then we're on to the emergence of the agrarian Right, and then it's notions of Cornish masculinity, and a couple of chapters later, we're into Charles Saatchi and the power of artists as brands.

The effect is to build, little by little, a picture of the creation of Britain's patchwork soul. What Le Brun has written is a study of Britain imagined, Britain as it recently was, and of Britain becoming. In her chapter on Wallis, Le Brun mentions H.V. Morton's *In Search of England*. This is a book that goes in search of the same subject and finds it to be a complicated, dark, and wonderful country.

It is fashionable to talk Britain down but the art it has inspired is remarkable and reading Le Brun's book will give you a renewed love for this place that sits apart. ●



Heaven on Earth: The Lives and Legacies of the World's Greatest Cathedrals  
Emma Wells  
(Heard of Zeus, £40)

## A window into the medieval mind

**Mathew Lyons**

**W**ALKELIN, THE NORMAN bishop of Winchester, had a problem. He needed more wood for his new cathedral, being built on unpromisingly marshy ground a little way from the city's two existing Saxon minsters. He went to the man who had appointed him, William the Conqueror. His king offered him as many trees from a nearby royal wood as Walkelin's carpenters could cut in three days. Sometime later, William passed by the site. He found just one tree left. "Am I bewitched or have I taken leave of my senses?" he cried. "Had I not once a most delectable wood upon this spot?" Walkelin, it is said, had pressed every citizen of Winchester into service and stripped the woods bare.

**THE STORY MAY NOT BE TRUE.** Cathedral scribes were notoriously partisan and sometimes downright dishonest when it came to the history of their buildings. But, as Emma Wells reveals in *Heaven on Earth*, a detailed and illuminating survey of 16 great medieval churches, it captures some key aspects of what has been called "the Crusade of the Cathedrals", the extraordinary efflorescence of primarily Gothic architecture in north-western Europe in the first centuries of the second millennium.

The story has, in Walkelin, someone to drive the construction with reckless audacity, cunning and determination. It has the sometimes supplicant, sometimes competitive, sometimes accommodating relationship with state power that was required to build something on this scale and at this expense. And it has the immense labour of unnamed men and women — not always willingly given — without which nothing could have been built at all.

Wells's selection runs from Istanbul's sixth-century Hagia Sophia to Florence's fifteenth-century Santa Maria del Fiore, but its primary focus is the pinnacle of the

**Cathedrals were ways of conceptualising faith in stone and glass — "geometrised theology"**

Age of Gothic — roughly from 1140 to 1280 — as manifested in England and France. Many of these buildings looked back to the very foundations of Christianity in Europe. Santiago de Compostela was built on the site of the supposed tomb of St James, martyred in c.44AD;

Notre-Dame de Saint-Denis stands where the third-century missionary-martyr Saint Dionysius finally fell after his beheading on Montmartre. There had been a cathedral on the site of Cologne Cathedral in the fourth century, when it was part of Roman Gaul.

But if cathedrals were in some sense bounden to the affirmatory heft of secular authority, they were also a bulwark against it. They embodied the eternal certainty of grace while transient political and dynastic chaos ebbed and flowed around them. Indeed, Wells was re-founded in the middle of the twelfth-century English civil war aptly known as The Anarchy.

Civic authorities meanwhile were ambivalent. Running battles at Santiago resulted in the cathedral precinct being stormed in 1116 and again in 1136. On the latter occasion, the cathedral's combative bishop, Diego Gelmírez, was forced to hide from the projectiles of his flock behind the grille of the altar shrine. At Amiens, the church bought off the fractious local bourgeoisie with a 25 per cent tax cut known as the "Respite of St Firmin", named for the first bishop of the diocese, martyred in the second century, whose relics the cathedral held.

Money was a constant problem; these marvels required vast amounts of it. The building of Westminster Cathedral cost around £40,000, of Salisbury 40,000 marks (a mark being around two thirds of a pound); the eastern arm of Ely alone cost close to £7,000. And that's just three of the many ecclesiastical building projects going up across England at more or less the same time. Meanwhile, Henry II's budget for running the country was a meagre 12,000 marks. Whatever else they are, these buildings are monuments to worldly endeavour.

**THE FINANCING OF BOTH SALISBURY** and York was aided by the sale of indulgences: the contributions of the penitent faithful were, in essence, offset against their sins. At Salisbury, 40 days of penance were waived; at York, 42. Cults and relics were vital to both the spiritual and the financial economy. Every cathedral needed its saint, but canonisation was merely a kind of kitemark of sanctity. Cults grew without it: the relics of the Blessed William Fitzherbert and Edward the Confessor were promoted, at York and Westminster respectively, for decades before they received the ultimate *imprimatur* from Rome.

Authorities were always alert to small tweaks that could grow their revenues: at Reims, the cranium of St Nicasius was translated to a new shrine simply to create a new station at which pilgrims could make offerings. At Amiens, the processing of the relics of St Firmin was so lucrative that a second procession was launched with the relics of St Honoré, another former bishop.

But, as with any marketing campaign, consumer enthusiasm wasn't a given: in October 1247 Henry III walked barefoot from St Paul's to Westminster to promote the latter's acquisition of some holy blood from the wound of Christ, but neither the stunt nor the relic





A view along the rear of Winchester Cathedral

fired the public imagination.

Through pilgrimage, cathedrals were great engines of mobility. An astonishing 100,000 pilgrims came to Canterbury in 1171, inspired by the murder of Thomas Becket the year before. But, as Wells notes, the mobility these buildings inspired wasn't merely temporal. They were built to embody the celestial city itself while also transporting the faithful towards it. Moreover, pilgrims also made cathedrals into engines of the divine: St James produced just eight recognised miracles in his first thousand years. But by the first decade of the twelfth century his productivity rocketed to one a year. Cathedrals weren't merely places where God's grace could be found, they were places where it happened.

**WELLS IS AN ECCLESIASTICAL AND** architectural historian, and in some passages the lure of architectural exposition impedes an otherwise lucid and absorbing narrative. The glossary of technical terms provided is useful and the photography is wonderful; but some drawings to illustrate the more detailed descriptive passages would have been welcome.

Taken as a whole, however, the book offers a luminous insight into the medieval mind and the worldview that made these achievements possible. We think of these buildings as expressions of faith, but they were more than that. They were ways of conceptualising faith in stone and glass — what the scholastic philosopher Peter Abelard called "geometrised theology".

Abbot Suger, who led the twelfth-century building of Notre-Dame de Saint-Denis — in many ways the template for every Gothic church that followed — understood it was more than daylight that his abbey's great windows let in, it was the divine. "The dull mind rises to the truth through material things," he had inscribed on his abbey doors. "And is resurrected... when the light is seen." ●

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# How to avoid the Third World War

Paul Sagar

**T**HIS IS A BIG BOOK, ABOUT big ideas. At its core is a vision not only of how to understand the vast complexity of modern international relations, supranational political institutions, and global political economy, but how to stabilise it and make it work better.

Paul Tucker — a former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England and long-time member of the Monetary Policy Committee — is one of the very few people alive who could write such a work, blending as it does philosophy, political economy, international relations, and real-world experience of how major international organisations function. He has done so with remarkable success.



**Global Discord: Values and Power in a Fractured World Order**  
Paul Tucker  
(Princeton University Press, £32)

*Global Discord* puts forward a vision of international relations that rejects (simplifying somewhat) the two dominant approaches hitherto on offer. On the one hand, so-called "Realists" affirm that the international arena is anarchic, a scaled-up version of Hobbes's infamous state of nature, where life is nasty, brutish, and short. But this vision cannot be right. Not only do cooperative supranational organisations plainly exist, but states often bind themselves to the decisions of such organisations, submitting to international law even in the absence of a Hobbesian sovereign coercing them.

Furthermore, it is simply not true (as realists claim) that states operate solely on the principle of self-interest, viewing all other states as equally hostile rivals. North Atlantic democracies such as Britain, France, and the US don't regard each other with the deep suspicion directed towards (say) Russia or Iran. This is in part a function of their long-shared histories, including robust common commitments to liberal democracy. As Tucker shows, these things matter.

**YET THE BOOK ALSO RESISTS FALLING** into the other major school of international realism, so-called "Liberal" accounts that (following the German philosopher Immanuel Kant) appeal to moral duties and the power of reason having the capacity to pacify the international arena. Against this, Tucker insists on a

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hard-headed acknowledgement that global confrontations are not going to go away; the only sensible bet is that they are going to get worse.

Principally, this is due to the unstoppable rise of China as a political and economic superpower, whose strategic incentives do not align with those of rich western democracies, and which does not share a heritage of commitment to the same moral and political values, nor a deep investment in the current international order of economic-political institutions such as the UN, the World Bank, IMF, and so forth.

Tucker's major innovation is to deepen the power and plausibility of what is sometimes known as the "English School." This approach insists upon the possibility of "anarchical society" in international affairs: that through ties of mutual interest and reciprocated respect for the so-called "laws of nations", Hobbesian wars of all against all can be transcended, but without falling into implausible Kantian over-optimism. Tucker takes this English School insight and marries it with the thought of two giants of philosophy: the eighteenth-century Scot David Hume, and the twentieth-century Englishman Bernard Williams.

**FROM HUME, TUCKER CONSTRUCTS** a sophisticated account of how nations may, over time, build international conventions and institutions capable of binding them to collective decisions. While initially being motivated only by self-interest, with enough repeat experience of commitment to shared endeavours, nations — like people — can come to believe in the *rightness* of obeying mutually agreed-upon rules, even in the absence of a Hobbesian sovereign.

This helps explain why international law not only does exist, but is often adhered to, even by nations whose immediate self-interest is not obviously served by doing so. It also explains how credible commitment can be maintained over time among international competitors without devolving into endless armed conflict.

From Williams, Tucker takes an equally crucial idea (also found in Hume): that central to political processes is the underlying conception of *legitimacy*, which actors and institutions are operating with. In the liberal-democratic societies of the West, we now take it as baseline that legitimate politics respect certain important values, including (to oversimplify horribly) respect for democratic accountability, the centrality of human rights, and respect for the liberty of the individual. This,

however, is not a timeless moral imperative, but a product of the particular, often tortured and stumbling, histories of societies such as ours.

The problem is that, at an international level, it is not always easy to integrate the norms of domestic legitimacy with those appropriate to running supranational organisations (think the IMF; or Davos), let alone when dealing with authoritarian regimes that flagrantly disregard human rights (such as Iran). This is especially so because many other nations do not share western conceptions of what makes for legitimate political action, either domestically or in the international arena.

**THIS IS MOST TRUE OF CHINA UNDER** the CCP, which, as Tucker spells out in stark detail, is committed to an explicit rejection of, and hostility towards, liberal democratic values, drawing on a different, Confucian tradition. Yet China is a superpower, and is only going to get stronger. What this means is that western nations — in particular the US — and the international economic and political architecture erected following the end of the Second World War, cannot blithely proceed as if China will slot amicably into the global order (as some assumed would be the case back in the heyday of pre-2008 global optimism).

Against such wishful thinking, Tucker urges the western democracies to steel themselves for the inevitability of global discord. This will take place between, at the very least, China and the US, but probably also other rising powers (Indonesia, India, Brazil). He sketches four possible future scenarios: a lingering status quo of US dominance; a reshaped world order following the collapse of US dominance; a new Cold War between China and the US; and a superpower struggle via spheres of influence.

Which of these comes to pass is not yet determined; each would require different responses at the level of international politics and political economy. How the world navigates the challenge of adjustment, while avoiding the catastrophe of all-out superpower war, is not obvious. But the great achievement of this profound and important book is that it offers a way of thinking about international politics that helps us to know what better decisions will look like. Indeed, it might even assist some of those charged with making such decisions to do a better job. Books like this do not come along very often; when they do, one can only hope they are read as widely as possible. ●





EDITED BY  
Darrin M. McMahon

History and  
Human  
Flourishing  
Darrin  
McMahon (ed)  
(Oxford  
University  
Press, £19.99)

# Rebadging the past as feel-good therapy

Michael Ledger Lomas

**T**HE AMERICAN HISTORICAL Association recently asked social media users to vote on a slogan for its annual meeting, from a shortlist which included “I’m a historian. I’m here to help” and “Study the past to understand the present.” A better one might have read, “Where did the jobs go?” The number of full-time, permanent posts in history across the United States has fallen from over 150 a year to just under a hundred in the past ten years.

When combined with fading student enrolments, the withdrawal of major philanthropic trusts from funding research and the explosion of rows within the AHA over “presentist” approaches to scholarship, these statistics prompted one *New York Times* editorialist to wonder if the end of history was nigh.

The nosedive in the discipline’s fortunes may yet level off to a glide, but it has been dramatic enough to provoke American historians, even comfortably-tentured ones, to brood on possible course corrections. When it comes to the past, historians emphasise the structures which curb individual actors; when it concerns their own profession, they remain incurably optimistic that a determined overhaul of their methodology can turn things around.

**HISTORY AND HUMAN FLOURISHING** is the latest clarion call to do better. While it emanates from American academe and is dominated by its problems, it will interest anyone who worries about the prospects of academic history. Its editor, Darrin McMahon, is a prolific intellectual historian who has gathered a crew of similarly eminent professors to stake out a promising new role for academic history: advancing human flourishing.

That may sound like a naïve undertaking, but McMahon points out it is a new way of asking a question originally posed by Friedrich Nietzsche, a disenchanting professor. What, Nietzsche mused in his *Untimely Meditations*, are the “uses and disadvantages of history for life?” In his time, as in our ours, there was not so much a crisis of history as a crisis of historicism.

Precise, “antiquarian” reconstructions of the past poured from the presses, as did what he called “critical” scholarship, which anatomised the myths by which societies had lived. Yet although nineteenth-century historicism believed it was inherently important to trace the origins of modern beliefs, Nietzsche held that its investigations merely distracted us from a pressing crisis of value: why should we hold those beliefs?

Perhaps yoking history to the study of human flourishing could answer Nietzsche’s still-smouldering question. This academic industry, which has taken off in the United States, is a form of “positive psychology” which seeks to understand and advance the healthy operations of the human mind, rather than to dwell on its pathologies.

Students flock to positive psychology courses, which promise to unveil the meaning of life, or at least strategies to get ahead; government agencies consult national happiness indexes for the promotion of economic growth; philanthropic funders are generous with their support. It is no wonder that McMahon wants to investigate how history could revive its prospects by assisting in its social mission.

Most of his authors are nevertheless nervous about delivering themselves to a discipline which seems tinged with snake oil. Some are prepared to consider how history could rebadge itself as a therapeutic discipline. McMahon’s own essay suggests that history could help people to face their mortality by bringing them to consider how earlier generations endured shocks and reverses.

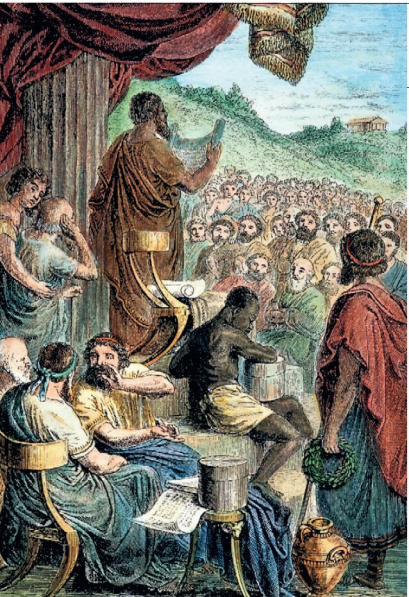
Courses framed like this might draw in older people and in his experience could be particularly attractive to military veterans in the classroom, who could process their experiences of Afghanistan or Iraq by studying the Peloponnesian wars or the Peninsular campaign. The example is a reminder that American historians, unlike British ones, still write from within an empire.

Dan Edelstein similarly appeals to the example of Goethe in Rome and Stendhal in Florence to suggest that the “historical sublime” — an emotive reflection on the wreckage of noble pasts — might be a powerful source of consolation. That seems convincing, even if he concedes it may take “a certain melancholic disposition” — which not a few readers of *The Critic* may share — to fall for the wistful charms of the historical sublime.

**YET PRIVATE CONSOLATION IS NOT** the same as public usefulness. Two Harvard professors hope that history can make wider and more direct contributions to human flourishing. Maya Jasanoff’s essay argues that academic historians can regain their standing as public educators by becoming storytellers. They can hook the public by dropping their cautious qualifiers and writing bravura set-pieces, before patiently explaining their context and bearing on the present.

Historian narrators will be following the example of Barack Obama, who has taken to making Netflix documentaries, in spreading enlightenment through story. Yet Jasanoff seems to be urging a shift that has already taken place. Few historians have her literary chops, but many already start their books and articles with the tale of how such and such a person arose at eight o’clock on a frosty morning in 1546, then did something which turned out to create the modern world.

## The nosedive in history's fortunes has prompted U.S. academics to brood on course corrections



Herodotus reading his history

A literary tic is hardly a life-raft for the discipline. Moreover, while very online historians have not prospered as fact checkers of the political right's tall tales, there is no reason to think they will fare better by setting themselves up as rival story tellers. Their political message may be the problem, not just the medium.

Perhaps it is not literary reticence but rather anxieties over “presentism” which have denied historians a public hearing. David Armitage argues that before rushing to absolve themselves from the sin of presentism, historians should investigate what the term means. In the first place, they put themselves on a path to antiquarian irrelevance if they insist that the past be understood only with reference to itself.

**THEY ARE ALSO PURSUING AN IMPOSSIBILITY.** As philosophers note in their (neutral) use of the term “presentism,” the present is our only reality. Roman ruins or the signature of Guy Fawkes are tangible and visible, but also present-day things. The pasts they recall are fabrications which inevitably reflect our current concerns and needs, albeit ones produced according to scholarly conventions.

Armitage doesn't want to frighten us. He is not calling for the full-blooded use of anachronisms or for bending the past into shapes which crudely parallel liberal fears in the present. Trump isn't Hitler, or vice versa. His vanilla “defence” of presentism therefore offers history a rousing way of describing who they already work rather than a new way to be heard. It seems no more likely to rescue the profession than his *History Manifesto* (2014), which cautiously exhorted historians to embrace Big Data.

If McMahon's more optimistic contributors fail to convince, then two of his contributors have given us essays whose radiant pessimism might have cheered Nietzsche. Suzanne Marchand suggests that history's problems are deeply — maybe incurably — rooted in its own institutional history.

As late as the eighteenth century, Herodotus remained the mentor of a motley crew of history writers, men and women who sought to emulate his “pano-

ramic curiosity” about the customs and especially the beliefs of other peoples.

