The most powerful man in Europe

Douglas Murray on how Erdogan brought a continent to heel
19TH & 20TH CENTURY
SCULPTURE
AUCTION LONDON 25 MAY 2016

Viewing 20, 22 – 24 May

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ollowing Tuesday night’s Indiana primaries, the race for the Republican nomination is effectively over. Talk of Donald Trump being overhauled in a contested convention in July evaporated when Ted Cruz withdrew from the race after seven successive defeats. Compromise candidates have ruled themselves out, and Trump’s former opponents are reluctantly rallying around. It really has come to this: the people of the most powerful country on earth will be asked to choose between Hillary Clinton and her former campaign donor Donald Trump.

It cannot be assumed that Trump will be defeated in November. This week, for the first time, a poll put him ahead of her. The world is sooner or later going to have to face up to the possibility that a man whom our own Parliament recently debated banning from the UK, and whom the German magazine Der Spiegel recently called ‘the most dangerous man in the world’, might soon be leader of the world’s most powerful nation and commander-in-chief of the world’s largest military.

Is Donald Trump really such a danger to the world? Yes, but not in the way most of his critics usually assert. As the National Review has pointed out, Trump’s ascendancy means that Reagan-style conservatism is now in exile from the Republican party. He will attack Hillary Clinton from the left on everything from her Iraq vote to social security. But it is not his incoherent and contradictory foreign policy which we have to fear. It is his much more consistent — but seriously wrong — economic ideas that would inflict the most damage.

His victory speech in Indiana started attacking Mrs Clinton’s economics, saying that she ‘doesn’t understand trade’, apparently because Bill Clinton agreed to the North American Free Trade Agreement. The notion of international competition frightens him. To Trump, free trade is a system where ‘companies just think that they can move, go to another country, make their products, sell it back to us and we get only one thing: unemployment’. Jeremy Corbyn would have said the same thing, if he had the courage. Trump, like so many on the left, wants to build a wall around America not just to keep immigrants out but keep its companies in.

As he put it this week, ‘We’re not gonna let companies leave. Now if they want to go to a different state; good luck, compete. But when they start going to different countries, and in many cases countries that devalue their currency and make it impossible for our companies to compete, that’s not gonna happen. And if they wanna do it anyway there will be consequences and there will be very, very serious consequences.’ It’s worth quoting because this is the message that is resonating with a great many Americans. Trump is inviting them to feel afraid of the world and unconfident about America’s ability to compete.

Many in Britain could be forgiven for not taking Trump seriously — but this is now, no longer an option. With far less money, no speechwriters, relatively few political staff, he has won an extraordinary victory, with far too much support to be written off as a wretched irrelevance. His protectionist message certainly has an appeal among those who believe the world economy is moving in a direction that disadvantages them. Trump has concentrated his ire on Chinese exporters, claiming they destroy US jobs. It is a message which gains great traction among poor white voters in the rustbelt, normally more inclined to vote Democrat. Inflammatory language on trade — such as accusing the Chinese of ‘raping’ the US — does not earn him condemnation on the left. On the contrary, it wins him the sort of voters who might have voted for Bernie Sanders.

In contrast to many of Trump’s policies, there is some logic to the claim that protectionism saves jobs. Tariffs of 45 per cent on Chinese-made goods would indeed protect some jobs in the short term. Unfortunately for America and the world, that would only come at the expense of a great deal of other jobs as general prosperity took a huge hit.

That is the experience of protectionism whenever it is tried. George W. Bush proved it in 2002 when, responding to complaints from US steelmakers, he slapped 30 per cent tariffs on foreign steel imports. An independent analysis the following year concluded that the move had cost some 200,000 jobs in steel-consuming industries, which had been hit by higher raw material costs as a result. Barack Obama proved it again seven years ago when he slapped tariffs on tyre imports for three years. The number of jobs in the US tyre industry grew by 1,200 to 52,000, but the estimated cost to American consumers was put at $1.1 billion. US motorists in effect paid $900,000 for every job created — and that is without taking into account the retaliatory tariffs which China imposed on chicken imports from the US.

But it is not enough to trot out such figures and blithely declare that the case for free trade is self-evident. It needs to be made again and again. The decaying Republican party has been unable to make this argument, so it was vulnerable to a fist-shaking challenger like Donald Trump. In Britain, the Conservatives have been very bad at defending conservatism, and are similarly vulnerable as a result. Trump’s ascendancy is a warning to conservatives the world over: failing to make the case for popular capitalism and basic economic freedom invites political disaster — as American conservatives are now finding out.

Trump’s protectionist message has an appeal among those who believe the world economy disadvantages them

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**CONTRIBUTORS**

Stephen Robinson, who writes about Zac Goldsmith on p. 16, is the author of *The Remarkable Lives of Bill Deedes*.

Cormac Murphy-O’Connor, who writes about the EU on p. 20, is Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster and Cardinal-Priest of St Maria sopra Minerva.

Alex von Tunzelmann’s books include *Indian Summer*, about the partition of 1947, and *Red Heat*, about the Cold War in the Caribbean. Her lead book review is on p. 30.

Mark Cocker, who considers Kathmandu on p. 35, is the author of *Crow Country* and *Claxton: Field Notes from a Small Planet*.

Peter Phillips, whose final Music column is on p. 47, is founder and director of the Tallis Scholars.
took up the interim role of chief constable of South Yorkshire Police when David Crompton was suspended following the Hillsborough inquests, herself stepped down and Dave Jones, chief constable of North Yorkshire Police, took over. Two loud bangs in Yorkshire turned out not to be explosions but the sonic booms of fighter jets scrambling to investigate an Air France airliner that had not responded to radio calls.

In a survey of party members by Conservative Home, Michael Gove surged ahead, with 31 per cent preferring him as next leader, 16 per cent backing either Theresa May or Liam Fox and 14 per cent Boris Johnson. Liberty House submitted a letter of intent to buy Tata Steel’s assets in Britain, including its Port Talbot works. Sir Philip Green was invited to give evidence about the failure of British Home Stores, which he used to own, to the Commons business select committee. The Bodleian Library, Oxford, bought a map of Middle-Earth annotated by J.R.R. Tolkien that had been on sale for £60,000.

Abroad

The European Commission hatched a scheme to fine countries €250,000 for every migrant allocated to them but not taken in. The commission also decided to support visa-free travel for Turks to the passport-free Schengen area. A Turkish watch merchant lost valuables from his hand luggage worth £175,000 on a flight to Hong Kong. An Italian court found that a man from Ukraine who stole two pieces of cheese and a packet of frankfurters worth €4 was not guilty of theft because he acted out of necessity. Finland offered a grass-cutting service by postmen at £51 for half an hour.

Hundreds of people were killed in more than a week of fighting in Aleppo, 55 dying in an airstrike on a hospital, including one of Syria’s last remaining paediatricians. A Russian jet fighter confronted a US Air Force reconnaissance plane over the Baltic. In Alberta, 80,000 were evacuated as wildfires approached Fort McMurray. In India’s Himalayan state of Uttarakhand, 427 forest fires raged at once. Donald Trump was within grasp of the Republican nomination as presidential candidate after Ted Cruz withdrew from the race. Spain is to hold elections on 26 June, since no government had been formed since the previous elections in December. André Vallini, the French minister for development and French-speaking nations, complained that the anthem for the Euro 2016 championship, which France is hosting, is the English-language song ‘I Was Made for Lovin’ You’.