But the rot had already set in: Voltaire scorned the credulity of Herodotus and urged historians to adopt a clearly secular approach. By the mid-nineteenth century, German scholars had rebadged history as a masculine and scientific discipline. Its practitioners had doctorates and followed a different ancient exemplar, Thucydides, and his obsessive concern with politics, causation and the rise and fall of states.

The implication of Marchand's impish essay is that the diminution of the historical profession would be no bad thing if it encouraged a revival of lively, “Herodotean” writing about the past.

**D. GRAHAM BURNETT SHARES** Marchand's concern that academic history has made itself too dull to last in an essay whose raw speculations are the best thing in this book. Burnett agrees with McMahon that the question of human flourishing is now “*the big one*” for historians. But his world view is remote from the lifehacks of positive psychology: the “basic catastrophe of human being that we are, functionally, little hollow passages for the transmission of pain”.

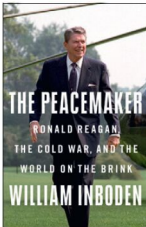
Cutting the chains of pain might seem like a job for religion, but Burnett alleges that historians inherited spiritual and metaphysical assumptions from theologians, which they long ago hid in the interests of scientific respectability. If they were more open about the private “*credos*” which shape their research, we would all stand to benefit. Burnett's own desire to battle against the “demons” of human nature culminates with a deliberately “daft” proposal. Historian humanists should “teach us *what is eternal*”.

By turning from a scientific preoccupation with explanation to the aesthetic recovery of past states of being and feeling, historians can refine our sense of what is temporally determined. In doing so they promise to “surface” what is not, granting us “momentary apparitions of what might redeem us — beauty, truth, love”.

Graduate training programmes in history are not going to incorporate such “soulcraft” any time soon. But Burnett's speculations are not meant to be bullet points for university reform. They urge us to recognise that what is at issue when we talk about history — especially in our disagreements about its subject matter and implications — are values which come from outside the discipline.

So long as we live in societies where shared values are in flux or decline, there seems no reason to hope or perhaps even to wish that history as practiced in universities should be a power in the land, rather than merely a respectable, modestly-sized academic field. ●

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The Peacemaker: Ronald Reagan, the Cold War, and the World on the Brink  
William Inboden  
(Dutton, £31.99)

# The man who tamed the Russian bear

Angus Reilly

**I**N OCTOBER 1986, IN A CLAPBOARD, possibly haunted, house on the windswept Icelandic coast, Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev came agonisingly close to promising the elimination of all nuclear weapons. The leaders of the United States and the Soviet Union dared each other to take the precipitous step and make the pledge, but ultimately neither party was willing to budge on their respective commitment and opposition to the American Strategic Defence Initiative, which Reagan had commissioned to counter incoming Soviet missiles.

The Reykjavik Summit represented an important moment in the peaceful conclusion of the Cold War. Yet Reagan and Gorbachev's impassioned colloquy did not take place in the same Cold War as their predecessors' summits had over the previous decades. By the 1980s, new spectres were haunting Europe as the forces of global politics superseded the contours of the US-Soviet confrontation set down in the post-war period.

The global economic order was shaken by the collapse of the Bretton Woods system of fixed exchange rates in 1973 and the Volcker Shock of 1979, in which the Federal Reserve raised rates to the highest level "since the birth of Jesus Christ", as the German Chancellor complained.

The oil shocks of the 1970s further upended the global balance, shifting power to the Middle Eastern states and facilitating a vast proliferation of capital across nations to power the rise of neoliberalism. Beyond the ghostly rooms of Reykjavik, a post-Cold War world was being born.

**AS WILLIAM INBODEN REMINDS READERS** in his masterful new study of American foreign policy under Ronald Reagan, statesmen were confronted with a stupefying cacophony of crises in the 1980s — the frustrating "simultaneity of events", as Secretary of State George Shultz noted. When one picks up Inboden's book one might expect it to be a story of nuclear weapons, Star Wars, summits and Soviet reformers. It is that, but, as Inboden reminds us, the 1980s were "also more than a Cold War story".

Inboden's book should be regarded as the definitive history of American foreign policy in the 1980s for years to come. He is a clear writer, never losing the reader in the fog of events as the book charts across democratisation in Asia, terrorism in the Middle East and civil war in Latin America. The book, furthermore, is commend-



Reagan meets Gorbachev in Reykjavik

ably subtle. It does not fall into the temptation of loudly proclaiming the lessons of the period for the present, as if one should prop up a revived Reagan in the Oval Office to impart his historical wisdom.

The dilemmas of Russian pipelines providing fuel to Europe, American military support for Taiwan, and aggressive Middle Eastern dictators are all stories with evident contemporary echoes, but Inboden lets them speak for themselves. These are history's lessons through causality, rather than analogy.

Ronald Reagan entered office in 1981 with an intention to wage the Cold War differently; if that meant upending generations worth of strategic doctrine, so be it. "My theory of the Cold War is we win and they lose," he told an aide. The Reagan administration was committed to expanding and updating American military capabilities, shaking off the memories of Vietnam that had haunted them since the withdrawal.

Technological advancement in the form of a series of strategic bombers, the B-1, B-2 and F-117, that could evade Soviet radar, undermined the logic of mutually-assured destruction. The announcement of the Strategic Defense Initiative, a far-fetched and potentially impossible idea of using lasers to take down incoming missiles, in 1983 further upset the consensus that world peace could only come through a guarantee of annihilation for all.

**THE STATE OF EASTERN EUROPE** also provided opportunity for imaginative strategy. In 1981, Poland was experiencing social and political upheaval exacerbated

Angus Reilly is writing a book about Henry Kissinger in the Second World War

## Imboden's book should be regarded as the definitive history of American foreign policy in the 1980s. He is a clear writer, never losing the reader in a fog of events

by the ordeals of the global economy. A burgeoning movement, in the form of Solidarity, threatened the Communist government. Reagan was deeply moved by the resistance, telling his officials: "This is the first time in 60 years we have had this kind of opportunity. There may not be another in our lifetime. Can we afford not to go all out?" In the sanctions and support that ensued, the Reagan administration broke with the accord, drawn up at the Yalta conference in 1945, that Poland lay under Soviet dominion, explicitly challenging Communist legitimacy in the Eastern Bloc.

Imboden, the author of a previous book on the religious dimension to American strategy in the early Cold War, places a particular emphasis on Reagan's evangelicalism. The USA was, he declared, the "shining city on a hill," and he never doubted its divinely-sanctioned mission. Religion was not just a personal lodestar, but a historicist and strategic tool for geopolitics.

Conflict between Israel and Syria inspired profound eschatological fear in Reagan, who confided to his diary: "Armageddon in the prophecies begins with the gates of Damascus being assailed." He was confident in the course predicted by the dialectics of scripture: that the Cold War would end with the final liberation of Europe from idolatrous Communism. Perhaps, most revealingly, Reagan even tried to personally convert Gorbachev to Christianity.

**R**EAGAN'S ADVISORS AND OFFICIALS reflected his unconventional worldview. The administration was populated with a cast of flamboyant characters with a mandate from the President to break orthodoxy. His first Secretary of State, Alexander Haig, looked the part but suffered from an inability to get along with anyone in the administration, from the president down. CIA Director Bill Casey (*right*)—"the last of the great buccaneers" in the words of his deputy—had last served in intelligence with the OSS in the Second World War.

The geriatric spy chief, who mumbled so much that Reagan could often not understand him, went about finding all manner of extravagant ways to confront the Soviet Union, from lethal aid to the Mujahadeen in Afghanistan, to mining a harbour in Nicaragua that had to be stopped when Congress realised it was technically an act of war

against the Soviet ships entering the port.

A combination of difficult egos and a prevaricating President fostered debilitating infighting and, in turn, often contradictory policy. Reagan joked, "In my administration, sometimes our right hand doesn't know what our far-right hand is doing." When Argentina invaded the Falklands in 1982, one faction, led by Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, sent state-of-the-art weaponry and intelligence to the British, while Jeane Kirkpatrick, as UN ambassador, actively supported the Argentinians.

In the same year, in the debate over whether to send peacekeepers to Lebanon, the internecine battles resulted in a "dangerous muddle" of a policy that provided US troops but gave them little leeway to engage in action. Imboden is damning: "This was no way to run a superpower."

A fanciful scheme to sell weapons to the Iranian regime in exchange for the release of American hostages in Lebanon, conjoined with an ambition to support the Contra rebels in Nicaragua, delivered the most severe crisis for Reagan's administration. From the outset the Iran-Contra affair was scandalous malpractice.

Bud McFarlane, Reagan's third National Security Advisor of five, was desperate to emulate Kissinger's opening to China by reworking the US-Iran relationship. He trusted the enigmatic Iranian Manucher Ghorbanifar, who strung McFarlane along for years, telling him a breakthrough could be just around the corner if only a few more weapons could be delivered.

At one point, Ghorbanifar took a CIA polygraph test in which he lied on 13 of 15 questions; the other two, his name and birthplace, registered "inconclusive". Yet the engagement continued. McFarlane, Oliver North, and others have been rightly excoriated for their role in

Iran-Contra, but, ultimately, Reagan had fostered an environment that permitted such rogue behaviour.

**DESPITE SCANDALS AND** infighting, Reagan achieved significant foreign policy victories. The engagement with Gorbachev was essential for improving the Cold War, and Imboden details Reagan's focus on East Asia, further cementing the importance of the book. Under the competent hand of George Shultz, the United States was able to deftly navigate a complicated dynamic of strategic interests and trade pressures amidst a shift of



global economic power towards Asia.

The administration recognised the importance of South Korea, Japan and Taiwan as “forming a security shield in the western Pacific” and, for all of the personal bond between Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, the American President made clear that Japan was “the most important ally that the US has”.

The Soviet Pacific fleet constituted 720 ships, outstripping the entire US navy and menacing America’s regional allies. One official described America’s strate-

gic interests in Japan as “Location, location, location” for air and naval bases to project power against the Soviets — a strategic infrastructure that has remained in place ever since.

The origins of America’s present clash with China runs through its confrontation with the Soviet Union in the Pacific, as well as the deeper transformations of the 1980s, and, for all his contribution to ending the Cold War, Reagan’s most enduring legacy may well have been his preparation for a world beyond it. ●



**An English Tradition? The History and Significance of Fair Play**  
Jonathan Duke-Evans,  
(Oxford University Press, £35)

**Erroll Flynn as Robin Hood**

## England’s fair and pleasant land

**Robert Colls**

**J**ONATHAN DUKE-EVANS TELLS US that the first recorded use of the phrase “fair play” is to be found in an obscure mid-fourteenth-century poem called *Titus & Vespasian*. Having taken their leave and went their way, “He thanked [t]hem of [t]here faire play”. Duke-Evans goes on to say that there are 39 printed mentions of “fair play” in English for the sixteenth century, 600 for the seventeenth, 1,400 for the eighteenth, and (with no equivalent databases to draw on) British Periodical samples indicate an Edwardian peak of mentions, a twentieth-century leveling off, and a twenty-first century falling off.

What all this tells us I couldn’t really say.

As for the great writers, Shakespeare comes out top with a very creditable five mentions, but there are ducks all round for More, Sidney, Spenser, Hooker, Marlowe, Burke, Johnson, Gibbon, Paine, Hume, Wollstonecraft, Austen, Wordsworth, Keats and Byron, with only quick singles for V. Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and G.B. Shaw. If fair play was cricket, and this was the best we could do, we’d try another game.

But it’s not cricket, it’s the murky world of identity. Duke-Evans claims that for the past 300 years, fair play has sat “at the core of our national identity” as “one of our most deep-seated qualities”. For my own part, I can only say there are stronger contenders as expressions of national identity, and when I have come across the phrase, it usually has been in rarefied or rhetorical contexts.

Of course, if I’d been looking

for it, it might have been different. My family had a thing about male toupées. We found them funny and fascinating (there’s another story here but thankfully we were not the only ones sharing in this madness: see how Anthony McGowan taught philosophy to his dog), seemingly perched everywhere we went, but we didn’t think they were at the core of male fashion. It’s true, of course, that modern sport gave the English a global reputation for fair play and rules, but all sport needs rules or it isn’t sport. Whether it needs fair play as well is an open question. In any case, historians have got better things to do than count mentions.

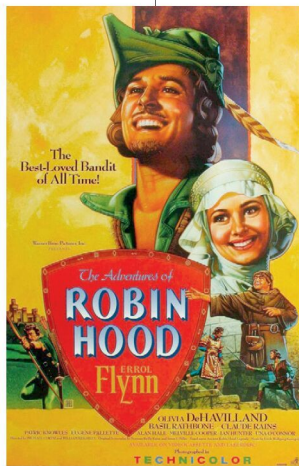
**ONCE WE TURN FROM MENTIONS** to meanings, the game gets more interesting. We find notions of fair play in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, in Plato and Virgil and, in a list as long as your arm, at the Ancient Olympics, in French-inspired medieval chivalry, at the heart of Rawlsian philosophy and in all the various manifestations of the “gentleman”, from Chaucer and Mallory to Sir Walter Scott and James Bond.

In a lot of wrangling over meanings, Duke-Evans moves his argument from fair play being at the core of being British, or English, or the UK (he isn’t clear), to the altogether more modest contention that “There is

indeed in British culture a deep layer of attitudes and customs which are grouped together under the heading of fair play.”

Which is reasonable, although there are still problems because meanings change according to context. The author is aware of these difficulties and pins some, but not all, of them down in the first two chapters. Is fair play about mutual respect, or equality between sides? Is it about justice, or respect? Is it procedural, or summative? Was it spoken more than written, or *vice versa*?

Is it the same as “fair dos” or “fair’s fair”? The Aussies built a country on a “fair go”, but fair go for whom? And how might it differ from other notions of mutual



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## Modern sport gave the English a reputation for fair play. But all sport needs rules or it isn't sport

obligation? We are told there is no fair play without honour, but honour is just as sticky a concept. In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone reminds his enemies where family honour lies by getting someone else to shoot his brother in the back. Mind, he's not English.

**DUKE-EVANS WRITES WELL AND** clearly enjoys the challenge of the argument, but you only have to turn away in order to snap out of it. We all know the Brits played football with the Germans on Christmas Day 1914, but what about other days? What about fair play and poison gas? What about fair play and flying shrapnel? No empire was ever won by fair play and no country ever said it won by cheating.

All countries have their own ways of getting their histories wrong (although in the English case, Hollywood does it for us), but it all depends on how you want to be heard. The French say *franc-jeu*. The Spanish say *jugo limpio*. The Germans and Italians say *fair play*. The Argentinians say *Maradona*.

And so we go from Beowulf and King Arthur to Robin Hood and Terry McCann (*Minder*, ITV). It's a nice stroll through the various points of view, but a more severe estimate would see it as the tracking of a meme and, as everyone knows, the whole point of being a meme is that you have a life of your own. If you try to track it across time and space, the number of entities



becomes too heavy and soon it is time for Occam.

To be fair, the analysis suddenly sharpens up when, in the middle chapters, Duke-Evans concentrates on English social structure and common law in the making of that "deep layer of attitudes and customs" he talked about earlier. Serfdom ended early to bring the aristocracy down a peg or two, while in the towns, the guilds and fraternities grew in wealth and authority.

In other words, from early on the English were relatively more able to move around, run their own affairs, resort to law, speak freely, think of each other and take responsibility. Duke-Evans takes this further by invoking E.P. Thompson's valuable work on "the moral economy" of the eighteenth-century poor. Rather foolishly perhaps, people believed the country belonged to them as well. They said they were "free-born" under an English common law that came from below, not from above, and, in that common quality some sense of liberty and justice as one and the same was possible.

**IN A SUPERB SECTION, WE ARE REMINDED** how the gentleman soldier John Lilburne went to trial twice in the name of the English and their theory of justice: once, in 1638 against Charles I, the man in whose name the court sat; and again, in 1649, against the Lord Pro-

rector, the man who had brought the king down in the name of common law over divine right.

Confirmed, as Lilburne put it, by both Magna Carta (1215), and the Petition of Right (1628), he asked the court for fair play and "not be wound and screwed up with hazards and snares".

For all its snares and hazards, in the end you have to admire Duke-Evans's attempt to say something serious and good about his native land. For once, here is an intellectual alive to the possibility of a history which is not distasteful and might be exceptional. Fair dibs to us, and fair dibs to him. ●

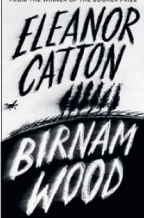
Fair men?  
Dennis  
Waterman as  
Terry McCann  
(here with  
George Cole as  
Arthur Daley)  
in ITV's *Minder*  
and, below,  
John Lilburne

The Critic Books

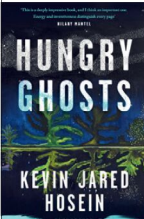




FROM THE WINNERS OF THE BOOKER PRIZE



**Birnam Wood**  
Eleanor Catton  
(Granta, £20)



**Hungry Ghosts**  
Kevin Jared  
Hosein  
(Bloomsbury,  
£16.99)



**The Springs of  
Affection**  
Maeve Brennan  
(Peninsula  
Press, £10.99)

John Self is  
*The Critic's*  
lead fiction  
critic. He lives  
in Belfast

# Pains and pleasures of anticipation

John Self

**T**HE PERFORMANCE ANXIETY for a big literary prize winner — the “follow that!” factor — must be greater still if you are a record holder like Eleanor Catton, who was just 28 when she became the youngest ever winner of the Booker Prize with *The Luminaries*. Why her new novel, *Birnam Wood*, took a decade to write (in the acknowledgements she thanks her “very patient agent”) we cannot say, but struggles in composition are suggested by the fault lines that run through it.

As the *Macbeth*-sourced title suggests, the novel is about a “wood that moves” — Birnam Wood, an ecological campaign group in modern New Zealand that plants crops on other people’s land to promote self-sufficiency. Heading the group is Mira Bunting and her friend Shelley, and as the book opens they are excited by the opportunities for some guerrilla gardening presented by a landslide which has cut off a local farm owned by pest control magnate Sir Owen Darvish.

Equally excited is “serial entrepreneur venture capitalist former CEO company director billionaire” — or “libertarian survivalist”, as he styles himself — Robert Lemoine, who spies the chance to take over the land to mine some rare earth elements. And he should know about such things, as it was his mining activities that caused the landslide and killed five people.

Lemoine is a sort of comic-book super-villain, effortlessly hacking people’s phones, tracking his quarry with drones, and booking two luxury hotels every night so he can switch between them to frustrate assassina-tion attempts. (He’s also American, a nice antipodean take on Hollywood’s preference for a Russian or English holder of such roles.)

**THE LEMOINE FACTOR IS THE FIRST** indication we get that *Birnam Wood* is not going to be a straight literary novel: it’s half-thriller, and shows its qualities most effectively in scenes of action and punchy dialogue, whether between sinister Lemoine and suspicious-but-tempted Mira, or among the combative members of the “horizontally”-organised Birnam Wood. (There’s some nice comedy as they tie themselves in knots wondering whether polyamory is capi-

talist, and whether it’s respectful or cultural appropriation to rename their collective with a Maori term.)

But there’s a lot of backstory to get through, and the story only really gets going after the first 70 pages. It picks up when Lemoine decides to invest in Birnam Wood, setting the scene for lots of moral anguish by Mira, Shelley and their colleague Tony, as well as some big plot turns. Lemoine convinces Mira that he’s buying the Darvish land for “doomsteading” purposes — that is, the (genuine) tendency by the more rapacious brand of billionaire to plan a post-collapse life in a bespoken New Zealand biosphere. Tension ensues as Mira is pulled between hopes and fears, and the conclusion is appropriately Shakespearean, if somewhat abrupt.

Even while the pages turned smoothly, however, I felt I could see the joints too often, particularly with Catton’s tendency to introduce a new plot element and detonate it a few pages later. (Acid, gate code, drums of poison.) The novel shuttles too much between story and explication, which is a shame because the story is engaging; though genuine mystery is limited by giving every character, including the dastardly Lemoine, a

place in the narrative spotlight. The overall feel is schematic, mechanical, a book with the design imposed on it rather than developed from within its own elements. Catton remains an interesting writer and is still, after all, in the early stages of her career, but I don’t expect *Birnam Wood* to repeat *The Luminaries’* success.



Eleanor Catton

**THE WAIT FOR** Kevin Jared Hosein’s novel *Hungry Ghosts* has not been quite as long, but I did first hear about the book a couple of years ago, so I approached it with a mixture of anticipation and fear that the anticipation would capsize the reading. I needn’t have worried. *Hungry Ghosts* is the best sort of debut: one that isn’t actually the author’s first book. (Hosein has published two books for young adults before, but this is his first, as it were, grown-up novel.)

The story drops us in 1940s Trinidad, a malleable time when British rule is lightening, but American troops are stationed on the island. Both those elements are largely off-stage, but they provide the context for an uncertain period when anything can happen.

Most of the book switches between the two sides of rural Trinidad. First there is Marlee, the semi-aristocratic wife of Dalton Changoor, a farm overseer and therefore one of Trinidad’s elite. As the book opens, her husband has gone missing, and soon ransom notes begin to appear. This opens a dilemma for Marlee, who “once tried to love him but ended up loving only what he owned”: will she cooperate with the kidnappers, or the authorities — or neither?

The two groups of stories about the Derdons and the Bagots mark Brennan as one of the great short story writers of the last century



Kevin Jared Hosein

Meanwhile, in the valley below the farm live the poor workers, in “barracks”, long buildings where families live in a room, and among them are Hans and Shweta Saroop and their son Krishna. Krishna is a typical mischievous kid, getting into scrapes with enemies (dogshit in shoes, scorpions in the latrine), while his father wants to improve the family’s station in life. Opportunity knocks when Marlee asks him to stay in her house while Dalton is missing.

The scene is laid for a rich tale of ambition, compassion, cruelty and — trigger warning? — violence to dogs. Everyone in the story has a history — a recurring refrain is a variation on *The Tempest’s* “what’s past is prologue” — but the book does not crowbar in great wodge of backstory (see Catton, Eleanor). Instead, there is lightness of touch and a just-enough approach.

Indeed, chief among the delights of *Hungry Ghosts* is Hosein’s willingness to leave things out. The reader comes away from the book feeling that there was a hell of a lot in there for such a short novel. (In fact, it’s 320 pages long, but just as the prevalence of obesity has skewed our perceptions of weight, so too does word-bloat in modern fiction make us think that 320 pages is a model of restraint.)

Off the page are not just Dalton Changoor, but many of the lives of the secondary characters, whose tendencies are hinted at, seen in passing just as they would be in real life. Yes — it’s nice to find an author who trusts the reader enough not to bombard them with details, and leaves something to the imagination. It’s true that some of these decisions I regretted — Marlee disappears for most of the book’s second half, which is a shame as she’s the character I most enjoyed spending time with — but you can’t have everything, as Marlee herself finds out.

**MAEVE BRENNAN’S** *The Springs of Affection* is a curiosity: a modern classic that was never published in the author’s lifetime, but compiled after her death in

1993. It then slipped out of print, and is reissued now with far less fanfare than there should be.

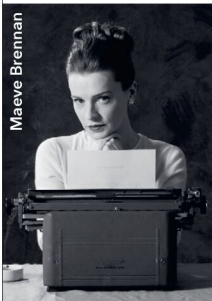
That theme of disappearance is apt enough for Brennan, who moved from Ireland to America as a teenager in 1934 before joining the *New Yorker* as a staff writer. She wrote fiction and essays there, but later in life she had repeated admissions to mental hospitals — her colleague William Maxwell described how she “moved in and out of reality in a way that was heart-breaking to watch”. When she died, none of her work was in print. But now it is back, and we should be glad.

*The Springs of Affection* compiles Brennan’s Dublin-based stories, in three sets. First come the autobiographical sketches, which are worthwhile but are ultimately prelude. It is the other two groups of stories — about Rose and Hubert Derdon, and about Min Bagot and her family — that mark out Brennan as one of the great short story writers of the last century.

The best of the best are the Derdon stories, which cover Rose’s life from childhood to death. (With these and the Min Bagot stories, what we really get is two novels in broken pieces: extra value.)

Brennan’s eye is unwavering in its attention to Rose’s tragedy in a minor key, especially regarding the men in her life: the death of her father as a child; her struggle with her own son leaving to join the priesthood, not recognising that it was her smothering attention that drove him away.

As a result of Rose’s unhappiness, she and husband Hubert work away at one another like knives, making



Maeve Brennan

themselves unhappier still. It’s bracing stuff, and when Rose dies, the final story describing Hubert’s time after her shows Brennan hasn’t finished with the Derdons — or with our emotions — yet. Hubert finds endless bric-a-brac he never knew his wife had hoarded: recipes uncooked, dress patterns unmade, evidence that she “wast[ed] nothing except her time and her life and his time and his life”.

When Hubert’s sister comes to stay, he is unable to express his complicated grief, and the Derdon stories close with further absence: “He could not speak to her to tell her that it was all only a masquerade and that he was only a sham of a man, and after a long time, when he finally got command of himself, it no longer seemed worthwhile to tell her, and the way it worked out he never told her, and never told anybody.” Except us. ●

# Bring back plain English

*Academic English departments have become lost in a morass of elitist jargon and relativism*

**R**ECENTLY THE Secret Author spent a relaxing night or two not browsing impressively through John Guillory's *Professing Criticism* (Chicago University Press).

Professor Guillory teaches at NYU and has written a stratospherically high-end book about the way in which the discipline known as "literary studies" has organised itself historically, whose chapter titles alone — "Monuments and Documents on the Object of Study in the Humanities", for example — will give some idea of the issues at stake.

Professor G is reporting from a crisis — or rather two crises, each inextricably connected to the other. One of them is the economics-driven "crisis of the humanities" we hear so much about; the other is what he calls a "crisis of legitimisation" among the people who teach literature.

Not only are cash-strapped university English departments losing staff and students like a gale-struck beech tree shedding leaves, but there is no real consensus about what dons should be teaching or how they ought to teach it.

THE AMERICAN CRITIC, Merve Emre, has also been spending time with Guillory, and the result was a late-January *New Yorker* piece under the arresting heading "Has Academia Ruined Literary Criticism?" (a comparable title might be "Can Excrement in Woods be Associated with Bears?" or "Is Appearance on Vatican Balcony Proof of Pope's Catholicism?")

Emre doesn't muck about, and her response to Guillory's crisis-talk is notably hard-edged: "It is not clear that even the most robust justifications for literary study would be effective in the face of overwhelming socioeconomic pressures, the rise of new media and the

decline of prose fiction as a genre of entertainment."

"No reader," Emre goes briskly on, "needs literary works interpreted for her, certainly not in the professionalised language of the literary scholar." It is that reference to "professionalised language", of course, that moves straight to the heart of English Studies' dilemma.

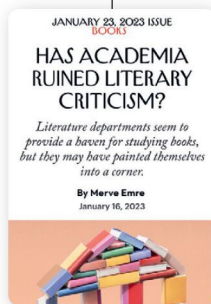
To legitimise itself, as Guillory would put it, and to demonstrate it did something ordinary readers and reviewers couldn't, University English spent decades perfecting a language (and a bureaucracy) designed to protect its own interests. You can see it whenever an academic let loose on the *TLS* or the *London Review of Books* starts talking about "authentications" or "valorisations", uses the word "ludic" or introduces the phrase "liminal spaces."

You can also see it in the large number of academic works that are simply factitious — written reflexively, as a means of showing that the author can talk the talk rather than having anything new to say about the subject under discussion.

AND YET, IF MOST contemporary literary criticism is a matter of don addressing don, and in a style (and at a price) expressly designed to exclude ordinary people from the debate, then another, equally off-putting aspect of contemporary academe is its reluctance to pronounce a judgment about most of the cultural artefacts that come its way.

The canon, of course, has been under siege for decades. And with the collapse of hierarchies comes a terrible relativism.

"Better," the novelist Maureen Duffy declared half a century ago at a meeting of the Arts Council's Literature Panel convened to discuss handing out grants to deserving authors, "is an elitist word."



Hilarious, of course, and yet there are dozens of modern English dons, highly intelligent and trained for years at the public's expense, who would think it somehow *infra dig* to suggest that the winner of this year's Man Booker Prize is not actually a very good writer and to provide a convincing explanation of why they think so.

IT IS AN AXIOM THAT MOST English dons should never be let anywhere near the review pages of a newspaper or magazine: the average literary freelance will always give a much better idea of what the book under review is about and whether the reader ought to lay out £16.99 on it. But ought they to be allowed anywhere else?

Emre ends her *New Yorker* piece with a bracing paragraph in which she opines that lit crit "as it is currently institutionalised in the university" may not be the place from which the journey towards a future in literary criticism starts. She adds that "Literary criticism may have to be de-professionalised before its practitioners will allow themselves to openly embrace aesthetic judgment or to speak in the voice of the lay reader."

The sooner this happens the better. By chance, the day before he wrote this piece, the Secret Author read a scintillating review of Bret Easton Ellis's new novel in *The Times* — pithy, witty, judgmental (the book is rubbish, apparently) with not a "valorisation" or "liminal space" in sight. It was the work of Dr Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, a fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford.

It is possible to teach English at a modern university and yet write intelligibly for a mass audience. The sooner English departments learn this lesson the less precarious their future will be. ●

**The Secret Author is a former Professor of English and Creative Writing at a leading British university**

**Most literary criticism is a matter of don addressing don in a style that aims to exclude ordinary people**

# Romeo Coates

## PLAYING BY THE BOOK

**H**ANDSOME YOUTH Tom Hiddleston is identified as current owner of the “Red Book” — that old copy of *Hamlet* passed down from one esteemed Danish prince to another.

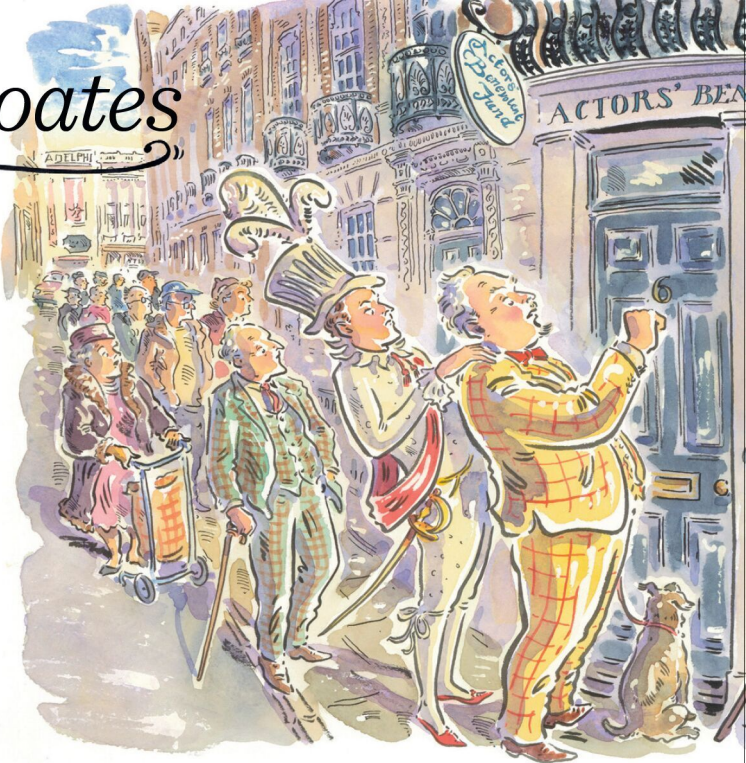
Cue inevitable pressure on Tom, given the said book in 2017, to hand it over once more. As one struggles to think of a recent Hamlet worthy of the honour, let’s hope Mr Hiddleston holds his nerve and keeps possession for some time yet. Previous owner Ken Branagh (rarely troubled by modesty!), brazenly clung on to it for 21 years.

◆ **WITH SHAKESPEARE** expected to feature heavily in the monarch’s planned cultural extravaganza following his upcoming coronation, can anyone stop Branagh from hogging proceedings?

He’s had our Bard-obsessed sovereign under his spell ever since all that relentless royal networking at RADA over 40 years ago. Hopes of a rival Shakespearean knight stealing Ken’s thunder seem to rest precariously with oddball Rylance — known to have bonded with His Majesty over crop circles.

★ **“UNLUCKY IN LOVE”** Jemima Goldsmith, now riding high in the movie-writing world, ruefully reflects she’d have been better off having an arranged marriage, rather than associating with unsuitable types down the decades.

Unflattering, perhaps, to ex-hubby Mr Khan, along with curmudgeonly Mr Grant, hairy deviant Mr Brand and bed-hopping *The Crown* writer Mr Morgan — the latter having reportedly managed to frequent the quarters of both Jemima and Gillian Anderson in the space of hours.



**WITH THE ACTORS’ BENEVOLENT FUND** recently plunged into chaos, courtesy of a botched coup by that blundering cabal, traditional assistance from this once respected institution proved conspicuous by its absence during bleak winter months.

Having narrowly missed out on a small but pleasing role in one of those TV prequels with dragons, I myself would normally have expected a long and loyal association with the ABF to merit at least some morsels of support between December and February.

Rest assured, we mature troupers who’ve dodged the eager Grim Reaper unaided these past perilous weeks will be banging on the ABF’s door demanding answers!

*RARELY ALLOWED* beyond the garden gate in his dotage, grandmothers’ favourite Tom Conti comes out guns blazing on the BBC with wild claims of “men being men and women being women”, while taking against a gender-neutral production of Jesus Christ Superstar.

*Eventually simmering down, Tom felt it necessary to display a more tender side, sympathetically suggesting we treat non-binary actors like*

*alcoholics. An olive branch that appears to have gone unappreciated ...*

## OLD BIG ‘EAD

**C**HEEKY MINX Alan Cumming announces he’s publicly returned the OBE after 14 years, blaming the “toxicity” of the British Empire. He touchingly claims to consider himself “plain old Alan again”. In case some of you might be unaware, Mr Cumming also helpfully outlined, at



# “Between you and me...”

some length, why he'd been so very deserving of the OBE in the first place. Thank you, Alan!

★ A HAPPY 75TH BIRTHDAY to Gyles Brandreth, who, with trademark modesty, has gone to the trouble of booking a lengthy line-up of actress Dames required to pay gushing tribute to him at the London Palladium on March 5th. With Gyles having so persistently wheedled his way into the lives of many a vintage star down the decades — in between all that toadying to the Royals — a fitting celebration for this most remarkable of interlopers!

## SEEING RED

NEEDLESS TO SAY, one's loyalties firmly remain on the side of His Majesty and the Prince of Wales following recent unseemly developments.

While having never encountered Harry myself, regular readers may recall

the bizarre sequence of events that caused me to have an altercation with a professional “Prince Harry lookalike” after a chance meeting in a West London beer garden the summer before last.

The thin-skinned fellow in question (apparently still making hay on the corporate circuit) was desperate to take offence in the face of merely playful teasing on my part, causing a more heated exchange to follow.

Thanks to subsequent falsehoods spread by the lad in question, yours truly — much like our monarch and the heir to the throne — has been scandalously portrayed as the villain of the piece by deluded types ever since.

**HEARTENING TO HEAR J.K. Rowling can officially count on Brian Cox being among celebrity actors now fighting her corner — the Succession star recently growled about the author's “high and mighty” enemies.**

*Though what with Mr Cox's unfortunate reputation for performing hasty retreats in the heat of battle (who can forget him running for the hills following his “outspoken” memoir?) perhaps it's unwise to rely on this ferocious Dundonian indefinitely.*

◆ **TURNING A GLAMOROUS 90 in May, Joan Collins is curiously eager to announce she's been mistaken for Hollywood sexpot Halle Berry (56) by a mentally disturbed vagrant entering a Beverly Hills nail bar.**

Dutiful bag-carrier Percy naturally came to the rescue, with a pedicure arranged for the confused chap in question. Still got it, Joanie!

★ **MONTHS AFTER INSISTING on giving us his “age-blind” Hamlet at Windsor, has McKellen been rolling back the years once more? As I**

**F**INDING ME RECENTLY weeping in the kitchen, the nephew felt obliged to reluctantly enquire about the cause of my distress. When I eventually clarified that “Jennifer Aldridge had just died”, he stared at me with that blank millennial expression, before half-heartedly asking if I'd “known her long?” “Sixty years!” I wailed. The juvenile giggles that greeted my explanation I was referring to a much-loved character from *The Archers* showed him at his very cruellest.

write, he's being linked to a starstruck boy playing his son in *Mother Goose* (touring until April). This latest tussle with Father Time predictably meets with ungenerous hoots from ancient queens familiar with Gandalf's past nocturnal adventures.

◆ **CREAKING BON VIVANT Charles Dance, fast approaching 80, sweetly announces he counts himself “very, very lucky” to be squiring an Italian firecracker 22 years his junior. One wonders whether such good romantic fortune fuels Mr Dance's absurd claim he's above mere “telly cameos” and remains leading man material?**

**AFTER HIS NEW GIRLFRIEND established herself as an ever-present figure in our family home, the nephew flatly accused yours truly of being “openly hostile”. Nothing could be further from the truth. Since subsequently learning she happens to be the niece of a widely respected theatrical agent, I've generously offered to host a dinner in this charming young lady's honour ... while also inviting her doubtless equally charming uncle! ●**



**Norman Lebrecht on Music**

## A genius who could say “No”

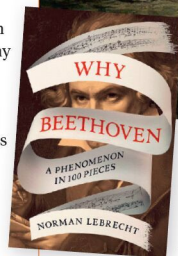
**IS IT POSSIBLE** to be world famous all your life and yet remain completely unknown?