Venezuela put its clocks forward by half an hour to save electricity in its power crisis. Saudi Binladin Group, the Saudi-owned construction company, laid off about 77,000 foreign workers, issuing them with final exit visas. A six-month-old girl was rescued uninjured after four days in the ruins of a building that collapsed in Nairobi, killing 23. Craig Steven Wright, an Australian aged 45, said it was he who had invented the bitcoin. The Australian government prepared to kill millions of European carp in the Murray-Darling basin by releasing carp herpes viruses.

CSH
I am no admirer of Donald Trump — not because he is a doomsayer and professional patriot but because he is a fake and, worse, he owes me money. A few years back I was telephoned by a friend. ‘I have to give a dinner for Donald Trump,’ he said, dolorously. ‘He entertained me in Palm Beach and now he’s over here: ‘The dinner was in a bijou Mayfair restaurant and we were a party of about eight. Let me say one thing for Trump: he isn’t stupid. We had never met, but he spotted me for an Englishwoman right away. The other guests were various members of the London ton, including an hereditary peer and the son of a duke (despite Mr Trump’s professed belief in the infallibility of the common people, he has unerring snobbisme and would rather meet a titled Englishman than George Washington, were he alive today.) Like many American Anglo-Saxons, he was crude, shallow and devoid of aesthetic feeling. He was wearing an ill-fitting jacket, the shoulders of which appeared to be padded. His hair was naturally red, not blond, and his complexion, like that of all redheads, defied the elements; everything — sun, wind, rain — had discoloured it. His hands were damp and his egg-like eyes looked me straight in the bosom.

Yet he was no Bombastes Furioso. He seemed timorous of speech and the burden of conversation fell on me. ‘I was in Washington recently,’ I said, in an attempt to interest him. ‘I saw Norma at the opera house.’ His reply bewildered me: ‘Norma who?’ Trump’s whole thought process seemed dislocated. I tried to get him on the subject of Ronald Reagan, but he had spotted Jerry Hall across the room and shouted ‘Hey, Jerry.’ He turned back to me: ‘Too liberal. ‘Who? Jerry Hall?’ ‘No, Reagan.’ ‘Is that bad?’ ‘I don’t know. Is Jerry going to join us?’ I had the impression that politics bored him. Also, that he was phonier than a nine-dollar bill. Beneath the braggadocio and 100 per cent Americanism was a socially insecure man who sought the company of foreign aristocrats, did not know what he really believed and felt the need to pad out his clothes.

I have a more serious caveat. The very rich seldom carry cash and I lent him £20 for a taxi. I have neither seen nor heard from him since. The FBI should be alerted and his opponents should grab him under the Corruption Practices Act, which forbids political candidates from taking money from foreigners.

I have recently returned from Jamaica Inn, Ochos Rios, the most swellegant hotel in the Caribbean, where Noël Coward and Ian Fleming used to water-hole. The owner, Eric Morrow, showed me prints of Fleming in the bar with Coward performing his risqué version of Cole Porter’s ‘You’re the Top’. (‘You’re the breasts of Venus./ You’re King Kong’s penis/ You’re self-abuse.’) It was here that James Bond’s ‘shaken not stirred’ martini was invented. They had been playing tennis and asked the barman for martinis the temperature of freon. ‘Don’t stir them,’ said Fleming. ‘Shake them up with ice.’ Fleming despised his Bond books, confessing to my father, the late politician Woodrow Wyatt, that they were ‘rubbish’. Unlike Bond, he didn’t like sex much either. He would tell his wife Ann that he couldn’t make love to her because it made his hair fall out.

Coward’s Jamaican home, Firefly, is almost derelict now. Weeds grow in the rooms and the walls are discoloured with damp. Coward’s piano is missing three keys. A dining table is laid out with cracked crockery, as it was when Princess Margaret came for lunch. Coward died here a disappointed man. It was strange that he was only knighted four years before his death, given his propaganda and intelligence work during the second world war. The Queen Mother spoke of it to me once: ‘I loved “The Master”. Winston liked him, too. It was Philip who was always against it. He has a thing about the more flamboyant sort of queer.’

While sojourning in the country I encountered one of our former prime ministers, accompanied by his security detail. The taxpayer covers this and I confess myself aghast — at how much these fellows eat. One resembled a dirigible while the other two broke sweat much these fellows eat. One resembled a dirigible while the other two broke sweat when reaching for their fourth pastry basket of the morning. Is it fit that our ex-PMS should be protected by such unfit men? At least if an assassin emerged all they would have to do is sit on him.

I have been trying on Wallis Simpson’s frocks, acquired by my friend William Banks-Blaney, founder of William Vintage. But I struggled to get into her jackets, since she had no chest. Once the Duchess told the epigone Cole Porter, ‘You almost look like a man.’ He rejoined, ‘So do you.’ With the benefit of sartorial hindsight, I can confirm that he was right.

Petronella Wyatt is a former deputy editor of The Spectator.
After an eight-year detour into municipal government, Boris Johnson has now returned to national politics. The former mayor of London will mark this moment by going on the stump for the Leave campaign. He has some catching up to do: while never far from the public eye, he was absent from the Commons for seven years. Even when back in Parliament after the general election, Boris felt he could not take the cabinet job that was offered to him.

But his time at City Hall hasn’t dented his ambitions; quite the opposite. He is the bookies’ favourite to be the next Prime Minister. Indeed, he returns to the national scene in a far stronger position. In the summer of 2007 when he announced his intention to run for mayor, his political career had stalled. He was Tory spokesman for higher education but not a full shadow cabinet member. Although he had backed David Cameron for the leadership, it was clear Cameron was never going to give him a big job. What’s more, his Commons performances had been disappointing. A style of speaking that worked so brilliantly outside the chamber didn’t work inside. Mr Cameron would privately remark that his fellow Old Etonian was ‘stuck in a buffoonish rut’, unable to make the transition from entertainer to politician.

Eight years of running London, after two Tory victories in a Labour city, has changed all that. Boris is now a serious contender for the leadership in a way he simply wasn’t in 2007, and wouldn’t have been had he stayed in the Commons. He could be the first Prime Minister since the Duke of Wellington to enter No. 10 because of what he did outside Parliament. Rather than make it to the front bench then climb the greasy pole, he has entered the legislature — so we often end up with new ministers who haven’t run anything more taxing than a tombola stall. Mayors, by contrast, will come to Parliament already blooded in the arts of winning elections, fighting bureaucracy and delivering public services.

But devolution is a mixed blessing. When New Labour created the Scottish parliament and the Welsh assembly, the expectation was that ambitious young bucks would cut their teeth there then graduate to Westminster. Instead, the assemblies ended up stuffed with those who aren’t, or weren’t, good enough for Westminster. Remarkably, even the Scottish National Party seems to have sent its best talent to London. Joanna Cherry, the highly impressive QC who speaks for the SNP on justice and home affairs at Westminster, would surely be a more effective Scottish justice minister than the incumbent, Michael Matheson, who was a community occupational therapist before he went to Holyrood.