When Ludwig van Beethoven died on 26 March, 1827, nobody knew what to say about him. He had a small handful of life-long friends and a wider circle of musical acquaintances but not even the most fluent or self-advertising among his circle could find words to describe him. “Oh, the great man, the pity of it!” is the general tenor of comment.

It fell to the national poet, Franz Grillparzer, to compose the graveside eulogy and he fell back mostly on poetic cliché. But in one stanza Grillparzer, who knew Beethoven from 1805 onwards, touched on the very reason that he eluded everyone: “He fled the world because he did not find, in the whole compass of his loving nature, a weapon with which to resist it. He withdrew from his fellow men after he had given them everything and had received nothing in return.”

This is harsh and not completely true, but Grillparzer is right in stating that Beethoven made himself deliberately unknowable, holding himself apart from the world so that its chatter did not distract him.

UNKNOWABILITY IS THE assumption that every responsible biographer must accept. Those who try to draw character from incidents and anecdotes end up undone. Beethoven lays traps for pursuers; he is not what he seems. In my three-year quest, I decided to proceed strictly through the music — the hand on the page which, in these times, is often visible online. Here,



there are plenty of clues — inspirations, erasures, second guesses.

Why, for instance, does he strike out the movement titles in the

*Pastoral Symphony*? He is unhappy about something — either the over-simplified storyline, or something in the symphony itself which he ends almost without resolution. When he shows us his reworkings, we come very close to seeing the real Beethoven at work.

Here too, however, we must beware of rapid diagnosis. When he scrawls “Must it be? It must be” in his valedictory string quartet, is he engaged in existential

**THERE IS ONE OTHER THING THAT BEE THOVEN NEVER DID, AND THAT IS HAVE SEXUAL RELATIONS**

mediation, or technical self-questioning? Often with Beethoven, the signpost points both ways.

ASIDE FROM STUDYING the music, I added a counterintuitive wrench to my toolkit. Instead of looking at what Beethoven did, I made a categorical list of the things that Beethoven did not do.

He never, for instance, went to church.

In the capital of the Holy Roman Empire, he abstained from the social rituals of the state religion. As an artist, Beethoven can get away with it — just. But he is also making a statement about the privacy of faith.

We see it once more when, meticulous in delivering commissions on time, he brings forth one work unforgivably late — three years late, in fact. It is the *Missa Solemnis*, written for the ascendance of his friend Archduke Rudolf to the archbishop’s seat at Olmütz. Epileptic and rumoured to be gay, Rudolf was Beethoven’s close confidant. He hated losing him to God.

There is one stringed instrument for which Beethoven never writes a solo. He turns out sonatas for violin and cello, but not a whisper for viola. Yet viola was the instrument that Beethoven, aged 14, played in order to obtain his first paid position in Bonn. It brought him to the ruler’s attention and helped raise funds to send him to Vienna to study with Haydn.

Away from home, it would have been easy to knock off a couple of viola solos that would showcase his virtuosity. But this is Beethoven: he does not do easy. By abjuring the viola he slams the door on his brutalised childhood and remakes himself in Vienna. Add to the list of things he never did — he never returned to Bonn.



**Robert Thicknesse on Opera**

## Going for a song

THOSE WHO THINK THE opera gang spends its time lounging about in some scented clubland Elysium nibbling on nightingales' tongues and sipping ambrosia from chorus girls' slippers will be sad to learn that — myself and a hand-picked cohort of acolytes apart, *bien sûr* — it mostly skulks in Edmonton bedsits and is riven by a bitter factionalism rarely seen outside a Trotskyist section meeting.

Thank God for the blessing of Twitter, say I, offering a glimpse into the maelstroms of loathing behind the blank faces of the warblers and scribblers who make up this obscure coterie.

The highest of times, of course, was the Corbo meltdown, when the air was electric-blue with mousy academics flinging around accusations of fascism at their camp followers — largely well-meaning if not outstandingly bright mezzo-sopranos and similar — before relapsing into a years-long huff with only the cornucopia of Brexit to keep the boilers on the simmer.

And as with leftist ideology, so with opera: tastes are as viciously factious as any *Spartista* cellmates tearing each other to bits over bourgeois deviationism. The most implacable zealots, of course, are the Wagnerians (i.e. mostly people attracted to “strong leaders”) but there are others.

THERE HAS, FOR INSTANCE, been a good showing lately for ever-so-slightly geeky Handelian, inflamed by the revival in the old dude's fortunes that have seen many of

his 40 virtually indistinguishable operas stagger back onstage after 300 dormant years, with their phalanxes of dotted rhythms and piping countertenors — the equivalent of those old-time capons whose re-emergence can only be a matter of time in these genital realignment surgery days.

There are others too (e.g. suburban voluptuaries devoted to Richard Strauss), but there is one little niche of the opera world that is simultaneously the most disparaged while in truth the most operatic, the least anything else: the brief day-lily of the so-called *bel canto* style, dreamed up by the young Rossini around 1820 and all done by 1846 when the poor, sweet Gaetano Donizetti (*below*) followed many of his heroines into the loony-bin, and opera passed into the hands of Verdi and became something else entirely as it devolved

towards the *can belto* of the late nineteenth century.

THIS SHY BEASTIE would be wholly forgotten but for the prima donnas — Maria Callas, Montserrat Caballé and Joan Sutherland — who reanimated its greatest hits in the '50s as the

perfect vehicle for their miraculous voices.

In the nature of things there are never many singers around with the nerve, instrument and technique for this stuff, but the real epicures hunt it down when it appears; and the admirable English Touring Opera is taking a couple of examples (Rossini's *Viaggio a Reims* and Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia*) around the country from now until late May.

In true *bel canto*, the only important thing is the voice, the song. This isn't the genial juggler of *The Barber of Seville*, with woodwinds cavorting like dolphins messing about with beach-balls: the ideal accompaniment is a lazy string arpeggio (in harmonies as facile as a Marc Bolan



Nor did he go pretty much anywhere else — except, on doctor's orders, to summer spas, where he dallied with holidaymakers and made himself thoroughly miserable. In his life of 56 years, he never saw the sea. He never visited Paris or Rome, summits of civilisation. Haydn and Mozart profitably toured great capitals and crossed the sea. Not Beethoven. His was a life of single-minded dedication, not a moment to be wasted.

THERE IS ONE OTHER THING he never did, and that is have sexual relations. In his teens, late twenties and again as he turned 40, he fell in love repeatedly and obsessively with pretty young debutantes who toyed with his affections but made sure it went no further. They were two social classes above him, out to catch a rich count or a prince.

Beethoven chose them for their unattainability. He needed to experience romantic love as a resource for his creative imagination, but he recoiled from physical contact and did nothing (such as washing) to make himself desirable. When love ends, his pain is brief. The famous letter to an “immortal beloved” is most significant in that it was never sent. They found it unopened in a drawer when he died.

If he never bedded any of his beloveds, might he have paid for sex? A cello-playing official, Nikolaus Zmeskall, tried to tempt him on a brothel crawl but the only response from Beethoven was that he had no interest in such “swampy places”, a phrase psychiatrists will recognise. His autopsy was clear of venereal disease.

His reasons for all of these abstentions are numerous and complex, but the pattern of conduct is admirably clear. When Beethoven decided an activity was extraneous or deleterious to his core purpose, he shut it down — be it a viola, a vacation, a votive offering or a roll in the hay. The greatest strength of his character was its force of principle, his ability to say, “No.” ●

Norman Lebrecht's *Why Beethoven* is published by Oneworld, £20



Sonya Yoncheva sings Norma

song) while the singer unspools the dreamiest, longest, most unchained melody in the ether, with leisurely cartwheels and roulades like a slo-mo acrobat trampoline on clouds; it was Vincenzo Bellini who perfected this — think of “Casta diva” from *Norma* — but Rossini and Donizetti are no slouches.

WHAT PEOPLE PROBABLY can’t handle is the utter lack of anything besides this endless song: most yearn for idiotic stage business, an attempted rape or at least some dwarves to look at. The perfect *bel canto* strives instead for a kind of ideal stasis, the orchestra reduced to what Wagner disparaged as a “big guitar”, nothing happening in the room beyond the perfectly-controlled, vibrating column of air in the singer’s throat — a thing that, as Bellini said, must make the audience “weep, shudder, die ...”

There are no concessions: the first act of Rossini’s *Semiramide* lasts *two-and-a-half hours* and bugger-all happens. It is the blessed antithesis of spoken theatre — that *Exchange and Mart* of petty-bourgeois banalities — as far from tawdry naturalism as could be, a heaven of absolute sound, skeins of pure imagination ensnaring us in the despair of another hapless damsel.

The voices bestowed on those damsels confirm this as the most feminist of arts. They are remarkably potent metaphors for all human tribulation — as well as agitators for Italian unity, on the agenda as popes and princelings crept out of the wreckage

**THE VOICES BESTOWED ON THESE DAMSELS CONFIRM THIS AS THE MOST FEMINIST OF ARTS**

after 1815 to dismember the peninsula into a status quo-ante patchwork of satrapies.

The Italians took enthusiastically to Romanticism, with its cowed monks stalking bat-haunted Gothic cloisters, though it was hardly a natural fit for their unlit humanist traditions, and wallowed happily in Byron, Scott and Schiller, enabling the somewhat spaced-out

personnel of *bel canto* opera to speak.

These encoded operas, spreading their message through the human voice at its most hyper-trained and artificial, smuggled parables of religion, politics and liberation past the censors disguised as chronicles of old-time Scottish weddings that go tits-up (*Lucia di Lammermoor*) and Gauls on bonfires (*Norma*).

It might be a bit late for *Il viaggio a Reims* — written for the coronation of another King Charles, the unhappy X of France — to knit the Union back together, but aspiring Mazzinis might want to brace audiences up to the struggle from Exeter to Durham this spring. ●



Sarah Ditung on Pop

## Taking the piss

● COULD EVERYBODY PLEASE shut up about Sam Smith. This may seem a bit unnecessary if you weren’t talking about Sam Smith, in which case I will now fill you in on the whole Sam Smith situation, and after that you will be fully entitled to tell me to shut up too.

So here we go. In January, adorable, angel-voiced lummoxx Sam Smith, 30, released the second single from his album *Gloria*. Until last year, Smith was primarily a torch song specialist, applying a mournful falsetto to sad-sack warbles about one-night stands and rejection like “Stay With Me” and “Too Good At Goodbyes”: Smokey Robinson after too many bad Grindr dates.

The wounded persona in the songs was matched by an almost painfully shy demeanour as a performer. When I saw him introduced as a special guest by Taylor Swift on the Red Tour in 2014, he had the endearingly wide-eyed appearance of someone who’d come on stage by mistake. (But even with obvious nerves, the voice was there.)

Sam Smith’s video showcases his efforts at outrage



His look back then was a little bit Teddy Boy: smart jacket, plaid shirt, hair long on top with fade sides. It was a style he’d settled on not entirely voluntarily. When he arrived in London in his teens, he’d worn women’s clothes until a homophobic beating scared him off flamboyance.

SMITH WAS ALWAYS OUT as gay. But over time, he got outter. In 2017, he announced: “I feel just as much a woman as I am a man.” In 2019, he declared himself nonbinary and began using they/them pronouns. (I, however, do not use they/them pronouns, so let’s respectfully acknowledge Smith’s sense of identity and move on in legible fashion.)

Then in 2021, Smith protested at being excluded, as a nonbinary person, from the best artist award at the Brits, which was divided into male and female categories. The Brits, caught on the wrong side of identity etiquette, did what organisations tend to do: the stupidest thing. They made the award gender neutral. And in 2023, no women were nominated.

In an interview, Smith said this was a “shame” and seemed genuinely perplexed by the result. I felt, as I’d done at the Taylor Swift gig, a pang of sympathy: it seems cruel to put pop stars in the position of political arbiters. Bluntly, having a decent voice and some charisma (not that much in Smith’s case) is no guarantee of holding well-reasoned opinions.

The complaint of exclusion was risible, but it’s not Smith’s fault anyone listened. Nonetheless, he had become the figure-head of the Brits’ terrible decision, a Controversial Figure in the gender wars.

BUT AT THE SAME TIME, his image was shifting into a more confrontational mode. Embracing enbyhood, for Smith, meant embracing the camp he’d denied himself since that assault. He was bigger too. He’d never had the sylph-like build of a Harry Styles, and it had made him self-conscious. Now, he was going to live without shame.

ROBBIE JACK/CORBIS/CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES





The new Smith has a platinum crop. He attended the Brits in a delightfully mad latex suit that made him look like a pervy Michelin Man. In the video for *Gloria*'s lead single "Unholy" he wore a basque. And the video itself was quite different from his old moody offerings: it was an orgy of fetishwear with Smith prancing delightedly at the front of it all.

The second single, "I'm Not Here to Make Friends", went further with a troupe of dancers twerking in a baroque urinal and Smith being ecstatically bathed in streams of golden liquid. For those infuriated by Smith's blundering entry into the gender wars, this was a degeneracy too far. Words like "groomer" got thrown around. This was, of course, just as stupid as the Brits. It's pop music, and pop music is going to be horny. It wasn't even the first golden shower in a pop video: Frankie Goes to Hollywood included a brief watersports allusion in 1983's "Relax" video and no one minded ... No, wait, a lot of people were very upset and the BBC refused to play it.

BECAUSE IF YOU'RE GOING TO BE provocative, people are going to be provoked. That's how this game works, and if Smith doesn't realise it, he's even sillier than the Brits business suggests. His defenders, though, chose to leave no doubt about their own stupidity: one pompously wrote in the *New Statesman* that even discussing the video "makes LGBTQ+ people feel that their existence is controversial and debatable".

Call me old-fashioned, but I think that when a person has grown blasé about piss parties, they have grown blasé about life. I like it when pop artists behave outrageously. Let's not disparage Smith's efforts by pretending that luxuriating in urine is no more shocking than a night at the bingo.

If nothing else, Smith seems to be having more fun than at any previous point in his career. Regrettably, there's still plenty of the old neediness on *Gloria* — now mixed up with bland affirmations of self-acceptance like "Love Me More". Lost under the backlash and counter-backlash is the fact that, "Unholy" aside, this is all some very medium pop music. And now, I really will shut up about Sam Smith. ●



Michael Prodger on Art

## Boney's PR man

ANTOINE-JEAN GROS WAS BORN IN 1771 and would go on to become one of the most significant artists of the Napoleonic era. It was Gros above all others who captured *Le petit caporal* both as he climbed to power and in his pomp.

After Napoleon's final defeat, Gros rose to even greater eminence under the restored Bourbon monarchy. Nevertheless, he remains an undervalued figure and while his huge paintings of the Napoleonic adventure hang in the Louvre and in Versailles they are routinely dismissed as works of bombast and propaganda.

The painter and the future emperor first met in Milan in 1796. Gros, who trained with Jacques-Louis David, the premier artist in France and the great image maker for its Revolution, had failed to win the Prix de Rome — the scholarship for painters to study in Italy — but went there regardless. He travelled ostensibly to see the fabled works of art but also on a tip-off that he had become a person of interest to the revolutionaries and that putting some distance between himself and France would be prudent.

HE WORKED INITIALLY AS A jobbing portraitist among the French expat community and in this capacity was introduced to Josephine de Beauharnais, then in the early stages of her affair with Napoleon. She adopted the painter and took him in her carriage to Milan and her rendezvous with Napoleon, who was then busy conquering northern Italy as commander-in-chief of the French army.

At that moment he had just won a celebrated victory over the Austrians at Arcola, during which, in a foolhardy display of bravado, he stood at the head of his troops and led them over the bridge across the Alpine river.

The incident was too good for Gros to pass over and he painted the portrait of the

coming man with Napoleon so fizzing with nervous energy (*detail below*) that the only way he could be persuaded to remain still was for Josephine to take him on her lap and caress him into stillness. The resulting portrait, made from rapid sketches, both established Gros's name and added extra glamour to Napoleon's. It also yoked the two men in public consciousness.

By 1804 things were different. Napoleon was no longer a dashing general but the ruler of an expanded France and on the verge of crowning himself emperor. As a



parvenu he needed to cement his position and one way to do it was through paintings that exalted his exploits.

FOR THE SALON THAT YEAR, Gros produced a monumental canvas showing Napoleon visiting stricken French soldiers during the Egyptian campaign. *The Plague House at Jaffa*, as the painting came to be known, depicts Napoleon touching the bubo in the armpit of one sufferer, a gesture that not only recalled the "King's touch" — the magic of royalty by which anointed monarchs were said to cure scrofula — but showed Napoleon's courage and care for his men.

Except that in reality, after the visit, Napoleon had also ordered his medics to give the worst afflicted soldiers an overdose of laudanum so they would not slow down his movements or infect further troops.

Fortunately, the dosage had an unexpected curative effect on many of the men, but Napoleon's cold-bloodedness seems to have stuck unconsciously in Gros's mind and when he painted the sick



Giorgione's *La Tempesta*;  
Pasquale Rotondi

men he made some of them so monumental that they belong to a race of giants. His sympathy was with the sufferers.

This aspect of the painting was not seen at the time and it was a triumph at the Salon, one repeated with another supposedly propagandist exercise, *Napoleon on the Battlefield of Eylau*, 1808 (detail above).

In this canvas, the Emperor surveyed the carnage after the battle, in which 50,000 men died or were wounded, and is shown declaring that if the world's rulers could see such a scene they would be less avid for battle. Again, however, although Napoleon is at the centre of the composition, it is the victims surrounding him that are Gros's real subject and their suffering — mad with pain or frozen in death — makes the Emperor's piety malign.

IT IS UNLIKELY GROS UNDERSTOOD that he was subverting the ostensible message, but the ambivalence reflected his conflicted personality. He had a breakdown at the grave of a fellow painter, Girodet, when he accused himself of setting the French school a bad example by abandoning David's Classicism for the showier Romanticism.

And although the Bourbons granted him the title of baron, he remained susceptible to the bullying of David — then in exile in Brussels — and unable to square his gifts for colour and movement with his master's example.

Without Napoleon as the master of his art — whatever his real feelings towards him — his painting became anodyne, and he knew it. It all became unbearable; and while Napoleon ended his days on a speck of rock in the Atlantic, Gros's end was even more bathetic.