Some Tories hope that their leader in Scotland, Ruth Davidson, can be persuaded to make the journey south. If elected as an MP, they argue, she would immediately be a leadership contender because her ‘proper, old-fashioned blue-collar Toryism’ is what the party needs. They believe she is the party’s most naturally talented politician.

Davidson is fond of saying she has no Westminster ambitions. But she certainly has options. She grew up in the Borders, one of few parts of Scotland where Tories stand a chance of being elected to Westminster. Whether her style of politics would work there is another matter. When Boris Johnson was on TV explaining his decision to back Britain leaving the EU, Davidson sarcastically tweeted: ‘Is it just me or is Boris floundering here? Not sure the bumbling, kitten smirk, tangent-bombast routine is cutting through.’ One of her allies admits: ‘She is a bit too free-and-easy about making it known what she thinks of people. If she wants to come down here, she is going to have to be a bit more careful about that.’

The viciousness of Davidson’s comments indicate a problem for Boris. ‘He has people who will do absolutely anything to stop him,’ one cabinet minister tells me. Some loathed him even before he came out for Brexit; others were enraged by that decision. And his enemies are delighted that he has not had the easiest of starts to his referendum campaign. Michael Gove is now the hero of the Brexit-backing grassroots, they declare. And a survey of party members by the Conservative Home website showed Gove top, and Boris in fourth place.

But Boris does tend to start slowly on campaigns; it takes time before he gets into his stride. He is about to embark on six weeks of intensive Brexit stumpng and come polling day on 23 June he should be in fine voice. Downing Street’s reluctance to put forward anyone in government to take him on in the TV debates suggests they have more respect for Boris and his argument than they care to admit.

James Forsyth, Isabel Hardman and Fraser Nelson will be discussing the EU referendum at a subscriber-only event in the ICA, London, on 20 June. Tickets are available at spectator.co.uk/brexit
The comparison between the referendum questions — that asked in 1975 and the one which we shall be asked on 23 June — is interesting. In 1975, the question was ‘Do you think that the United Kingdom should remain part of the European Community (Common Market)?’ (Answer: Yes/No). Today, the question will be ‘Should the United Kingdom remain a member of European Union or leave the European Union?’ (Answer: Remain/Leave). The modern question is the fairer, and it also brings out how things have changed. In 1975, it seemed almost obvious that the answer was ‘yes’: even many who did not like EEC entry could see it was strange to leave only a couple of years after joining. The whole issue, like the question, expected the answer ‘yes’. Today, this is much less true. There really is a possibility of leaving and so the question explicitly entertains that possibility. A choice exists. It is this explosive fact which the Remain side seeks to deny.

Tuesday’s memorial service for Geoffrey Howe at St Margaret’s, Westminster, had a more fervent feel than is usual on such occasions. Partly this was because the gentle and courteous Geoffrey was held in much greater affection than most politicians. But partly, too, because this was a wake for a generation of Europhiles now passing, unreplaced. When John Major read from ‘Desiderata’, ‘Avoid loud and aggressive persons’, one could guess whom he had in mind. When Michael Heseltine preached his punchy eulogy, that target was not veiled at all. I feel about Howe’s Europeanism rather as I feel about the men who opposed the Great Reform Bill or the repeal of the Corn Laws — a romantic admiration for those who honourably failed to see the way the world was going.

Last week, I wrote about the fevered state of mind of the Financial Times as British voters threaten to throw off their EU chains. Here is another example. Martin Wolf, usually the best columnist in the paper, wrote a column giving ten reasons to remain. ‘Above all,’ he said, ‘those promoting departure ignore what the UK’s European partners think about the EU. Their political elites, particularly of Germany and France, regard the preservation of an integrated Europe as their highest national interests. They will want to make clear that departure carries a heavy price, which is likely to include attempts to drive euro-related financial markets out of London.’ Those who want to leave don’t ignore this at all! It is precisely because we know how much the German and French elites want more integration that we so much want to leave. Mr Wolf’s argument that we must obey because otherwise they will be horrible to us is, if he would only think about it, abject. It is also, I suspect, beside the point. The same elites are always trying to take euro-related financial markets out of London anyway.

Fighting on another front, the FT wrote a spunky leader last week attacking those who would muddle climate change sceptics. Following this up, the Global Warming Policy Foundation, on whose board I sit, wrote a letter to the FT, from its chairman, Nigel Lawson, and others. ‘We agree,’ said the letter, ‘that when it comes to global warming “the stakes are so high that all arguments must be heard”. Regrettably, however, the FT has not lived up to this precept…’ The GWPF has published more than 50 thoroughly professional papers and reports as a thoughtful contribution to a (still one-sided) debate, not one of which has ever been addressed in the FT.” The letter was sent last Wednesday. At the time of writing, the FT has not published it.

Possibly Sir Philip Green has behaved disgracefully in the matter of BHS. It does not follow that he should be stripped of his knighthood. Think of the consequences. At present, the promise of a knighthood can keep people who might otherwise be independent in line. But once a knighthood has been granted, it can hardly ever be revoked. This means the power of patronage dies. The recipient is no longer in the control of the patron. If knighthoods can be removed, then the power of patronage never goes away and people can be controlled by the government for the rest of their lives out of fear they might lose their title.

The first moves have now begun to restore the reputation of George Bell, the great wartime Bishop of Chichester who was alleged by his own diocese last October to have abused a young girl from 1949 until 1953. Bell’s supporters have worked hard to show that the process by which the diocese arrived at this conclusion nearly 60 years after he died has been inadequate and unjust. It is good news that Chichester Council, having originally removed the portrait of Bell which hung on its Council House staircase, last week decided to re-hang it. Bell has not been found guilty. He has been judged by the Church ‘on the balance of probabilities’ in an out-of-court settlement which no one has been allowed to see. Why should anyone feel compelled to accept the Church’s decision? We should re-hang his portraits unless and until actual evidence is publicly heard and the case for Bell is properly put.
Turkey’s triumph

President Erdogan has the EU’s leaders exactly where he wants them

DOUGLAS MURRAY

Is Turkey part of Europe? For most of our civilisation’s history, to have even asked such a question would have been to invite derision. The Ottomans were kept out of Europe not by some early-onset prejudice, but by the armies of Europe having to beat back their repeated invasions. The question became slightly more plausible a century ago with the rise of Ataturk and the modern Turkish state (one of the only successful efforts to reconcile the Islamic religion with state power). For a brief period around the turn of the millennium, some serious people (including the British government) supported Turkey joining the EU.

But today, the question has become academic — first because Turkey’s liberal trajectory long ago halted and began rolling backwards. And secondly because the country is now coming into Europe anyway. Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish president, has persuaded the EU to grant visa-free travel to his 75 million countrymen inside Europe’s passport-free Schengen area. In so doing, he has made more progress than any of his predecessors. Using a combination of intimidation, threats and blackmail, he has succeeded in opening wide the doors of Europe.

Erdogan’s success matters, because it says much about the EU — and the idea that it exerts ‘soft power’. This was the theory in 1999 when the EU declared Turkey to be ‘a candidate State, destined to join the Union’ so long as it fulfilled the standard criteria for membership. Its state should have ‘achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights, respect for and protection of minorities’. Four years later, the EU announced that Turkey had ‘taken important steps’ to ensure effective implementation, particularly in allowing Turkish citizens to ‘enjoy fundamental freedoms and human rights in line with European standards’.

For a brief moment, it all seemed to be going well. Formal accession negotiations began in 2005, but by then something important had happened to Turkey. That something was Recep Tayyip Erdogan. First elected with his ‘Justice and Development’ party (AKP) as prime minister in 2003, the man who is now president set about fundamentally altering Turkey’s direction of travel. He was not some proud moderniser. While mayor of Istanbul, he was imprisoned for inciting religious hatred by reciting these words at a rally:

The mosques are our barracks, The domes our helmets, The minarets our bayonets, And the faithful our soldiers...

This was seen by Turkish judges as a threat to the secularist, Ataturkist traditions of Turkish democracy. They were quite right. But Erdogan is a patient Islamist who famously compared democracy to a bus ride: when it gets him to where he wants to get to, he will get off. So as he continued his bus ride of elected office, he used his power to tighten his grip and consolidate power behind one party — and one man. He even commissioned a new golden throne to sit on. The putative caliph set about taking Turkey in an all too predictable direction — consolidating power around himself by taking it away from the military and judiciary and stifling domestic dissent whenever he could.

The extent to which Erdogan has been able to take Turkey backwards is a modern tragedy. When corruption allegations emerged around his immediate circle just over two years ago, he swiftly banned YouTube and Twitter, stuffed the ensuing investigatory commission with members of his own party and dismissed the investigations as a ‘coup attempt’ by people serving ‘foreign powers’. Every time Erdogan and his circle are judged by the normal standards of the law, he responds with such hysterical counter-attacks. And all the time, it was asked: what about EU membership? Didn’t Erdogan worry that his authoritarianism would disqualify him outright?

But he gambled that the EU, for all of its pious words, could be bought off later. Now and again, Brussels tried to wag its finger at Turkey. For example, after one round of judicial meddling, the Council of Europe’s commissioner for human rights wrote that ‘Proposals to curb powers of High Council of Judges and Prosecutors represent a serious setback for the independence of the judiciary in Turkey.’ How Ankara must have quaked.

Erdogan’s upheaval of the judiciary and police continued regardless. In a single night in January 2014, he removed and replaced some 350 police officers. His party gave itself new powers permitting domestic espionage on banks and companies on matters relating to ‘foreign intelligence’. As one political opponent told Erdogan on the floor of parliament (for how long will that be possible?), ‘You want to purge democracy and control the entire system.’ Indeed so.

This has not gone unnoticed by the Turkish people. In 2013, protests against the government spread to 60 cities. But the police crushed them brutally, and laws were later passed to restrict future protests. Since then the government has acted to further crush press freedom and the country regularly tops world league tables for the number of imprisoned journalists. But even this was not enough for the EU to withdraw its offer of Turkish entry. Each year, it published reports listing Erdogan’s various transgressions. And Erdogan treated them first with indifference, then with contempt.

By the end of 2013, Erdogan said he’d take no more lectures from Brussels and that he ‘sincerely expected the EU, which sharply criticises its member countries, should criticise itself and write its own progress report’. In March he seized control of Zaman, until then Turkey’s highest-circulation newspaper. And he has taken action against thousands of citizens for the offence of insulting the president. Last month, a Turkish man was arrested for insulting Erdogan by asking police for directions to the zoo.
While the suppression of freedoms within Turkey is a tragedy, the extension of Erdogan’s repression inside the EU is a scandal. When a late-night comedy show in Germany pointed to the absurdity of a German law forbidding insults against foreign leaders by attacking Erdogan, Turkey demanded that Berlin acted. Erdogan was calling Angela Merkel to heel. And successfully: she approved prosecution of the offending comedian, with the nod to her critics that the German courts could still find Mr Bohmermann innocent. Which (for now) is just about the only difference between Germany and Turkey.

As Erdogan has worked out, however much Turkey fails to live up to the EU’s expectations, the EU’s attitude to Turkey is ‘ever onwards’. Its 2013 ‘Visa Liberalisation Dialogue’ set out 72 conditions on security, migration, public order, fundamental rights and readmission of irregular migrants that Turkey needed to achieve. Despite failing them, in November last year the EU and Turkey agreed that visa-free travel should start this October. All the time Turkey demanded more and faster.

As well they could. Because last year — after the German Chancellor opened the borders of Europe to anyone who could get here — the tables turned. Persuaded that every problem in the Middle East, Far East, North and Sub-Saharan Africa was Europe’s fault and Europe’s responsibility, millions duly came. And will again. Today, even the European Commission and Frau Merkel realise that in order to avert political catastrophe in Europe, they must bring the number of entrants down. Suddenly, as Erdogan himself said, ‘The European Union needs Turkey more than Turkey needs the European Union.’

Turkey is home to 2.7 million Syrian refugees — a fact which Erdogan is treating like being in possession of a loaded gun. He threatens to send them over the Aegean to Greece, or let them walk through Bulgaria. ‘If the European Union does not take the necessary steps, then Turkey will not implement the agreement,’ he said last month. ‘Some three million people are being fed on our budget. But we are not doing this for thanks.’

Without visa liberalisation for Turks, ‘no one can expect Turkey to adhere to its commitments’, added Ahmet Davutoglu, the Prime Minister.

And so the EU has accepted Turkey’s abominable treatment of Kurds. It has ignored the ongoing illegal occupation of north Cyprus. And it has ignored every single one of its own putative ‘criteria’. In trying to avoid millions more migrants, the EU has opened the doors to 75 million Turks. It’s quite possible that Erdogan doesn’t even want EU membership, that he just enjoys lording it over Europe and showing Turks how he can make a continent (or at least its leaders) quiver. Now Europe is behaving like a man so fearful of death that he chooses to commit suicide.

And what of Britain’s role in all this? Shortly after becoming Prime Minister in 2010, David Cameron went to Ankara and announced that he would do everything he could to ensure Turkey entered the EU. Speaking as a guest of Erdogan, Cameron announced: ‘Turkey deserves its place at the top table of European politics — and that is what I will fight for. I will remain your strongest possible advocate for EU membership and for greater influence.’

Our Prime Minister has been true to his word. Even while Erdogan’s government has done everything it could to demonstrate why it has no place in the EU, Cameron has insisted on extending the borders of Europe to Syria and Iraq. Only a few months ago in the Commons, he reconfirmed his government’s commitment to Turkish entry. Of course, now that the referendum is upon him, he says that it doesn’t matter what he thinks because the French will not allow Turkey to join. This puts the British Prime Minister in the strange position of citing the French government as the only force capable of saving him from his own views.

In private, Erdogan must be amazed at just how much he can wrangle. The worse his behaviour, the greater his clout in Europe. He can send German police to arrest German comedians whose jokes he dislikes. He can instruct the EU to delay its ‘progress reports’ on Turkey to a time that better suits his electoral purposes. A few weeks ago, a leaked transcript of a conversation showed Jean-Claude Juncker, president of the European Commission, pleading Erdogan to consider that ‘we have treated you like a prince in Brussels’.