In June 1835 he drowned himself at Meudon-sur-Seine, in a stream off the river. A suicide note was reportedly found in his

hatband at the scene. It read: "Tired of life and abandoned by the things that rendered it supportable, I have resolved to part with it"

The message, tragic enough, only hints at the extent of his despair: the water in which he killed himself was just three feet deep, little more than a puddle.

Yet so determined was he to die that he forced his head under and kept it there. ●

**Michael Prodder is associate editor of the *New Statesman***



Anne  
McElvoy  
on Theatre

## Killer jokes

FROM *ARSENIC AND OLD LACE* to *The Man who Came to Dinner*, the haplessness of polite people confronting wickedness in a domestic setting is a staple of farce. In the hands of Steven Moffat, co-creator with Mark Gatiss of the BBC's *Sherlock*, the tradition has a new addition in *The Unfriend*, which is a welcome arrival from Chichester festival at London's Criterion.

It's a while since the subterranean theatre at Piccadilly has had a success after hosting the long-running hits, *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *The Comedy About a Bank Robbery*. A location which is tourist-central and run as an independent theatre trust means that it needs to nail an audience of visitors and regulars alike to thrive.

That is a harder combination than it sounds — especially so at a time when the stage too often divides between hefty political consciousness-raising and forgettable juke box musicals. Commercial imperatives are also tough, with a premium on small casts and single-space settings to spare the margins.

*The Unfriend* manages to breathe nicely within these parameters, as the spousal

combo of Amanda Abbington (*Sherlock*'s savvy Mary) and Reece Shearsmith as Debbie and Peter are befriended by brash Elsa Jean Krakowski (Frances Barber) on a cruise ship and make the mistake of handing over their email.

Elsa is a serial killer, this much is clear from the start and the clues, in the manner of *Sherlock*, are apparent if we choose to look for them as she references the transience of life and a trail of unfortunately departed spouses.

THE CENTRAL JOKE IS THAT Peter is also a bit of a zombie, surviving on twitchy reliance on his mobile phone and addiction to reading the *Guardian*, so that he can get angry about something every morning. In the tradition of the virtuoso Alan Ayckbourn, superficial similarities belie character differences, revealed under unexpected terms.

Debbie is more opportunistic and fast-moving than her awkward husband, but both, in the way of the well-mannered, resentful Brits, hide behind evasive courtesies and say "Yes," when they really

**KUDOS TO FRANCES BARBER WHO HAS A BALL AS A BAWDY AMERICAN, FLOUNCING HER WAY THROUGH THE ACTION**

mean "Please God, no."

Elsa duly arrives at the couple's West London home with several Vuitton suitcases (lugging a century's worth of transatlantic caricature) and exuding riotous sexuality, charm and threat. Unfortunately, she then proves a great hit — standing up to the irritating and inquisitive neighbour (Michael Simkins).

"You're a bit passive aggressive, aren't you?" she says — and luring surly teenagers out of their bedrooms, not least by proving more effectively murderous at computer shooter games than the couple's adolescent son.

Simkins is brilliantly annoying as an interloper, always half-apologising and



PAINTING/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; CRITERION THEATRE



From left to right, Abbington, Barber and Shearsmith

semi-upbraiding. “You’re a very busy man,” he wheedles, while analysing the family’s sporadic wine indulgences in the way of the Acacia Avenue Stasi, timing the clatter of their bottle recycling.

IN THE HANDS OF MOFFAT’S sly script and Mark Gatiss’s helter-skelter direction, the edge of unreality and panic accumulates. Having failed to stop Elsa from settling in, the couple find her pretty useful in breaking the humdrum patterns of domesticity and frustration. She is, as Debbie reflects, “a very likeable serial killer”. Their only problem, in the topsy-turvy way of successful farce, is how to enjoy the refreshing benefits of presence, but stop her killing again.

Kudos to Frances Barber, who has a ball as a bawdy American-writ-large, flouncing her way through the action in outlet-store designer labels and horrifying Peter by luxuriating in her Donald Trump indulgence: “Sure I’d do him.” Finally challenged on the number of corpses she has left behind, her deadpan retort is, “I’m just saying, they were all vaccinated.” In terms of repartee, Moffat’s script could have done with more of these stand-out lines and the physical farce, while accomplished, is too thinly stretched to bear comparison with the great Michal Frayn or Richard Bean at their most side-splitting. Too great a reliance on bowel-and-toilet jokes is a sign of scenes running thin on content.

YET, *THE UNFRIEND* lurks tantalisingly on the line between the normal and the terrible and explores how closely good and evil can live in cosy accommodation.

When Debbie finally plucks-up the

courage to confront her hastily departing guest after a visit from a policeman, it is not because she has rediscovered her moral fibre, but the result of pique that her guest has lavished compliments on the rest of the family in increasingly grisly metaphors — “I could mash you all up and eat you” — but missed Debbie out of the obsequies.

Elsa never really denies her crimes, assuming she thinks they are crimes at all. There’s one nicely appalling spectre of Moriarty’s amoral logic, when she reasons

that humankind is not “unimprovable” and some inconvenient humans could do with a sporadic cull. Given this devotion to her chilling craft, it would be a surprise if someone did not end the play in a stiffer condition than they started it. We might even feel that they had it coming. Which, I suppose, bears out Elsa’s point. ●

**Anne McElvoy is executive editor at *Politico* and presents *Free Thinking* on Radio 3**



**Robert Hutton on Cinema**

## Taking flight

● IS THERE A RULE THAT airborne movies have to have a one-word title? Gerard Butler’s latest action thriller is called *Plane*, perhaps because *Airplane* was taken, as were *Flight* and *Airport* and *Sully*. Though to be fair, the last one only works if your hero is called Chelsey Sullenberger.

I am a sucker for flying, and for films about it, and *Plane* doesn’t disappoint. “This is one view that never gets old,” Butler’s pilot comments as he looks down the runway before take-off, which is exactly how I feel. Feeling your plane power down the runway and then leave the ground is magical. I’ve been a passenger on big jets

and small, on RAF transports and US Army Chinook helicopters, and it’s never not been fun.

Airlines have done their best to suppress the joy of flight, cramming us into tighter spaces filled with plastic and polyester in an apparent effort to give international travel the same glamour as a bus ride through Swindon. But however terrible the food or tight the legroom, they’ll never win while passengers can glance out of a window and realise they’re looking down on a mountain range.

Miles Kington once theorised that airports, with their endless mazes of corridors and apparently random instructions, were designed to mentally prepare passengers for the experience of being hijacked. Maybe the irritations of passenger flight are there to distract us from the thought that if this all goes wrong, we’ll be an awfully long way off the ground.

IT’S THIS NAGGING IDEA THAT makes planes such a great setting for films. The 1970s golden era of disaster movies kicked off with *Airport*, in which a pilot faces a



*Plane*; Butler and Colter take up arms

series of mounting disasters while trying to get his passenger jet safely onto the ground, and ended with *Airplane!* a spoof so successful that it pretty much killed the genre.

*Plane* does a good job of capturing the tension between the routine nature of air travel and vague possibility of danger. We know, of course, that Something Will Go Wrong, but first there's just the right amount of the familiar rituals of international travel, the reminder that most of the time being an airline pilot probably isn't all that glamorous.

But go wrong something does, when the aircraft is struck by lightning and loses power. Butler is forced to land on an island in the Philippines which is, he realises, run by bandits who will see his passengers as excellent fodder for ransom demands.

What follows is a well-handled little adventure. You sense it was probably pitched as "Die Hard On An Island", but it's more subtle than that. For an action star,

**ON THE GROUND, PLANE IS A SUPERIOR ACTION DRAMA. IN THE AIR, IT'S A DELIGHT**

Butler is content to let his co-star Mike Colter do most of the fighting. Where he shines, and for me the highlight of the film, is the ten-minute cockpit sequence after the lightning strike as the crew struggle to regain control of the aircraft.

When Clint Eastwood announced that he was going to make a film of the "Miracle on the Hudson", the 2009 accident when a New York passenger flight was forced to ditch just after take-off, the reasonable question was how you make a 90-minute film out of a journey that lasted, from start to finish, less than a tenth of that time.

The result, *Sully*, got the action of the crash out of the way early, dealing instead with how Tom Hanks's pilot coped with the aftermath of the accident. It used much the same formula as *Flight*, where Denzel Washington's alcoholic pilot is in the habit of offsetting the effects of the booze with a little cocaine before take-off, something that works well enough for him to handle disaster when it strikes, but leaves him with problems once on the ground.

ALL THREE FILMS HAVE terrific cockpit

sequences that capture the ideal of what we all hope is happening up front at such a moment: skilled professionals keeping their cool in the face of catastrophe. All manage to stay on the right side of the *Airplane!* line: gripping without being ridiculous. On the ground, *Plane* is a superior action drama. In the air it's a delight.

The same, sadly, can't really be said of *Devotion*, another one-word-title film about pilots, this time in the Korean War. Currently streaming on Prime Video, *Devotion* is the story of Jesse Brown, the first black pilot in the US Navy.

It frequently looks amazing, and that's somehow the problem. The ease with which computer artists can just add another plane or six to every battle as the sun glints off the water leaves much of the film feeling like a computer game. Four years ago *Midway* — there really must be a Hollywood rule about the titles — had the same problem.

It's great that studios can now generate aircraft carriers and squadrons on screen down to the tiniest detail, but they haven't yet worked out how to make them feel real. It feels like a cinematic version of the problem with the craze for articles written by artificial intelligence: they're almost there, but not quite.



The one film this wasn't a problem for was *Top Gun: Maverick*, where the makers went to huge expense to use real planes as much as they possibly could. It made all the difference. Or perhaps it was simply that they had a three-word title. ●



Adam  
LeBor on  
Television

## Chaos captivates

● AFTER MOSCOW, MUNICH, Berlin, Buenos Aires and even Baltimore, Budapest has a new imitation game. In season four of *Fauda* the Hungarian capital stands in for Brussels. Kiev was the original plan, but recent events put paid to that. The substitution works, mostly, although once again landmarks such as Andrásy út, Budapest's grandest avenue, are instantly recognisable to anyone who knows the city.

*Fauda*, Arabic for chaos, is less a television series than a global phenomenon. The Netflix series follows an undercover Israeli special forces unit as they track down terrorists in the Palestinian territories and the Gaza Strip. Sold around the world, *Fauda* is especially popular in the Middle East, partly because its Arab characters are complex and nuanced, showing agency and courage.

Earlier this year *Fauda* topped Netflix's streaming chart in Lebanon, and the show was in the top ten in Jordan, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates. *Fauda* has even been dubbed into Farsi by a Persian-language channel based in London. Its creators Lior Raz and Avi Issacharoff have first-hand experience of this world — they both served in the Israeli army and Issacharoff is a veteran reporter covering Arab affairs.

SEASON FOUR SEES Doron Kavillio, the lynchpin of the unit, exiled to his farm, traumatised and suffering from PTSD. None of which stops Doron, played by Raz, from swiftly hospitalising several burglars rash enough to take him on.

The action soon switches to Jenin — recently the site of real-life Israeli military incursions — and then Brussels, where Captain Ayub, of the Shin Bet, the Israeli security service, has been kidnapped by operatives of Hezbollah, the Lebanese terror network.

This is a catastrophe as Ayub knows the

details of numerous operations and the identity of agents and assets. Meanwhile, Maya Binjamin, a courageous, decorated Arab Israeli police officer, receives a message from her brother, Omar, who is involved in Ayub's kidnapping.



The plot twists and turns along enjoyably familiar avenues, but this season is the most complex and thus the most satisfying. By now the team is aging — not only Doron is paying the psychological price for so much death, violence and guilt over the team members who lost their lives. Marriages are collapsing, doubts and fears for the future are piling up.

The workings of the Shin Bet feel very authentic, showing their inner debates — and not shying away from the Israelis' readiness to use threats and physical intimidation to get the answers they need. But the most outstanding storyline is the relationship between Maya and Doron.

Maya is brilliantly played by Lucy Ayoub, an Israeli TV presenter, herself of mixed Palestinian and Jewish heritage. Maya's dangerous journey with Doron into Lebanon and Syria is shot through with mutual anger, distrust, resentment — and a growing, if unwilling affection. Maya and

### THE EXTENT OF THE ANTI-SEMITISM IN THE PRE-WAR US STILL SHOCKS

Doron's realisation that like it or not, they are stuck with each other, is an apt metaphor for the whole tangled story of Jews and Arabs in the Middle East.

SOME OF THE ROOTS OF modern-day Israel lie in the killing fields and camps of eastern Europe. What if the West, especially the United States, had accepted more Jewish refugees instead of closing its doors? *The US and the Holocaust*, available on BBC iPlayer, examines that and much more in a richly authoritative three-part documentary series.

Made by the acclaimed director Ken Burns and his team, this is good old-fashioned television history, its informed commentary interspersed with contempo-

aneous footage, interviews with survivors and historians. I've read and written quite extensively about the Holocaust but the extent of anti-Semitism across the pre-war US, and the refusal of the State Department to allow in Jewish refugees, still

have the power to shock.

In *How the Holocaust Began*, also available on BBC iPlayer, historian James Bulgin travels to Liepaja in Latvia. Nowadays the town is a jolly beach resort. But in 1941, after the Nazi invasion, the area was a killing field, where the Einsatzgruppen and their local allies murdered thousands of Jews.

The contemporaneous footage of Jewish men stepping off the trucks into the trench, their bodies crumpling while the smoke curls from the rifle barrels is beyond haunting. Meanwhile the locals stand around watching, chatting, smoking and enjoying the spectacle.

FINALLY, DO CHECK OUT *The Rig*, on Amazon Prime. A closed story arena always cranks up the drama factor — witness the number of series set in prisons or even *The Office*. *The Rig*, out in the North Sea, takes this to a new level.



Oil rigs are isolated, claustrophobic, freezing and battered by the weather. When the wind howls and storms are blowing

there is no escape. So where to go when a thick fog comes in and a strange black dust fills the air? Some who come into contact with the powder find their wounds heal far too quickly. Others start dying.

Here the ocean itself is a character, adding a new layer to a smart, unsettling series with an intriguing supernatural layer. Millennia ago, Britain and Europe were one land mass, until a tsunami flooded the plains and forests, cutting off the mainland. Even now we still don't really know what lurks beneath the waves, but on the rig something wicked this way comes. Wrap up warm when you watch this one. ●



Michael Henderson on Radio

## Radio 2 is now beyond my Ken

● THE SHOW, WHICH GOES out at 9.30 on weekday mornings, is the most popular in the kingdom: nine million people tune in. The host's reputation, established over thirty-seven years, is sky-high: he is a star of the wireless. Yet Ken Bruce is packing his bags. Thanks for everything, Radio 2, but Greatest Hits Radio now makes a tighter fit for me and my listeners.

It's another bruising reverse for the BBC high command, whose contempt for other ranks becomes more evident by the quarter. Bruce is ideally suited to the mid-morning shift. He has an excellent voice, a kindly manner, and in *PopMaster*, the daily quiz, a much-loved hit. But in April the Glaswegian will be in the chair no longer.

This latest departure by a well-known name lays bare the culture clash. What used to work, and what listeners enjoyed, is no longer the most important consideration for the decision-makers, who are obsessed with snaring the forty-somethings easing into the second act of their adult lives.

Nobody is suggesting that Radio 2 restores *Waggoners' Walk*, whose jaunty



**REPLACING WOGAN WITH THE SHOW-OFF CHRIS EVANS  
OPENED THE GATES. NOW THEY WILL TAKE ANYBODY**

theme tune was last aired in 1980. Nor are there any requests to bring back somebody like Charlie Chester, whose *Sunday Soapbox* laboured arthritically until 1996. Those shows were of their time, and that time has passed.

For teenagers growing up in the grand days of pop music, Radio 2 resembled Dad's weekend clothes: casual sweater, burgundy slacks, and, with a click of the fingers, it's Perry Como! However, in a contest between Como and the slops served up by Angela Griffin on Sunday nights in the new dispensation, the crooner would win in straight sets.

Griffin's show takes the biscuit, and it's a bona fide Garibaldi. According to the PR wallahs, who rarely do things by halves, her show offers "blissed-out brilliance". The process of "unwinding" sweeps listeners along on "a mood-boosting musical journey across genres and decades". Blissed-out, mood-boosting, journey. It's popular entertainment as therapy, without the consultant's fee. Healing, sharing, and reaching out cannot be far behind.

This is not the language of middle of the road broadcasters. It is the bone-headed jargon of the media class, anchored to the seabed by a mission to educate. Picture them, licking plates of diced carrot and apricot coulis in Mortimer Street as they go about their work. What fun to baffle loyal listeners with hours of perfumed manure!

HOW DID WE GET FROM David Jacobs, the king of Sunday nights, to Griffin's blissed-out banalities? With undying commitment, that's how. This offensive was planned with great deliberation. Zoe Ball! Sarah Cox! Claudia Winkleman! A glottal-stopping curiosity called Rylan Clark (*below*), whose career was launched by a valiant fifth place on a talent show.



It's not just Terry Wogan and John Dunn that listeners miss; nor Jimmy Young and Brian Matthew, whose *Round Midnight* offered the clearest example of what a middlebrow arts programme can

sound like when prepared with affection. Those superb broadcasters are missed, but their absence doesn't tell the whole story.

THE OTHER PEOPLE, THE SPECIALISTS, made Radio 2 worth listening to: Harry Mortimer on brass bands, Mike Harding on folk, Malcolm Laycock on big bands, Paul Jones on the Blues, and the incomparable Benny Green on the American Songbook. Even Americans acknowledged that Green knew more about that subject than anybody. Radio 2 made room for him, and the world was a better place.

When Jacobs (*below*) died in 2013, Don Black took over his show, and did it jolly well for eight years. His love for the songbook matched Green's, and Sunday nights are made for Frank Sinatra, Fred



Astaire, Lena Horne, and Ella Fitzgerald. That is the proper way to "wind down", cocking an ear to the songs of Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, and the Gershwins. "Our kind of music," Jacobs called it in his courtly

welcome is the word. It was a formality, observed each Sunday at three minutes past 11 to his admirers' delight. Those four words closed the week, and listeners took to their beds in a state of grace.

With a few exceptions, like Paul Gambaccini, Radio 2 no longer welcomes people. It badgers them. The tone is rough and ready, as though presenters want to tap into the vexatious spirit of the world outside the studio. Replacing Wogan the painter of words with the show-off Chris Evans opened the gates. Now, it seems, they will take anybody. As Bruce departs, a cheeky new bug arrives, a Welsh weather-man whose gimmick is an undiluted campness. Golly gosh, how daring.