Erdogan, prince of Europe: quite a title to confer upon a wretched Islamist bully who regards refugees as human bargaining chips and stands poised to destroy our continent. Nevertheless he is someone who has at least regarded refugees as human bargaining chips and stands poised to destroy our continent. Nevertheless he is someone who has at least

London’s other mayor

How many people could name the capital’s other mayor, the Lord Mayor of London? The office, officially renamed the Lord Mayor of the City of London in 2006 to avoid confusion with the Mayor of Greater London, was instituted in 1189 and has been an elected office since 1215 — albeit only by the votes of representatives of livery companies. The current holder, elected last Michaelmas, is Jeffrey Evans, fourth Baron Mountevans, a shipbroker. The mayoralty was Evans’s second election victory last year; in July he won the election to replace the third Viscount Tenby as a crossbench hereditary peer.

Top tips

The government said it would consult on legislation to prevent diners being duped by extra service charges. In which cities do tip the most, per £100 spent?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>City</th>
<th>Tip Amount</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>London</td>
<td>£5.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swansea</td>
<td>£5.43</td>
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<tr>
<td>Edinburgh</td>
<td>£4.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glasgow</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Newcastle</td>
<td>£4.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>York</td>
<td>£4.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: OpenTable

Endangered species

Ringling Bros and Barnum and Bailey Circus in America held its last performance with elephants, ending over a century of using them in its shows. How many circus animals still perform in Britain?

- 6 reindeer and 6 snakes
- 4 zebras and 4 tigers
- 3 camels
- 2 lions
- 1 ankole (an African breed of cattle),
- 1 fox and 1 raccoon

Britain’s last performing elephant was retired in 2011.

Source: House of Commons Library

Top of the leagues

Other remarkable things about Leicester:

- 28% of the population is made up of ‘Asians’ or ‘British Asians’, higher than any other district in England and Wales.
- Leicester has the highest percentage of residents born in India and also the highest percentage born in Zimbabwe.
- 51% of children have tooth decay, the highest in England and Wales.
- 41% of children reached the expected level of attainment in the Early Years Foundation Stage, the lowest in England.
- Leicester has 289 tennis courts, the most in any city except London, Sheffield and Ipswich.

‘This town ain’t big enough for the both of us.’
Beware the Lycra louts
Cycling in funny clothes is bad for the soul

HENRY JEFFREYS

S
pring is here and the air is alive with the sound of sweaty manmade materials rubbing together, as middle-aged cyclists fill every road, dressed head to toe in Lycra. They whiz along, jumping red lights, weaving in and out of the path of trucks, screaming at pedestrians and taxi drivers; barely evading death three times a morning. Lycra isn’t just a fabric; it’s a state of mind. At work, these often portly, always angry, red-faced individuals might be mild-mannered middle managers who work in marketing. But in their cycling kit they are superheroes who happen to swear a lot.

The double Olympic champion Laura Trott was once asked to help with a safety campaign which involved riding around the capital to highlight the dangers cyclists face on the roads. She returned absolutely terrified — by cyclists who dressed like her but behaved like maniacs. ‘I see cyclists jumping in and out of the buses and people wonder why they get hit,’ she said. Trott was too polite to say that this is largely a male problem. You rarely see women sporting the full Lycra look unless they’re actually cycling competitively. There’s even an acronym for it, Mamil: middle-aged man in Lycra.

Thanks to Boris Johnson — who, mercifully, does not cycle in a stretchy body sock — and his £47 million cycle superhighways, Londoners can soon expect массed pelotons of Lycra to flow inexhaustibly all the way from Westbourne Grove to Tower Hill via the Victoria Embankment, massively enhancing our collective sum of rage.

Lycra is bad for the soul — and almost nobody looks good in it (the exceptions are 1980s LA gym birds and Jane Fonda). Even professional cyclists look ridiculous. So why do ever-increasing numbers of people dress like this? Joggers — also afflicted by the Lycra bug — will tell you that it’s practical and aerodynamic, but you don’t see Mo Farah running around in a skintight bodysuit.

Well, I have a confession: I am no stranger to the stretchy fabric. For ten years I rode a racing bike in London and would often sport Lycra. I even wore those special shoes that clip into the pedals. Lycra seeps into your brain. You might be pottering around the Chilterns, but in your mind you’re riding Paris–Roubaix. At work, you’ll nod at fellow cyclists when making tea and swap stories in a low murmur of battles fought at the Elephant and Castle roundabout.

I didn’t like people overtaking unless they had more Lycra on than me. Couriers — who cycle the most, and the fastest — don’t wear head-to-toe Lycra.

I now cycle in ordinary clothes. I wear a coat in winter. In summer I wear a shirt. If I’m getting too sweaty, I slow down. I’ve even ditched my racing bike, with its thin tyres and no mudguards, as it was completely impractical for Britain’s terrible road surfaces and changeable weather. I now have a Dawes Civic, a sturdy Alan Bennett-esque machine that gets me everywhere I want almost as quick as before but without the hassle. If the ride takes a little longer, I know that I’ll make it up in not having to get showered and changed. I’m much happier and, most importantly, I’ve rediscovered my love of cycling.

Nowadays there is no need to wear Lycra at all. For those who have to wear proper kit, i.e. people going on genuinely very long rides, there are companies that make cycling clothes that look normal. In fact they work better, because they’re often rainproof, let the sweat out and have padding in all the right places. And without Lycra, of course, loutism will diminish. Cyclists will become civilised once more.

And so I appeal to you: joggers, nobody wants to see your genitals, wear a tracksuit; cyclists, buy an Alan Bennett bike, your dignity will thank you. It’s high time to leave Lycra to the professionals. At least they’re paid to look stupid.

ANCIENT AND MODERN
Pliny on the joy of elephants

In order to deter poachers, hundreds of tons of elephants’ tusks are being incinerated in Kenya. But even for Romans, elephants were special: of all the animals cruelly slaughtered in the Roman arena, it was only the elephants that, on one occasion, moved the crowd to pity when they were put up against 20 armed gladiators.

In Book 7 of his encyclopaedic 37-book Natural History, Pliny the Elder (killed in the explosion of Vesuvius in AD 79) turns from describing the physical world to the animal world and, first and foremost, man. His account is by no means an encomium — of all creatures, Pliny remarks, none ever shows more cruelty to its own species than humans. Then in Book 8 he turns to the rest of the animal kingdom, starting with the animal ‘closest to man in disposition’. Which might that be? Yes, the elephant.

Not only does it understand the language of its own country, obey orders, remember duties it has been taught, and show pleasure at affection and marks of honour, but Pliny also affirms that it possesses virtues ‘rare even in man: honesty, wisdom, justice, respect for the stars and reverence for the sun and moon’. Elephants, he says, can walk on tightropes, and pick their way among guests at a party to take their place without spilling anyone’s drink. One even learned Greek.

Furthermore, they know how valuable their tusks are, and bury them when one falls off. When a herd is surrounded by poachers, they post those with the smallest tusks to the front to show that the herd is not worth the effort. Elephants have a sense of shame; they are modest, mating in secret; they do not commit adultery or fight over females; they are naturally gentle, moving sheep out of the way if they find themselves in a flock; and so on.

For Pliny, it was man’s uniqueness, diversity, versatility and freedom of choice that set him apart from the passive animal world. So if man responded with kindness to animals, as that Roman crowd had done, man could also fight his greatest vice: man’s cruelty to man.