The response to Bruce's going revealed how much his audience will miss him, and it seems certain that many thousands will follow the piper to his new home, where Simon Mayo, another Radio 2 man, has already planted his flag. You can't blame them for taking the road less travelled. Mayday, Mayday, is there anybody there? ●



## The great Wren

ON 25 FEBRUARY 1723, Sir Christopher Wren sat down in an armchair in one of the rooms of the house that he leased in St James's Street. He had caught a chill travelling from Hampton Court. When one of his servants came to wake him, he was dead. He was ninety-one and could remember life in the early stages of the Civil War. He had outlived all his close friends and contemporaries.

It had been an extraordinary life, in which Wren was recognised as having exceptional talents at an early age: a student at Oxford at 14; regarded as having

**HE AND HIS SON BEGAN TO COMPILE A DETAILED ACCOUNT OF EVERYTHING HE HAD DONE IN HIS LIFE**

"enlarged ... astronomy, gnomonics, statics and mechanics" by the age of 16; a Fellow of All Souls aged 18; described by the diarist, John Evelyn, as "that miracle of a Youth" when he met him at Wadham in 1654; appointed a Professor of Astronomy at Gresham College when he was 25; and asked by Charles II to oversee the harbour defences at Tangiers shortly after the Restoration.

FROM THEN, WREN WAS INCREASINGLY diverted from his Oxford laboratory where he was working on experiments with blood transfusion and developing his work as Savilian Professor of Astronomy, to thinking about issues of town planning, encouraged not only by Charles II, but also by John Evelyn, who was close to the King, and felt that the streets of London should be widened, its drainage improved.

In 1665, Wren was encouraged to go on what was in effect a study tour of new buildings in Paris, examining the construction of the new wing at the Louvre, meeting Bernini, visiting all the various new



Wren's extraordinary achievements included the new St Paul's

MAREMAGNUM/GETTY IMAGES; GRANGER/HISTORICAL PICTURE ARCHIVE/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; OVERSNAP/GETTY IMAGES

buildings round Paris, including Versailles, which he thought much too much under the influence of women, too full of "Filigrand and little Knacks." What he really admired were the ways that the banks of the river Seine had been constructed to make it easy to unload boats.

After the Great Fire of London, it was inevitable that Wren should have devoted the full force of his intellect and his brilliant organisational skills to reconstructing the City, initially planning a new layout of the streets, but quickly having to compromise in order to respect existing property rights.

He was put in charge of the reconstruction of the churches lost in the fire, together with Robert Hooke who worked as his assistant, and was appointed to design a new St. Paul's to replace the old Cathedral which had burnt down.

WREN WAS INCREDIBLY BRILLIANT as an architect, with a good sense of design, a strong idea of history, interested in the practicalities of construction, willing to learn from, and defer to, the superior expertise of the relevant craftsmen involved. He devoted himself single-mindedly and with an extraordinary sense of dedication to the task at hand, visiting St. Paul's every Saturday to inspect the progress, and willing to accept very little remuneration for the time involved. He was inspired by a strong feeling of public duty.

In the course of his long career as Surveyor of the Royal Works, Wren was involved in a host of major projects. He was responsible for the design and construction

of a new royal palace at Winchester, where Charles II wanted to spend time racing.

He installed a chapel at Whitehall for the Catholic James II. He reconstructed the interiors of the Earl of Nottingham's house at Kensington to provide appropriate accommodation for William and Mary whilst at the same time redesigning Hampton Court and he was appointed to the Commission for Building Fifty New Churches by Queen Anne.

IT WAS PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING that as Wren got older and more infirm, he began to feel that this extraordinary dedication to the public good, his abnega-



tion of much of a private life, the loss of two wives after relatively short marriages, had caused his work not to be as appreciated as it deserved.

When his son, Christopher, went on a Grand Tour in 1698, Wren wrote to him saying that "The little I have to leave you is unfortunately involved in trouble, & your presence would be a comfort to me, to assist me not only for my sake but for your own." When he gave advice to the Commission for Building Fifty New Churches, there was more than a touch of impatience to the way he gave his advice, knowing that it was likely to be adapted in the light of the views of a younger generation.

The final insult was when he was ousted from the Surveyorship in April 1718 with a threat that he might be investigated for mismanagement. So, he and his son began to compile a detailed account of everything he had done in his life which was eventually published by his grandson, Stephen, in 1750 as *Parentalia: Or, Memoirs of the Family of the Wrens*.

It lists every City church he had overseen. It records his thoughts on the history of architecture. It provides a list of every building he had designed, as well as a full account of his experiments in science, which he had been casual about recording at the time. No-one was going to be allowed to overlook his achievements. On 5 March 1723, he was laid to rest in St. Paul's Cathedral. As we mark the three hundredth anniversary of his death those achievements remain as a remarkable testimony to an extraordinary talent. ●

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**EATING OUT**

## A fright in the Dolomites

Lisa Hilton has an extraordinary experience in a chaotic restaurant “like *Fawlty Towers* with zombies”

**S**KIING FOOD GENERALLY gets a bad rap. Volcanic piles of cheesy starch dished up to roaring English who still parse the condition of Being Abroad as an injunction to get pissed at lunchtime before attempting a slalom down that tricky black, because of course they can ski; they had a whole week of lessons in Kitzbühel in 1982.

For those who make it down intact, it's back to the chalet, where a hungover girl called Poppy or India has climbed off Ignatz the ski instructor for long enough to slop out a puddle of Death by Chocolate and Mummy's whizzy three-tin boeuf bourguignon.

Conversely, I think that some of the most skilled and interesting cooking in Europe can be found in the Alps. Megève has long had a solid reputation as a foodie destination (perhaps to compensate for the lack of snow), but over the border in Italy, from Courmayeur to Val Gardena, a new generation

of restaurateurs are catering for a crowd who expect a lot more than glühwein and bratwurst.

Everything that was made globally fashionable by the unlamented Noma — arcane local ingredients, inventive traditions of fermenting and pickling — has always been part of Alpine tradition, which combined with the demands of sophisticated and, let's be frank, rich customers means that one consistently eats better in the moun-

tains than elsewhere in Italy.

Cortina d'Ampezzo has several low-key superstars which include the newly-revamped Rosapetra and the superlative lakeside Lago Pianozes, so I was excited to try the Faloria, ten minutes across the valley.

THE FALORIA IS A SMALL, high-end hotel and spa with the restaurant housed in a glass atrium tacked on to the standard low-slung, dark wood building. Nothing special from the outside, but once in range of the toasty green-tiled stove, amongst twinkly fairy lights bouncing the sparkle off the snow, it feels like the most glamorous of cocoons. We agreed that the view of the Dolomites beneath a full moon merited a glass of Champagne to begin, but from there things went downhill faster than Hermann Maier.

What follows is a true account.

Our waiter had a bit of difficulty with the cork and most of the bubbles ended



The Faloria

# Table Talk



Vanilla-scented beef fillet arrived without the promised celeriac

up on the tablecloth. He was mortified and apologetic, removed the glasses and never returned.

After 20 minutes or so, the man from the front desk arrived to take our order. Another 20 minutes passed and we asked for some bread, and perhaps a glass of water. The receptionist was doing his best, but from the bare tables and rising irritation around us it was clear that something was going very wrong in the kitchen.

A starter of poached egg in pine needle broth with caviar could have been a really clever dish, but by the time it appeared it looked and smelled like a cold bath with the Radox left in. Things picked up briefly with a primo of tightly furled Turin-style *ravioli di plin* stuffed with capon and mostarda in a fantastically dense game reduction. The bread was still a no-show.

Our host attempted to jolly things along with a very extravagant bottle of Gaja, which galvanised the sweating receptionist to the extent that he broke the cork in two bottles before he too retired from the field. His place was taken by the manager, bearing our main course of vanilla-scented beef fillet with foie gras and caramelised celeriac.

We gently pointed out that the celeriac was missing, as was the wine, and might we please have some bread? The manager squeaked loudly and actually ran away.

BY THIS POINT SOMETHING of a Blitz spirit had grown up between the bewildered diners. Rations were shared from table to table in the now-staffless restaurant and a raid launched on the sommelier's cupboard. Two bold gentlemen advanced on the swing doors to the kitchen, which proved to be entirely empty. Abandoned to the last plongeur. And there we were, alone on the snowy mountain in the isolated restaurant.

Obviously the thing to do was leave, but who knew what was lurking outside? Were we unwitting contestants in a reality show? Or was something more sinister going on? Which of us was going to be hauled to the cold storage and turned into tomorrow's carpaccio special? It's a bit much to go to dinner in expectation of a witty take on *raclette* and a nice fillet of venison and find oneself inadvertently appearing in *Faulty Towers* with zombies.

AND THEN — honestly this is no exaggeration — the staff came back. Service recommenced, our plates were removed and a dish of plain boiled carrots and courgettes was plonked on the table by the manager, who asked if everything was alright and did we want to see the dessert menu?

The oddest thing of all was that no-one complained. Conversation

resumed, the Gaja was drunk, the bill was paid. No explanation was offered and none requested. As a study in the collective inertia imposed by good manners or the paralysing effect of brass-necked smashing of social codes, the Faloria proved the most extraordinary restaurant experience I have ever had.

The food seemed to have great potential, had it been possible to really try it, but despite the draw of the mystery of the vanishing waiters, I shan't be going back. ●

Faloria Mountain Spa Resort,  
Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy

EATING IN

## The spirit of Lent

Forego wine for cocktails, says Felipe Fernández-Armesto

THE BRITISH TAXED WINE. The Spanish taxed medicine. In boyhood I understood perfectly: each nation encumbered its luxuries and exempted its necessities.

Now, when British friends give up wine for Lent, I have to suppress my distress. One might as well give up food — which without a healthful glass to help it down is at best indigestible, and at worst unpalatable. Ill-informed health faddists, misers and recovering alcoholics claim to prefer water. We all know where we don't mind where it goes.

For those determined to sacrifice table wine in penance, I have the answer. Somewhat in the spirit of Marie Antoinette recommending cake, let them accompany their meals with cocktails or highballs. Long residence in the United States has taught me that these apparently barbarous concoctions can do service at table.

A vodka martini, strewn with lemon, is insuperable with shellfish, especially

if the molluscs are marinated in vodka before being cooked or consumed. A version with gin suits smoked salmon or other preserved fish perfectly. With green olives instead of lemons, and (in the style favoured by Franklin D. Roosevelt) a dash of the preservative brine, the same drink honours fresh salmon or any white fish.

With a meaty-fleshed specimen, however, such as monkfish or sturgeon, Campari or another bitter apéritif, stirred with grapefruit juice and plenty of ice, is worth trying.

**THE SWEETNESS OF COCKTAILS** made with vermouth, red or bianco, complements most charcuterie. If Spanish vermouth is available, I mix it with vodka in what I call a dry Martínez, or with rye whiskey — or bourbon if the wormwood isn't too sweet — for a Mañanhattan.

Soup is harder to match with a cocktail. But many xenophobic members of bygone British élites used to drink scotch throughout a meal so bourbon, which tends to be more full-bodied, should be acceptable. Try it with soda for consommés, or as an Old Fashioned with a dash of bitters for cream soups or thick potages made from sweet root vegetables. One can follow Ethel Merman's advice and "leave out the cherry".

Most main courses are easy to pair. I presume Champagne cocktails are forbidden to those renouncing wine — which is a pity since a Normandy, made with calvados and a dash of pommeau topped with Champagne, is perfect with fat pork or boiled or roasted ham or a lean pig's loin anointed with cream.

An alternative is to use white rum as a base: it echoes the sweetness of the fruity compotes that traditionally accompany such dishes in England, and combines well with pommeau for a tang of apple. For duck or goose only a White Lady does justice; but this mixture of gin, triple sec and a little fresh lemon juice is deadly to the weak-headed. Orange-flower water can

dilute it undestructively.

With dishes of rich offal — kidneys, say, or liver or sweetbreads — Black Velvet would be best if one's spiritual director or guardian angel were

outside Lent, including most beef and game dishes, a touch of sweetness is not amiss. I favour two specialities of my own university. Both involve whisky with a spoonful of the liquor in which



amenable to the addition of Champagne to Guinness; but the Queen Mother's old tippie of gin and Dubonnet is good with liver cooked in the same blackcurranty tonic.

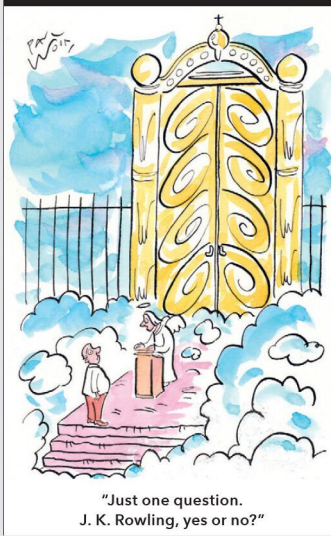
**FOR ANYTHING FOR WHICH** a penitent might choose red Burgundy

maraschino cherries are pickled.

The Dexter is named after a famous benefactor's horse, which the university stabled for him free of charge when he was an impoverished student in 1902: in prosperity he rewarded us with the millions that fund the guest house on campus. Rye and bitters, as for an Old Fashioned, is the base, whereas for a Father Hesburgh — the impeccable favourite tippie of the university's most renowned priest-president, who turned Notre Dame from a modest college into an indelicately rich place of research — one starts with a Manhattan mixture, of bourbon and red vermouth.

A Brandy Alexander or affogato or espresso martini will round off the meal, with the added benefit of offering up the sacrifice of a solid pudding. If the succession of cocktails sounds a little heady, the fearful can fend off drunkenness by using plenty of ice.

Will my guardian angel reproach me for recommending the use of such wine-based apéritifs as vermouth and Dubonnet to penitents who have abjured wine? Surely gall and wormwood are ideal for a season of spiritual sackcloth. And a pounding or splitting head may deserve, in heaven, the reward due to unostentatious pain. ●



"Just one question.  
J. K. Rowling, yes or no?"

## That dog won't hunt

Patrick Galbraith wonders why we are so dismissive of rural ways



four-hundred-bird day on the pheasants — something which isn't uncommon now — would be interesting.

That said, hunting, in many forms, is undeniably a rich part of our heritage. From Wordsworth's *Simon Lee: The Old Huntsman*: "And still there's something in the world / At which his heart rejoices; / For when the chiming hounds are out, / He dearly loves their voices!" to D.H. Lawrence's gamekeeper, Mellors, the chase is part of who we are.

IN THE CAR LAST WEEK, as I drove past Stonehenge, just as the sun was coming up over hungry winter fields, I listened again to Katrina Porteous's great poem, "An Ill Wind". It is both a lament for a country that is fast disappearing and an evocation of two countries, the urban and the rural. "It's

WHEN I WAS ABOUT twelve years old I used to watch a programme called *Tribe*. It followed the adventures of Bruce Parry, a former Royal Marine, as he set off across the globe to learn about and live with some of the last tribespeople.

Even at that age, I found it deeply affecting. Often, the people Parry was staying with were losing things that made them who they were: logging companies were moving in and destroying their worlds or mining companies were threatening to turf them out in order to capitalise on the resources beneath their feet.

But I also thought it was wonderful — there were great scenes in which Parry would take hallucinogens as part of rich tribal ceremonies and he sometimes went hunting.

I imagine the BBC wasn't hit with a barrage of complaints every time Parry headed off into the jungle with a few tribespeople, some nets, and a couple of dogs. After all, that's their culture.

Just over a fortnight ago, the BBC aired hunting in a very different context. *Countryfile*, often criticised for its beige depictions of rural life, devoted almost an entire episode to shooting.

The reaction from most gamekeepers I've spoken to is that it was remarkably even-handed — it certainly wasn't all entirely positive, but even those whose lives and livelihoods depend on shooting wouldn't suggest that the industry is beyond reproach.

HOWEVER, THE REACTION FROM some of those who identify as regular viewers was less positive. "Sue", who was quoted in *Birmingham Live* as "disgusted". She turned her telly off and doesn't know if she'll ever be able to watch the programme again. The *Sun* reported much the same fierce

disbelief. "I'm sorry ... is #countryfile actually promoting an episode on shooting?" was just one comment among the paper's collage of #fury.

There is part of me that is slightly irked when shooting claims it's flying the flag for tradition. You only have to read Victorian gamebooks to realise that the whole thing has changed over time and continues to change.

Thomas Fowell Buxton, the great anti-slavery campaigner, whose gamebooks I was reading the other day, often walked for miles in pursuit of a single snipe. Quite what he'd think of a

### CHRISTOPHER PINCHER | DELUXE

## Hay dude



One can make purchases of industrial quantity

Every summer for the best part of twenty years, my old friend Simon Gordon and I have headed for Hay-on-Wye and its bookshops. We stand in the big car park on Oxford Road, look out over the verdant treeline and the banking hills rising to the distance dotted with hill farms, breathe in the fresh air and sense that peace is upon us.

Not for me the Festival. Better, far better, to go on a weekday in late August when Hay is on holiday with walkers but not engulfed by the glitterati and their gawpers.

When the sun (one hopes for sun, but it is Wales) throws shafts and casts shadows down its narrow lanes and passages, Hay is at its best. Step into the Old Black Lion or Three Tuns (mind your head) for quenching cask ale and homemade food. Have cakes for tea, or any manner of ice creams at any time of day at Shepherd's Parlour on High Town.

Potter around the Antiques Market on Market Street for bric-a-brac or The Haywain just up the road if your taste is toward traditional Georgian and Victorian polish. Explore the byways of the old town and the flint and stone walls on Belmont Road where pink hollyhock sway sweetly in the breeze. But best of all, of course, are the books.

The late Richard Booth, *soi-disant* "King of Hay", kicked off its craze for second-hand books half a century ago. He



to say they were calling time, an announcement many met with delight.

I WON'T PRETEND THAT hunting isn't cruel but we must also acknowledge that when we do away with the hunt, we do away with part of our collective identity. As a telly-watching nation we still often sit there while the BBC shows footage of hunting around the globe.

We don't denounce the San people or the Hadza. But what about closer to home? On social media recently, an artist I know spoke of the horror he feels when he hears hounds in full cry and yet, there are also people out there, people usually not on social media, who are full of horror at the thought of not being able to hear the hounds again. ●

too far to shout, / It's too far to say / And it's getting farther every day."

She is a terrific performer of her work and the poem is punctuated with fixtures of rural life that are shutting up and closing, among them, the small slaughterhouses, "the little, local marts", and "the hunt".

Last month, a new bill passed

through the Scottish Parliament, with the support of two thirds of the members, enacting measures that could be the death knell for what remained of foxhunting in Scotland. The legislation reduces the number of hounds that can be used to flush a fox to just two. In other words, the old packs will have to be disbanded. The Fife Foxhounds were first

acquired the defunct fire station and began importing American library books bought at basement prices. Richard lit a lamp to lure more antiquarian moths to his flame and by the 1980s Hay had become a literary "destination".