— Peter Jones

THE SPECTATOR | 7 MAY 2016 | WWW.SPECTATOR.CO.UK
I am having terrible trouble with my hair at the moment. It is lank, flat and lifeless. There are split ends. Also, it doesn’t smell too good. What’s that appalling stench, my wife asked recently while sitting next to me on the sofa as we watched a rerun of the old racist editions of Midsomer Murders starring the excellent John Nettles. ‘Probably the dog, again,’ I replied — but I knew that was a lie. I knew it was my hair. It smelt like that rotten cheese Italians eat. I don’t know why, because I wash it frequently enough. Maybe, to adapt Orwell’s mordant observation, at the age of 56 everyone has hair which smells exactly as they deserve. In my case, Gorgonzola, with a subtle undertone of raw sewage.

What I needed, then, was a brilliant haircare product available from a shop called Urban Outfitters. It is called ‘Peachy Shampoo for Suicidal Hair.’ That would do the job. But unfortunately the product is no longer available to me, because of the furore that was occasioned. The screeching, the howl-round, the mentalisms. Suicide is not a laughing matter, the perpetually furious internet denizens — obsessives and compulsives all — bombarded Urban Outfitters on Twitter demanding that the firm with-draw the product forthwith and also donate money to a mental health charity to atone for their sins. I assume this last broadside was a case of economic self-interest on the part of the fantastically deranged individuals who inhabit cyberspace — they will be arsed to make the short journey to Beachy Head transported to Brighton, so that it is even handier for them, and personally chaperone them towards the precipitous edge: ‘Look, look — it’s France just over there! Doesn’t the water look a lovely blue! Now take a deep breath…’ They’re all in favour of assisted dying, after all. Well, let me lend a helping hand.

It’s also the place — of course — where parents have objected most stringently to Sats tests for their unspeaking children. Granted, it is a mild surprise that there any people left in Brighton predisposed towards procreating in the normal manner — although maybe all the children are adopted. I don’t have the stats for that. But whatever, Brighton is the place where a ‘strike’ of six- and seven-year-old children took place — actually organised by their parents (or guardians) and various cretinous leftie-green activists. The children (but rather the parents) were supposedly aghast at having to sit these tests — one mother complained plaintively that her offspring (almost certainly called Syriza or Gaia) had a ‘tummy ache’ as a consequence of the stress induced by these brief exams. So they took their kids out of school for the day. One of the strike organisers said: ‘The kids weren’t just having a day off. The event had speeches, workshops, yoga classes for the kids. This is Brighton, don’t forget.’ Nope, we won’t forget, have no worries on that count.

A former head teacher called Kit Messenger said she thought that by and large children should be encouraged to learn things, sure, but not at the expense of not being taught ‘resilience and interpersonal abilities’. Listen, you silly woman: that stuff is taught by parents, or should be. Schools are there to educate, to teach, to inculcate knowledge and to both enhance and evaluate ability. But thank you, Kit, for no longer being a head teacher. There are some mercies in the world.

My suspicion is, though, that the parents took their kids out of the Sats tests because they were scared stiff that their brats would be revealed as being even thicker than they are. That’s usually the reason the middle class cavil at tests in schools. And they retrospectively decide that their children are one of two things — either ‘dyslexic’ or ‘more intuitive, intellectually, than academic’. Au contraire — your child got a Sats score that would embarrass a bowl of cauliflower cheese because he is as thick as a plank. And your genes are to blame.

The government has largely backtracked on plans to improve the education we give our kids, and thus to hoist the UK back above the likes of Djibouti and Cape Verde in the educational league tables. The poorest families rather liked what Michael Gove had to offer. It was always the middle class which cavilled. They don’t like the idea of a meritocracy, in practice.
How to save Labour

The party needs real radicalism – it is in the hands of an ugly simulacrum

NICK COHEN

To me, there is every reason to make a fuss. Labour’s Jewish question is a symptom of a wider sickness in the party, which will discredit both it and left-wing culture if left unchecked. That culture’s huge and not wholly unwarranted advantage relies on the assumption that leftists are good people.

The left did not invade Iraq, it did not crash the banking system, it did not impose the bedroom tax, or ransack company pension schemes and head off to Monaco. Even when the left was wrong, it was in the 1066 and All That formulation ‘wrong but wromantic’. The Tories, even in their fleeting moments of competence, which occur ever more rarely these days, could only ever be ‘right but repulsive’.

‘The left’ can get away with the assumption of romantic virtue because it has been on the sidelines. Who cared what it did or said? Nor Corbyn leads the opposition and all its failings are on display.

The ‘left’, you might have thought, is against the far right. ‘Racist’ and ‘fascist’ are the insults leftists throw against everyone from their stuffy parents to members of the parliamentary Conservative party. Yet it is normal now to hear the fascist conspiracy theory fall from the lips of a supporter of Jeremy Corbyn or a supporter of Marine Le Pen.

Supporters? What am I saying? Corbyn himself is happy to endorse the most disgraceful liars. Corbyn decided that an Arab deported for saying that Jews feasted on the blood of Christian children was a victim of the ‘pro-Israel lobby’. He opined that the church was doing the Zionists’ dirty work when it disciplined an Anglican vicar, from Haslemere of all places, who cited Holocaust deniers and said 9/11 was the fault of the… oh go on, guess. Polite political commentators say that I must add at this point that ‘Jeremy Corbyn is not an anti-Semite’. Sorry to be a fact-checking bore, but if he isn’t a racist, then he is a remarkably stupid old man who in George Orwell’s phrase is ‘playing with fire without knowing fire is hot’.

If Labour is ever to win again, the poison from the far left will have to drained. And not just because Corbyn will keep the right in power indefinitely. Nothing will truly change unless there is a change of mind as well as a change of tactics. Those capable of self-criticism should at least consider that the prejudices they have endorsed may have been immoral. They should, but probably won’t. I can guess their reply. They will say: ‘We have not endorsed racism, we have just engaged in legitimate opposition to Israel.’

I could go on about how the supposed supporters of the Palestinians on the left do not appear to understand that Jeremy Corbyn’s ‘friends’ in Hamas and Hezbollah oppress Arabs as much as Jews. I could add that a left that cannot oppose clerical tyrants is no longer a force for progress in the world. But let us move away from the blood- and God-soaked ‘Holy Land’, and consider how, as a matter of course, the faction of the left in charge of the Labour party appears on the propaganda channels of Iran and Russia, and how it sides with Islamist conservatives against Muslim liberals.

The political consequence of these shame-ful double standards will be enormous. Not only is the Corbyn left comfortable with regimes that all decent liberals and leftists have a duty to oppose. It is comfortable with regimes that mean Britain harm. Patriotism may be an embarrassing subject today and no one talks of ‘traitors aiding the enemy’, but this does not mean that the patriotic impulse has died. The British public will still notice that the leaders of the opposition are more comfortable with hostile foreign countries than their own country, and the majority of their own countrymen and women too.

In France it is automatic for respectable politicians to condemn racism and then add ‘and anti-Semitism’. Perhaps anti-Semitism is
not taken as seriously here because the Nazis stopped at the Channel and we never had to live through our own version of Vichy. But there is a more contemporary reason for the failure to tackle it, or even admit its existence, that could unravel social-democratic politics.