Now alongside the refurbished Booth emporium, there is the Addyman Annex on Castle Street (very good for first editions as well as history and literary biography), the Poetry Bookshop on Lion Street and the Cinema Bookshop, a cavernous construction wherein you will find anything and everything. It is also conveniently close to the carpark should you make purchases of industrial quantity.



Colegate's elegiac essay on the death of a man and of a way of life as the sun set on Edwardian England, that last autumn before the trenches; Noel Coward's diaries of the 1950s – witty, waspish and forlorn for a world he and his friends were losing and which is lost utterly now. And I have been able to collect the biographies of an assortment of forgettable US Presidents from John Tyler to Warren Harding. None of this has broken the bank at Monte Carlo.

In a world which is wiki'd and wired where seemingly everything can be found "virtually" and without effort, there must remain a place for

the physical volume — the weight, the touch and the smell of old paper and binding — and the pure pleasure of its discovery.

Those of us worn enough to remember the *Yellow Pages* commercial featuring "JR Hartley" will recall his painful pursuit through many dusty bookstores in search of a copy of *Fly Fishing*. His joy in at last finding a copy — to borrow from John F Kennedy — was not because it was easy but because it was hard. Things that come too easily can never be truly appreciated. Modernists may cry "the Kindle is King". I say God Bless the King of Hay. ●

**Over the years** Simon and I have lined our bookshelves with a Hay harvest, although I fear that his languish in storage awaiting renovation of his house in Devon. If you like little leatherbound luxuries or possessing out-of-print prose then Hay-on-Wye, indeed just about any small town with a second-hand place, is worth a visit.

From such shops I have unearthed *A Durable Fire*, the letters between Duff and Diana Cooper edited by their granddaughter Artemis; *The Shooting Party*, Isabel

## Walled garden wines

Henry Jeffreys visits a charming 2,000-bottle-a-year vineyard



outside with an overgrown old tennis court. But Phillips also found something much more valuable, apple trees.

He produces a range of ciders including hybrids made with wine or grape skins; these function as an insurance policy, wine that's not deemed good enough can be blended into cider. Apples make much more sense in England, he told me, each hectare of vines needs 1,000 man hours to produce a crop whereas an apple tree needs 40 minutes. So though he has no plans to plant more vines, he has planted more apple trees.

Some of these are by the Clos du Paradis, others are around the winery which sits in a wood about a mile away. Before we tasted, he gave me a tour of the land nearby. He grows hazel coppices for firewood. Blue jays plant acorns and he pondered on the modest nature of yew trees which makes them last so long compared with the prouder oak.

This is Phillips to a tee, the empirical philosopher. One can imagine him as an early member of the Royal Society, tending his orchards and coming into London to give papers on his experiments with bottle fermentation.

IT WAS TIME TO TASTE some of his handiwork. Taking care not to trip over the bright red Ducati (*below*) in the winery, we drank a blend of Sauvignon blanc and Chardonnay straight out of the barrel which had a gorgeous purity about it, like a cross between Sancerre and Chablis.

He also let me taste some reserve



HERE CAN'T BE MANY chartered accountants who have raced in the Isle of Man TT but then Tim Phillips from Charlie Herring wines is an unusual man, a beguiling mix of adventure and practicality.

He makes wine organically in a tiny walled garden near the New Forest in Hampshire which conjures up images of *The Secret Garden* or *Le Roman de La Rose*. Yet since he acquired it in 2008 the purpose has been to make money. This makes him unusual in English wine, an industry of hopeful investors and patient creditors.

The previous owners wanted £1.2 million for the garden but seeing as there were no other interested parties, Phillips got it for £82,500. It was so overgrown that it took him two weeks to get from the door to the far wall.

Once cleared he planted it with Chardonnay, Sauvignon blanc and, most optimistically, Riesling. After this initial outlay there's been lots of "sweat and tears" but very little money spent, around £100 per year. He doesn't have a tractor or any staff, everything is done by hand by Phillips.

HE CHRISTENED IT Clos du Paradis, "clos" meaning a walled vineyard in French and "paradis" descended from a Greek word for an enclosed park. It might look picturesque, but it served a practical purpose when it was built in 1820 to provide warmer-climate fruit and vegetables for the family in Ramley House.

It's aligned 26 degrees off the north-south axis to capture the heat of the summer evening sun. Phillips estimated that within the walls he gets around 1,200 growing degree days compared with 800 outside, though I had to take his word for it on a freezing cold January morning.

This extra warmth means that Phillips can attempt the Holy Grail of English winemaking, Riesling. Many



have tried, nobody has succeeded ... until now. The difficulty is that Riesling needs a long growing season to ripen fully with plenty of sunlight and ideally no rain, something you get in a continental climate like Alsace and Germany but sadly rarely in England.

PHILLIPS STUDIED WINEMAKING at Elsenberg in South Africa but admits that the English climate took a bit of getting used to. In 2014 and 2015 he lost his entire crop to powdery mildew because he "cocked up". Other vintages were more successful and went into sparkling wines. Then, in 2020, he managed to get the Riesling grapes sufficiently ripe to make a still wine.

Apparently it tasted spectacular but by the time I arrived it had all been sold. Phillips said demand outstripped supply by a factor of six. He could have charged a lot more for it but prices everything just so that he can make a reasonable living.

He currently makes just 2,000 bottles of wine a year. He doesn't want to expand wine production but he does have a plan for growth. The walled garden came with a patch of land

Chardonnay used in his sparkling wines and a cider fermented on pinot noir skins. “Beaujolais, Charlie Herring style,” he called it. Sadly there was no riesling so instead I bought some cider and a bottle of 2010 Charlie Herring Shiraz that he made in South Africa.

The big question is, who is this Charlie Herring chap anyway? The shadowy money man behind the whole operation? In fact, he’s a nom de plume.

The name comes from how Phillips’s father used to sign cartoons. I picture an old school journalist winning away the afternoon in El Vino with Keith Waterhouse but Phillips sees him as a “set of values”. Something labelled “Charlie Herring” could be wine or cider; it could be made in Stellenbosch or Hampshire, but it’s always going to be worth tasting. ●

Supreme Novices last year had it not been for the little matter of the 22 lengths by which his stable mate Constitution Hill beat him.

But Jonbon is a serious machine in his own right and has looked tailor-made for chasing. 11/8 looks good to me. (All of these bets should be done NRNB — non-runner no bet.)

IN THE MARES’ NOVICE HURDLE, Luccia looks good at 7/4 and I’ve a feeling Honeysuckle will run in the Mares’ Hurdle (perhaps 5/2).

I’ve had some money on one-time Derby favourite High Definition in the Supreme Novices each way at 16/1, and Hermes Allen looks decent for Paul Nicholls in the Ballymore (5/2).

If The Real Whacker goes for the Brown Advisory (the old RSA Chase) rather than the Gold Cup I’d back him at 5/1. As for the Champion Chase: Energumene can surely be forgiven his defeat in January; if anyone can bring him back to his peak it’s Willie Mullins. I’ll have the 5/2.

Allaho has made the Ryanair his own and even at 6/4 I’d back him. But I am floored by the Stayers’ Hurdle, with only the tentative suggestion of Marie’s Rock at 10/1 if Nicky Henderson decides to bypass the Mares’ Hurdle.

IN THE GOLD CUP I am afraid I’ve nothing original to say: I think favourite Galopin Des Champs will win. But I do like Ahoy Senior each way at 16/1, now he’s shown he is back to his best.

What this all means in terms of bets for me is this:

- Jonbon 11/8
- Honeysuckle 5/2
- Hermes Allen 5/2
- The Real Whacker 6/1
- Energumene 5/2
- Allaho 6/4
- Galopin Des Champs 15/8
- A quarter point fourfolds, fivefolds, sixfolds and sevenfolds.
- High Definition 16/1 5 points each way
- Marie’s Rock 10/1 5 points
- Ahoy Senior 16/1 5 points each way ●

TURF ACCOUNT

## Chasing champions

Stephen Pollard gives his picks for the Cheltenham Festival



**L**AST MONTH I WROTE about my time as the Mug Punter — a tipster column based on the fact that I am useless. So naturally, I devote this month to tips for the Cheltenham Festival (14-17 March).

Just to give you some idea of my capacity for giving the bookies money: today I managed to back an 11/1 winner and still lose. I’d placed a £5 trixie (three doubles and a treble). The first won at 11/1. The other two ... well, you know the drill.

But let’s be positive. I don’t have a bad record ante post at Cheltenham. When Best Mate was winning three Gold Cups I had a perfect system: I backed him heavily before his first at very good odds, and then as soon as he passed the post at Cheltenham would put a third of my winnings on him winning the following year. (After his third win, it was clear he wasn’t going to run again so I held on to all the winnings).

I think my greatest triumph was Flakey Dove at 25/1 for the 1994 Champion Hurdle; she won at 9/1. That fine and underrated trainer Mark Bradstock also tipped me the winner of the 1999 RSA Chase, Looks Like Trouble, at 18/1 — of course he went on to beat Florida Pearl in the following year’s Gold Cup. And Mark’s own Coneygree was a scintillating winner as a novice in 2015, helping to turn my

balance sheet into a decent profit. **AS FOR THIS YEAR:** I write this with over a month to go and — crucially — before the Dublin Festival, which will sort out many of the “who runs where?” issues, especially for Willie Mullins’s horses. It says everything about his dominance that the best odds you can get for him to train more Cheltenham winners than every British trainer combined is just even money. He’s only 9/2 to train more than 12 winners.

One race I don’t think he will win is the Arkle. Jonbon would have been hailed as one of the great winners of the



“I pronounce you husband and wife. You may now delete your Tinder profiles.”

# Table Talk

STYLE

## Beret much so

Hannah Betts says if you want to get ahead, get a Basque hat



Lily Collins in *Emily in Paris*

I'VE BEEN WORRYING about the vibe shift. LOLS, I *am* the vibe shift. As earnest Millennial moaners give way to breaking Gen Z nihilists, it is more apparent than ever that the former are basically 'boomers, Gen Z a re-hashed Gen X. Accordingly, as Millennials themselves would put it: "I got this."

Still, others may be fretting about their ability to get with the scene, and I am nothing if not charitable. In her editor's letter in March's *Elle* magazine, Kenya Hunt notes that, where the *Guardian* has described the current fashion moment as "chaotic," "messy," and "falling apart," the *Wall Street Journal* as "weird," so she would argue that "the general vibe is one of rebellion." To which I say, "The sane are never not rebelling."

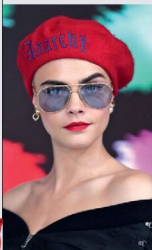
For a one-stop shop means of expressing this sartorially, I give you the beret. Berets have been happening for a while now. *Viz.*, the Bronze Age, when they were a big Minoan thing. Etruscans and Romans followed suit, as did anyone who fancied themselves a bit (artists, poshos) across the millennia that followed.

THE COMMERCIAL PRODUCTION of pastoral, Basque-style berets (*below*) began in the seventeenth century in the

commune of Oloron-Sainte-Marie in southern France; its first factory, Beatex- Laulhère, boasting records going back to 1810. By 1928, there were more than twenty French factories producing hats for the working classes, plus sundry hangers-on.

Military berets were taken up by the French *Chasseurs Alpins* in 1889. Going Gallic was the obvious solution for the Royal Tank Regiment which required headgear that would protect its soldiers' hair from oil without taking up space, remaining in situ while their wearers clambered in and out of minuscule hatches. The look then went Second World War viral thanks to Field Marshal Montgomery.

LAST BIG IN THE 1990s, berets have been back for a few seasons. Dior did leather numbers pre-pandemic, Gucci's were pure Margot Tenenbaum, while Marc Jacobs offered studded, Nineties sleaze. Most gloriously, for its 2018-19 cruise show, Chanel gave us an aching chic nautical-cum-Bonnie and Clyde incarnation in almost all its 90 looks.



*Bazaar* deemed this the "woke beret", less military than blending beatnik Hemingway / Picasso / Piaf / Dietrich / leanings with Che Guevara / Blank Panther edge. It was worn dragged down over the head French Resistance-style, rather than angled jauntily aloft it, and embraced by Beyoncé, Rihanna, Lupita Nyong'o, and Cara Delevingne (*above*), whose red beret bore the

legend "Anarchy", lest we missed the point.

Lily Collins's star turn as the heroine of Netflix's human cartoon, *Emily in Paris*, from 2020 onwards, might have been expected to finish this guise off. However, the deliberately "ringarde" (basic) embrace of the beret by "*La plouc*" (the hick) actually served to make it still more radical — a glad-to-be-gauche two-fingered salute to those fashion bitches who imagine they're better than the rest of us. And so the beret clung on. Armani put it on many of the models in his spring/summer 2023 collection, as did Kenzo.

Accordingly, berets are extremely now, without ever being not now; subversive to the point of divisive (regular wearers will be aware that the hate is real). They're also rather March, a moment desperate for a refresh that remains resolutely inclement. Berets thus qualify as transitional, a modish finisher that is no less a fuck you, and as such I'm all over them.

A SPEEDY FACT-CHECK confirms that I possess seventeen berets in black



HEMIS/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; STEPHANIE BRANCHU/NETFLIX



(plain, velvet, sequined, banded Basque), navy, grey, fuchsia, hot pink, rhubarb, evergreen, Klein, ice and baby blue, two in bouclé, plus three that are technically more of a *Railway Children* tam-o'-shanter. (See Reserved's Wool Beret in cream bouclé for similar, £25.99, reserved.com.) And Other Stories gives great beret, while my most recent additions were from Kettlewell (now £29.40, kettlewellcolours.co.uk) and all very heaven.

If we're talking "it" berets, Gucci has multi-coloured, lamé-flecked, tweed pink and yellow, or orange and green versions that are a means of doing rad

while indicating that spring has sprung; ditto its fuchsia and royal blue mohair variants (£325). Maison Michel's handmade Billy Fil Coupé velvet beret is now £252 (from £360) and a plush, dotted jet. While Vestiaire Collective harbours a wealth of pre-loved Chanel, Dior, Prada and Gucci examples.

Still, itness isn't really the point. Almost two hundred years on, Laulhère is France's sole remaining artisan beret-maker. Why not secure one of its dense, merino originals (€49, laulhere-france.com), available in 18 shades, for far less dosh and a lot more cred? ●

elsewhere. #independentschools.

Back at ours, having successfully avoided Will's moronic brother Harry and his nightmare wife Jocasta since our disastrous holiday in Paxos last year (culminating in Jocasta leaving the villa with their terrible child Rocco, and accusing me of undermining her parenting style) I'm now doomed to have them round for an olive branch Easter lunch.

Not only will this entail sweating over a leg of lamb that only Will can actually eat (obviously Jocasta is vegan, rendering me and our kids notionally veggie for the day to save face), but we will also inevitably have to discuss the elephant in the room.

Ergo, Jocasta's mothering and how the shit hit the malfunctioning ceiling fan in Villa Constantine. Probably once I've stress-drunk a bottle of Chablis, and she's stuck to Seedlip all afternoon.

Jocasta is a proponent of Gentle Parenting, having given birth in the post Gina Ford era. So in her eyes, "Cry It Out" is tantamount to abuse. Possibly worse. And since my three were born pre-2014, when Supernanny and her ilk ruled, I still have such hideously dated notions as Time Out and The Naughty Step imprinted on my unconscious. Not to mention an entire eighties childhood of being bribed with E-numbers and TV to shut up, or overhearing adults saying "Just ignore her and she'll stop."

ANYWAY, SUFFICE TO SAY Jocasta and I do not see eye to eye on how to deal with a tantrum. Though I do enjoy seeing how frankly miserable and badly adjusted the whole family appear to be — especially Rocco.

This, inevitably, is blamed on him being "a Pandemic Toddler", as if six months of missing Monkey Music were more formative than being brought up by Jocasta. Actually they practically celebrate his misery. Apparently a cheerful child must be pitied as a future "people pleaser", because happiness signals repression and avoidance.

So lunch should be fun. ●

## Easter angst

**Claudia Savage-Gore sees more holiday horror looming on the horizon**

HOT HOUSE

SO MY INTERVIEW came out on *Mama Medley*. To recap, *Mama Medley* is my bestie Pandora's sister's website, extolling the virtues of living "the Mama Life" — whatever that means. N.B. we emphatically aren't allowed to call it a blog, even though I thought blogs were so antiquated they're cool again. But apparently not.

Anyway, my interview met a profoundly damp squib of a response. As in, under 50 likes on Instagram. Admittedly more likes than my occasional photos of food/shoes/kids garner, but still deeply humiliating. For context, there's an ex-*Made In Chelsea* cast member on there whose interview got 97,000 Likes. And even an anaesthetist — for some Help The NHS initiative — who got more than me.

So it's safe to say that my fears I would be cancelled for citing my biggest "Mama Fail" as "allowing Baby Lyra to eat Foie Gras", were unfounded. I didn't ever actually do this, needless to say. It just seemed like a safer bet for the LOLS

than referring to my actual Mama Fails. Like the time I let Hector take a selfie sitting on the kitchen table, and he fell off and got concussed because we'd gone for a poured concrete floor.

ANYWAY, IN OTHER "Mama News" the uniform debate at Hector's prep is rumbling on, with River — the child in question who identifies as non-binary — now officially allowed to wear the girls' skort, but NOT the girls' actual dress.

When River's parents protested that this was an infringement of rights/freedom, and threatened to take it to court, the head basically told them they were welcome to take their fees



"They're just adorable at this age — before they develop a personality."

## In Praise of...

# Hipsters: eco-friendly heirs to William Morris

Written by Sebastian Milbank  
Illustration by Martin O'Neill

**T**HE CONCEPT OF THE HIPSTER was born roughly around the same time on both sides of the Atlantic. They popped up in newly-trendy urban areas such as Brooklyn and Shoreditch — generally (but not exclusively) white, middle- and upper-class twentysomethings, typically artsy and progressive, often working in emerging industries (or not working at all). They were introduced to a wider audience in 2003 through the gentle *Hipster Handbook* in America and two years later in Britain, through the rather savage Channel 4 sitcom, *Nathan Barley*.

The charge sheet against them is deceptively long, with bizarre concepts like “hipster sexism” and “hipster racism” (of which more later) appearing alongside 50 different synonyms for pretension. But boil away the bile, and you’re left with two central accusations: one spiritual, the other material.

Firstly, hipsters are guilty of an obsession with “authenticity” and a belief that they are either ahead of or behind fashion, whilst embodying a narcissistic pursuit of style. Indeed, the “hipster paradox” questions quite why a tribe so self-consciously in pursuit of individuality can all look the same.

Secondly, they’re accused of “gentrification”; the colonisation of previously affordable working-class neighbourhoods. According to this theory hipsters move into down-at-heel urban areas, coo over crumbling brickwork and graffiti and price out long-term residents. Expensive cafés and shops crop up and the rough charms of the region are appropriated by the children of the elite who think it’s cool to slum it as long as they can bring their home comforts.

**BUT THE CHARGES DON’T STACK UP.** Take away the ad hominem, and the real crime they’re guilty of is being young people with money in their pocket, an eye for aesthetics and a desire to live ethically.



With their love of vintage clothing, hand-made furniture, and locally sourced food, hipsters are following in the footsteps of William Morris (with beards to match). Far from their desire for authenticity being surface deep, their actual misdeed is having the temerity to try to put their principles into practice by



changing their patterns of consumption.

Nor are they simply otherworldly posturers. They don't just go to vintage shops or buy fair trade goods; they're entrepreneurs who start ethical businesses, vegan restaurants, and local bike shops and cafés.

Although generally politically progressive, hipsters have the whiff of a more implicitly Tory radicalism about them. This trait was first identified in Rod Dreher's prescient book *Crunchy Cons*, with its "Birkenstocked Burkeans, Gun-Loving Organic Gardeners, Evangelical Free-Range Farmers, Hip Homeschooling Mamas and Right-Wing Nature Lovers".

Rather than sitting in leafy suburbs ordering their ethics from a catalogue, they've set out to live their aesthetic and moral convictions in the dodgier end of town, bringing commerce and jobs with them. Why does this admirable intent to put their money where their moccasins are justify the abuse?

And as much as people sneer at all those hipster outlets, what is so terrible about the fact that in large parts of the country you can now get a decent coffee, or a proper shave? Men of my father's generation will recall the dark age in which the gents' barber was dying out and men went instead to the "unisex hairdresser". Now you can recline in leather chairs while men with fire and sharp razors treat you in the style to which ancient Persian kings were accustomed.

HIPSTERS TAKE FLAK FROM often older and more comfortable cultural commentators who see any movement against consumerism as "elitist". And in a certain type of establishment ex-radical, it's hard to escape the whiff of bad conscience driving the venom against a generation of youngsters trying to live out their ideals.

But it's here that we nudge the underbelly of anti-hipster hate. The claim that picturesque gentrification is driving the decline of working-class urban life is frequently made, but rarely substantiated. The venom serves as a form of displacement activity, with the ephemeral figure of the hipster acting as a useful scapegoat for social anxieties that cannot be otherwise safely expressed.

It's true that in some cities, and particularly in London, traditional working-class cultures and neighbourhoods certainly have been irrevocably changed by incomers — but they're not young middle-class people who like artisan coffee. Indeed, while some early hipsters really were young, upwardly mobile people with disposable incomes, many of today's hipsters live precarious lives with little hope of providing for a family or buying a home.

That is not the financial consequences of hipsterism at work, but the inevitable pressure caused by unprec-

## Hipsters have set out to live in the dodgier end of town, bringing commerce and jobs with them

edented volumes of international migration.

At the high end of the market, this has been driven by the preference of the world's super-rich to live, at least for some of the year, in London. The ultra-wealthy of Russia and the Middle East have transformed areas such as Kensington, driving up house prices and fuelling a roaring trade in luxury shops and high-end restaurants. Many of these neighbourhoods were already well-heeled, and few commentators mourn the displacement of the only somewhat rich to former working-class areas like Fulham or Chiswick.

IRONICALLY THE AREAS IN EAST LONDON that hipsters are accused of gentrifying were already transformed from their old status as Cockney heartlands by the working-class flight from grimy terraces to the suburbs and satellite towns, as well as by waves of migration from the Indian subcontinent, Africa, and the Caribbean.

Many of these migrants are, like the hipsters, young and upwardly mobile: working-class African and Indian children are far more likely to go to university than their white working-class counterparts. They, like hipsters, are enterprising. They open shops, restaurants and cafés, selling food previously unfamiliar to the sniffer elements of Britain's older middle class.

Like them, hipsters have answered the call of multiculturalism. They are trying to be the good global citizens they were told to be and actively seek to live and work in diverse areas and communities.

Yet again we find that the hipster is sincere in his or her beliefs and it is this very authenticity that so riles their critics. Not only are they guilty of gentrification (living near foreigners) but of "cultural appropriation" (appreciating foreign culture).

Yes, hipsters can frequently appear absurd and ridiculous. Yes, they may well have a high opinion of themselves and have a desperate need to look cool. But these are not exclusive features of a self-regarding pariah subculture, but of young people in general; in particular, those among them who are richest in hope and potential. ●

# THIS SPORTING LIFE



THE PREMIER LEAGUE EXISTS AS A COLLECTIVE FOR NEGOTIATING TV REVENUES

## NICK TIMOTHY

### FROM STREAM TO TORRENT

THREE O'CLOCK Saturday afternoon is not what it was. While once football fans looked forward in unison to the weekly kick-off — now they need a forgiving boss, diary manager, and whole logistics teams to make it to matches taking place at

lunchtimes and evenings on Fridays, Mondays and midweek.

For the games that do kick off on **SATURDAY AFTERNOONS**, some things remain as they were. While fans around the world can tune in, those in Britain are prohibited from doing so — lawfully, at least. Every week the inevitable messages on social media football accounts appear: “Anyone got a stream?”

We do not know how many millions of fans keep up with their teams by watching **ILLEGAL ONLINE STREAMS** of matches, but the problem is significant enough for the Premier League to have taken action against websites that show them. Hesgoal.com stopped showing English matches in March last year — following an American court case in which the Premier League sought to identify its owners — and the website was closed down by US authorities in December.

Some reports suggest hesgoal.com attracted 40 million regular users, a quarter of them from the UK. And judging by the weekly social media traffic, its demise has not made those fans give up their quest for livestreamed football, but simply focus their efforts elsewhere. The demand is there, and if demand cannot be met legally, it will go on being met illegally.

Taken with rapidly-changing technology, the eclipse of linear television and the success of streaming ventures from Netflix to Disney+, many are starting to ask whether the existing

football broadcasting model is — to use that dreadful term — fit for purpose. A broadcast deal agreed last year between Major League Soccer in the US and Apple TV means every match will be available to subscribers all over the world. Some European leagues, like in Poland and the Netherlands, have done something similar. So why should the Premier League not follow?

THE ARGUMENT FOR “PREMFLIX” as some call it, is simple enough. The Premier League should launch its own streaming platform, advocates insist. The technology is there, and the supporters clearly want it. We should get rid of the ban on broadcasting matches on Saturday afternoons, they say, and let freedom rip. Fans could pay less than they do for their existing subscriptions, but because of demand for specific matches and tailored content, the Premier League could make even more.

The idea is not completely outlandish. All Premier League matches were broadcast on pay-per-view television during the pandemic, and lower league matches are shown live, shot from



MILLIONS OF PEOPLE WATCH ILLEGAL STREAMS

SIMON STACPOOLE/OFFSIDE VIA GETTY IMAGES)



## PATRICK KIDD

a single camera and without any match analysis, for £10 a time.

THE EXISTING PREMIER LEAGUE CONTRACT for broadcasting matches in the UK is with Sky Sports, BT Sport and Amazon. It was negotiated four years ago, and between 2022 and 2025 was worth £4.8 billion, with international rights worth a further £5.05 billion. But some club owners, in particular Todd Boehly, who bought Chelsea last year, believe the rights are under-valued and are looking to US tech companies to win a higher price. Apple TV is reportedly keen to bid for the next round of UK broadcasting rights.

Yet some experts are urging caution. First, there is the risk of reputational damage caused by technological problems. This, though, seems to be an overstated issue. Other leagues are already proving that the concept works, and when Amazon first started streaming matches, fears about buffering proved to be misplaced. There can be a short delay — “latency” is the word in the trade — causing fans to receive push alerts telling them their team has scored before they see it “live” on their screens, but with 5G rolling out across the country, this will not be a problem for long.

The second challenge is about money. The Premier League already receives billions from the broadcasters — and far more than any rival leagues — so why would it want to change? But this seems to misunderstand the competition, commercialism and cold, ruthless negotiating power of the Premier League, which after all exists less as a governing body or sport regulator, and more as a collective for the single purpose of negotiating television revenues. Especially for this generation of club owners, growth and profit is the goal, and nothing — not lethargy, complacency or an attachment to familiarity and tradition — will get in the way.

THE PREMIER LEAGUE DOES NOT NEED to build its own streaming platform. In this respect, the sceptics are right and the advocates wildly naïve about the complexities of tech and the way business deals are done. Disney might have taken its decision to withdraw its content from Netflix and Amazon to set up its own streaming service, but it first acquired 20th Century Fox to be confident it could do so. The Premier League will not do that.

And of course, it might be that even if the tech companies bid for the rights, Sky will just outbid them. New entrants will conveniently drive up the price. But in the end, technology, the future of broadcasting — and the simple matter of what the fans demand — are all pointing in the same direction. We will soon be watching all the football we want, whenever we want to watch it. ●

Nick Timothy is the author of *Remaking One Nation: The Future of Conservatism* and a *Daily Telegraph* columnist

## FIRST LADY OF LORD'S

THE WALK DOWN TWO flights of stairs from the home dressing room at Lord's takes you past portraits of great England cricketers. Depending on the curator's shuffling, you might see Colin Cowdrey talking to Fred Trueman; Ian Botham puffing on a fat cigar; a rather Byronic Len Hutton; or the dastardly Douglas Jardine plotting Australia's defeat. They are placed there to inspire the next generation to great deeds.

When Eoin Morgan led his men down to begin the World Cup final in 2019, it seemed a nice touch that the last portrait selected for them to pass under before entering the Long Room and out into the crowd's roar was the most appropriate person for the



ENID BAKEWELL

occasion. Of the nine Test cricketers who have sat in the House of Lords, this player had the highest batting average and did what no other England captain had done before that day and won the World Cup. Her name was **RACHAEL HEYHOE FLINT** (*in the nets, above*).

“We have nothing against man cricketers,” Heyhoe Flint once said. “Some of them are quite nice people, even though they don't win as often as we do.” Fifty years ago this summer, she

led an England team into a **WORLD CUP**, two years before the first men's tournament was held and 46 years before Captain Morgan's team finally, by the slenderest of margins, lifted the silverware.

It had started with a bottle of brandy. Women's cricket back then was amateur and heavily dependent on patronage. Heyhoe Flint, working as a journalist in Wolverhampton, had contacted the Hayward family, local philanthropists, to ask if they might sponsor a tour to the West Indies. Jack Hayward agreed to cough up £1,580 but insisted that Heyhoe Flint ring his wife and explain — lest she be suspicious at his chequebook showing a large sum going to a strange woman.

ANDREW FOX/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

# THIS SPORTING LIFE



ENGLAND'S TEAM FOR THE FIRST WOMEN'S TEST IN AUSTRALIA, 1934

Two tours later, in 1971, she was spending the weekend with the Haywards in Sussex, wondering what to do next. "After supper we started having a little slurp of brandy," she wrote, "and as the level went down the bottle, Jack suddenly said: 'Why don't we have a World Cup of women's cricket?'" He put up £40,000 (about £600,000 at today's value) and a plan began to form.

The first recorded women's match had been played on **GODSEN COMMON**, near Guildford, in 1745. In 1811, the first county match was played, between Surrey and Hampshire, for a prize of 1,000 guineas. The international game, however, took much longer. It was only in 1934, 73 years after the first men's tour to Australia, that two art students, two office workers, a lawyer, an army auxiliary, two ladies of leisure and seven teachers sailed from Tilbury docks to represent England in the first women's Test match, in Brisbane.

Almost 40 years later, seven teams came together for the World Cup: England, Australia, New Zealand, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, Young England and an International XI hoovering up the rest in a league competition.

*The Times* gave Heyhoe Flint 900 words to sell women's cricket beforehand, in which she told readers that the great W.G. Grace had first been coached by his mother, but the event was initially stymied by the weather. The first match was abandoned without a ball bowled and four of England's first five matches were rain-affected.

They won four times, however, as did Australia, to leave the last match at Edgbaston as effectively a final. It proved very one-sided. **ENID BAKEWELL**, a miner's daughter from Nottinghamshire with a gloriously nostalgic-sounding name that conjures images of long teas and lashings of ginger beer, opened the batting and made a century, her second of the tournament, with 64 from Heyhoe Flint as the hosts reached 279 for three. Bakewell then took two wickets as Australia's

chase failed to get going. England were **WORLD CHAMPIONS** by 92 runs.

Fifty years on and three of that side are dead. Jill Cruwys and Lesley Clifford did not live to see 50, while Heyhoe Flint died in 2017, aged 77, but Bakewell is still playing at 82. She toured Australia this winter with the East Anglian Veteran Ladies and was player of the match in the first game. "We played over-70s men," she said. "They were very chivalrous but didn't want to lose."

THE WORLD CUP SUCCESS BROUGHT AN invitation to Downing Street, where Heyhoe Flint gave Ted Heath a cricket bat and, sensing his bemusement, told him he could use it as a paddle if there was no wind when he was sailing.

It didn't earn the women equal respect. An invitation to play their first match at Lord's was grudgingly extended in 1976 (subject to Middlesex not needing the ground for a Gillette Cup match), but it would be another 11 years before women played there again and a further 12 before they were allowed to be members of MCC.

Ironically, that summer of 1999 in which a few women stormed the Lord's barricades, most politely, was one in which England's men made a complete hash of hosting their World Cup and were knocked out before the tournament's official song had been released.

It would be another two decades before Morgan and his men could follow Heyhoe Flint's women — and the three England women's teams who copied them in 1993, 2009 and 2017 — and call themselves world champions. ●

Patrick Kidd writes the *Diary and Tailender* in *The Times*

## BORIS STARLING

### HOW TO BE A GHOST

PRINCE HARRY'S **SPARE** HAS MADE **J. R. MOEHRINGER** the most famous ghostwriter in the world. Long before he took on an aggrieved prince, however, Moehring worked with tennis royalty in **ANDRE AGASSI**, and their book *Open* remains perhaps the standout sports autobiography of the twenty-first century so far.

I've been lucky enough to ghost three major sporting figures myself: the rugby players **SAM WARBURTON** and **SIYA KOLISI** (*Open Side* and *Rise* respectively) and the jockey **FRANKIE DETTORI** with *Leap of Faith*. Along the way, I've learned that such books need to be five things if they're to sing: five things which spell an appropriately spectral mnemonic.

**GENUINE.** Getting the voice right is arguably the most

# “I want to know what it’s like to play in enormous matches. Mentally, emotionally, physically, I want to know what it’s like to be you”

important part of the process. An autobiography in which yours, the ghost’s, voice intrudes has failed in its first purpose.

It’s not a question of mimicry, but of putting yourself in the subject’s head and shoes. It’s their book and not yours: their story, their voice, their name on the cover. Even when you’re credited, you should write it as though you’re anonymous (a conceit which Robert Harris takes to its logical conclusion in his thriller *The Ghost*: like the second Mrs de Winter, we never find out the ghost’s name).

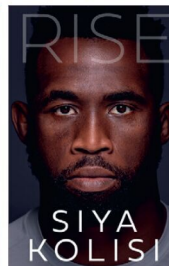
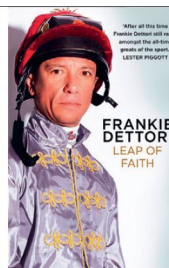
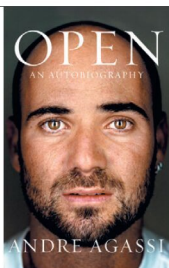
You can only get the voice if you ask the right questions, get answers which resonate, and structure the narrative well. Knowing which questions to ask and when to ask them is harder than it seems. Memory’s a funny thing, and often things come out when people are not looking at them head on. Sometimes you just have to let people talk rather than plod through a chronology.

**HONEST.** Other people’s lives are endlessly fascinating to us and we want to be transported there, to see the world through their eyes and relive their experiences at a short, vicarious distance. Readers want to know they’re getting it straight from the horse’s mouth, as it were, and honesty is a key part of this. A book which constantly pulls its punches is unsatisfying for obvious reasons: the subjects are almost by definition alpha high achievers, so why not say what they really think?

This doesn’t mean unflattering opinions of team-mates or opponents (though these can certainly be part of it). Rather, it means a deeper and more holistic commitment to finding the emotional truth behind every story, because every story has one.

“I want to know what it’s like,” I said to Sam when we first met. “I want to know what it’s like to play in those enormous matches, to live with that kind of pressure, to deal with yet another shattering injury. Mentally, emotionally, physically, I want to know what it’s like to be you.”

**OPEN.** The counterpart to honesty. There was a reason Agassi chose the word “Open” for a book which among other things covered his use of crystal meth and a fractious relationship with his father. Readers also want to see behind the curtain: a sportsperson’s public face in the arena is only a small part of the reality. My subjects have revealed struggles with alcohol, coming to terms with near-death experiences, and more.



There was a time when sports autobiographies shied from these things: Lester Piggott’s, for example, was more or less a long list of owners, trainers, horses and courses with next to no insight into his complex, brilliant psyche. If any one book changed this, it was the England cricketer Marcus Trescothick’s *Coming Back To Me*, which won William Hill Sports Book of the Year prize and was unsparing in its descriptions of the toll depression had taken on him. Now sportsmen and women are much more inclined to open their souls.

**SUBJECTIVE.** Autobiographies aren’t neutral books which cover all sides of a situation and seek input from several different sources. They are by their nature personal takes from a specific viewpoint. They are, to use a vogueish phrase, “my truth”; and sometimes that truth clashes

with other people’s points of view: as the late Queen put it, “Some recollections may vary.”

That said, it’s a ghost’s responsibility to check objective facts wherever possible. There’s no reason that a subject can or should remember every last detail of hundreds, maybe thousands, of competitions. I spent hours on each project looking up old matches and races: when and where they took place, who was involved, what the results were. These are easy things to do, and they make the books demonstrably better and more accurate.

**TENSE.** One of the reasons people love sport is the drama which it constantly throws up. (This is, perhaps slightly tangentially, why great sports films are hard to pull off: how can you make the real thing any more dramatic than it already is?)

Capturing the almost unbearable tension of a big occasion is not just your job as a ghostwriter: it’s your privilege too. The Welsh team bus inching through ten-deep Cardiff crowds before a Six Nations title decider against England; Springbok rugby players ready to go out and play a World Cup Final which would bring a divided country together even if only for 80 minutes; a jockey before his comeback Derby after years in the wilderness. These were some of my favourite bits to write, because these are the reasons that sport does what it does to us. ●

**Boris Starling is an award-winning author, screenwriter and journalist. He has written *Open Side* with Sam Warburton and *Rise* with Siya Kolisi**

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