Most Jews are white. And across the middle-class left, it is held that racism is not racism when it is directed against whites in general and that entitled aristocrat of our age, the straight white male, in particular. The dangers for centre-left parties should be obvious. In Europe and in Donald Trump’s America, the white-working-class base of social-democratic parties is falling away. Voters will carry on leaving if they keep hearing expensively educated voices tell them in perfectly constructed sentences that they are the oppressors who must be overthrown. Why should a white man with miserable job and no prospects tolerate a left-wing elite that casts him as an overprivileged villain? If I were in his shoes, I would loathe the lies and point-scoring and want nothing to do with such politicians.

A ‘left-wing’ egalitarianism that takes so little notice of class is fake. Like a ‘left-wing’ foreign policy that is on the side of the reactionary and obscurantist, it will first infuriate and then fail.

The tragedy for Britain is that a dose of true left-wing radicalism is needed now. Only the most complacent Tories maintain that our economic order should continue unreformed. Simon Wren-Lewis, Chris Dillow and other left-wing economist whom I have always respected say there is a good case for many of John McDonnell’s economic policies. An entrepreneurial state that supports start-ups through a government investment bank is a sensible way of dealing with the manifold failings of the banking system to promote new business. Left-wing warnings against the government’s combination of austerity with close-to-zero interest rates are wholly justified. When the next shock comes, the supposedly prudent Osborne will have left this country naked before the storm without one monetary lever to pull.

Like a case of dysentery, the Corbyn moment will pass. My fear is that it will be replaced not with a serious commitment to reform, but with the terrified conformism that characterised the Labour party after Tony Blair became leader. Labour will be so desperate to prove it is strong on national security that it will agree with whatever the generals and security services propose. It will be so desperate to appear economically reputable that it will endorse rather than oppose the stagnant system the Cameron government has presided over.

The most haunting line about politics I know comes from the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci. While he lay in one of Mussolini’s jails, he wrote ‘The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear.’

Corbynism is a morbid symptom — the curse my generation of left-wingers have handed to on to our children, who deserved a better and more principled politics. In all likelihood, when the interregnum is over, we will return to normality, even though normality is the last thing Britain needs.

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Zac Goldsmith spent almost every day out on the stump during his London mayoral campaign dressed in the formal dark suit he inherited from his father, and had recut on his death in 1997. At least that is what a member of his team told me as I was out observing proceedings one day.

I think that detail was offered as a bit of journalistic ‘colour’ to show Zac’s sense of filial duty, but that was the only sense in which his painfully understated campaigning could be said to have owed anything to Sir James Goldsmith’s bombastic, manic style when he ran the Referendum party.

Some political campaigns are failures; others are simply tragedies, and Zac Goldsmith’s falls into the latter category. Writing this two days before polling day, one cannot exclude the possibility that turnout could sink as low as the 32–33 per cent mark, and that white middle-class voters in the outer suburbs will turn out while the younger, more liberal supporters of Labour’s Sadiq Khan will stay in bed. Zac’s staff were assiduously promoting this notion.

But even if there is an upset, Goldsmith’s campaign must be classed as an embarrassment, and in some ways a disgrace, as an effort by Conservatives to win over the electorate of a great capital city. It is worth remembering that last summer Zac was 2/1 favourite to win on what then seemed likely to be a prospectus of optimism.

Zac Goldsmith himself seems an amiable enough soul, though his thin CV and past business failures scarcely qualify him to stand up as the candidate of enterprise against what he classes as the ‘divisive’ figure of Sadiq Khan.

Khan seems dim and slippery and could have been beaten by the right sort of Conservative candidate, especially after the new Islington-based Labour leadership cabal declared jihad against London Jews. This raises the question: who at Conservative HQ really thought it was a good idea to present to multicultural London as successor to an Old Etonian mayor with star quality another OE — with none? Notwithstanding some voters’ anxieties about the people Khan has shared a platform with over the years, was that really do-able in London these days?

The absurdity of the proposition first became obvious to me when, against initial resistance from the Zac media operation, I joined the campaign in Romford market on St George’s Day. Romford, one of the outer parts of London where Zac needed to pile up votes in order to have a chance, remains so doggedly Caucasian that even the Bob Marley tribute band banging out reggae numbers were white.

Here the problem was immediately apparent. The locals wanted to talk to Zac not about transport or business rates, but about Europe, and why we should leave.

I couldn’t help thinking that had Boris Johnson been out campaigning here, he would have been wearing a comedy red and white top hat, or would have borrowed someone’s bulldog for the day, or at least done something to get himself noticed. One of the lessons to be learned from this fiasco of a mayoral campaign is how incredibly good Boris Johnson is as a political showman who can close out elections.

Through Romford I tagged along with Zac and a nicely spoken girl from Conservative HQ and genial Tim, who was Zac’s press man, and it took me a while to fathom why this felt such a peculiar campaign event. Then it hit me: I was the only journalist who had come along to cover it. True, there was a photographer present, manically taking pictures of Zac, but it turned out she was working for the campaign, not the media.

There was not a single reporter present — no one from the Romford Recorder, or the Standard, or from BBC London television news or any of the various local radio stations. Later that day we moved on from Essex into the Tory redoubts of Chislehurst and Bromley in the Kent suburbs, and all day The Spectator maintained its absolute exclusivity in its access to the Goldsmith campaign.

It is often said that modern political campaigning is designed only for television cameras; Back Zac was almost a virtual campaign that seemed to occur in a vacuum, shielded from the public gaze, as though people might be embarrassed by it.

It turned out there were good reasons to shield Zac from the press. When he was presented to the media, it tended not to end well. He went to a pub to be photographed with Boris having a pint but held his glass like a 1950s pantomime dame. He attended the Asian Awards dinner, at which he professed his love of Bollywood films, but then when asked on camera which were his favourite films and stars, he couldn’t name one. Watch it on YouTube — through your fingers if you like excruciating video nasties.

The Asian Awards event was a month ago, but the toe-curling footage was distributed only at the weekend just as Labour’s anti-Jewish stuff reached its peak. Sadiq Khan is famously the son of a bus driver, but his campaign operation was smoothly overseen by Patrick Hennessy, less famously another Old Etonian, who instinctively knew to keep something in his back pocket for a difficult phase in the news cycle.

Back Zac was run by Mark Fullbrook, who officially oversaw strategy, but the fingerprints of his business partner, the Australian hired gun Sir Lynton Crosby, seem to be all over the ‘dog whistle’ questions about Khan and his nasty Islamist friends. This criticism of Khan might have worked had he been running to be mayor of Basingstoke, but in London, where many voters pride themselves on their ‘tolerance’ to all, it was unlikely to gain much traction. It also allowed Khan’s slicker media operation to bat back the charge with claims of ‘Islamophobia’, which, though clearly unfair, do damage.

After an event in Chislehurst, I spoke to Zac in a remote part of a car park where he furtively satisfied his nicotine craving with an e-cigarette. I had heard indirectly from other sources that Zac’s brother Ben and sister Jemima and the wider family were furious with Cameron and Conservative HQ for messing up his campaign and for not allowing him to run as his own man. Zac was too stoic to be drawn on this point.

He insisted that Cameron had been entirely supportive, as had Boris, but one is left to wonder. He added that ‘nothing I have said about Sadiq Khan is untrue’, which is no doubt correct. But is also not really the point.

A toe-curling tragedy
Zac Goldsmith’s London campaign was an embarrassment

STEPHEN ROBINSON
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The axeman next door

What happened when I tried American neighbourliness in London

MISTI TRAYA

When I moved to London, my husband Henry gave me a copy of Kate Fox’s *Watching the English: The Hidden Rules of English Behaviour*. He was hoping the gift would avoid an awkward conversation about our cultural differences. As an American, I cannot think of anything more English than that.

Fox’s chapter about introductions bothered me. The brash American approach: ‘Hi, I’m Bill from Iowa,’ particularly if accompanied by an outstretched hand and a beaming smile, makes the English wince and cringe. I had never known friendliness to be cringe-worthy. I felt sorry for Bill from Iowa. I pictured him arriving in my neighbourhood and being scorned for enthusiastically introducing himself to strangers.

Henry tried to explain. ‘We don’t talk to neighbours. Maybe people in the country do, but not Londoners. In fact, I’d say people move to London just so they don’t have to talk to neighbours.’

I could not get to the bottom of this misanthropy. So eventually I stopped seeking answers and accepted Henry’s words as fact. At the same time, I decided to keep the American spirit of neighbourliness in my heart. I resolved to knock on strangers’ doors and introduce myself while offering them slices of buttermilk chocolate cake. Because seriously, how else do you meet people?

The house opposite ours boasted the prettiest front garden in the neighbourhood. Passers-by would stop and Instagram it and offered him hazelnut biscuits.

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The house opposite ours boasted the prettiest front garden in the neighbourhood. Passers-by would stop and Instagram it and offered him hazelnut biscuits.

In the months that followed, Sam would show up unannounced and invite himself in, a 70-year-old man whom he accused of playing the radio too loud. We thought nothing of it and offered him hazelnut biscuits.

Our daughter danced to a *Top of the Pops* special. She showed Sam her books and introduced him to her toys. Some of her teddies gave him kisses. Before Sam left, I gave him a sack of dark-chocolate almonds with a red satin ribbon. He pulled me into a bear hug and smiled. I wished him a happy Christmas and told him that if he ever needed a break from his neighbour’s noise then he should pop round for tea. I thought that a very correct, English offer.

In the months that followed, Sam would show up unannounced and invite himself in. He would sulk in our kitchen and complain about his neighbour. I would offer him cups of tea but he said he didn’t like my tea. Later he would tell me that he didn’t like tea at all. So I brewed coffee and made supportive noises as he moaned.

The only thing that would snap Sam out of a mood was my Sarah Raven catalogue. Sarah Raven is the Martha Stewart of English gardening. If you want to buy Genoa zinnias or master floristry in a weekend, she is your woman. Sam would sit cross-legged with her catalogue on his lap, flipping pages and dog-earring the ones he liked best. Tulip collections, perfect perennials, stunning alliums. He wanted them all. He also wanted to know whether I put edible flowers in my salads, because he was thinking about planting a bed.

After a while Henry gave Sam his mobile number, hoping this would curb the unannounced visits. It did not. Sam’s surprise visits continued until one night he had a mini-meltdown at ours. I was bathing our daughter and Henry was catching up on work emails when Sam came in, insisting we didn’t like him. We assured him we did. Then he apologised for being insecure. Again we told him it was all right. Neither of us wanted to upset him. Sam became frantic, like a bird trapped in a house. Abruptly he left. Henry and I agreed that we had to create some distance.

Then one night Sam woke the whole street by howling at the full moon around 4 a.m. Henry and I assumed he was drunk. Then Sam started shouting that only he knew the truth and would somebody please help him. It went on for 20 minutes until the cops arrived and took him away.

Sam has not been home since. The following day, the police and several neighbours paid me a visit. They told me that Sam had tried to drop an axe on his neighbour in the dark from the top of the staircase. He had missed. Locals had already nicknamed him the Axeman.

After being carted off by the police, Sam called or sent text messages to Henry almost daily for almost two months. Henry never replied, though Sam begged him to call and expressed a hope that ‘everything is still cool’. At one point, his messages took the tone of a jilted lover. ‘You don’t have the heart to call me?’ was the last he sent before Henry changed his number.

Sam’s flowers have died. Grasses have grown tall and weeds have moved in. The garden beds look as if they were sown with malice.

My poor husband is somewhat scarred by the ordeal. I can’t blame him. He gave me a book outlining the rules of English social protocol and I ignored them. I invited the Axeman to tea.

Still, for all that’s gone wrong, Henry and I have met four great people on the block. Our world is a little bigger. For that I am thankful.
Let’s renew the EU
There is more to the idea of Europe than narrow economic considerations. The Remain side needs to say so

CORMAC MURPHY-O’CONNOR

From the time of the French revolution, the Catholic Church has always encouraged relationships between nations that draw them together rather than divide them. It is for this reason that the Church has always been broadly supportive of the European Union, although with reservations.

There will be many Catholics on both sides of the coming referendum. Many of us have concerns about recent developments in the EU, such as the official removal of the reference to the continent’s Christian history from the European Constitution a few years ago. The more general push towards secularisation troubles us, too.

Recent popes have questioned the tendency to regard the goal of the EU as the optimisation of market forces. They have challenged Europe to rediscover its roots and to renew itself and reconnect with its citizens, and to realise that a narrow EU will eventually atrophy and die.

It is instructive to read what Pope-emeritus Benedict says about Europe. He argues that the approach of Europe’s founding fathers — which spoke to the moral heritage of the continent — is absent from the debate about its future. Europe’s founding fathers, he says, ‘were seeking a European identity that would not dissolve or deny the national identities but rather unite them at a higher level of unity into one community of peoples’.

He argues that, without reference to the values and common traditions that made Europe in the past, the future of Europe is at risk. Europe ‘must not give up on itself’, he says. He further warns of a Europe that has become hopelessly divided, and the European Parliament two years ago, he too urged the continent’s democratic leaders ‘to return to the firm conviction of the founding fathers of a European Union which envisioned a future based on a capacity to work together in bridging divisions and in fostering peace and fellowship between all the peoples of this continent’.

‘A Europe which is no longer open to the transcendent dimension of life is a Europe which risks slowly losing its own soul and that humanistic spirit which it still loves and defends,’ he added. Pope Francis affirmed that ‘Unity does not mean uniformity of political, economic and cultural life or ways of thinking. Indeed, all authentic unity draws from the rich diversities which make it up. In this sense it is like a family, which is all the more united when each of its members is free to be fully himself or herself. I consider Europe as a family of peoples.’

I was born and brought up in England and, like many others, I have Irish roots. One of my brothers was a regular officer in the British Army and fought in the Korean War.

The need for reform and renewal in Europe is evident. The UK’s withdrawal would make it harder to build a union that is greater than the sum of its parts. The UK should not only look for its own interests, but be concerned for all human society on our continent and throughout the world.

I care deeply about Britain and its future. However, I also feel close to Europe because I lived for many years in Italy and, as a bishop, I have been in touch with fellow bishops from all the European countries on a regular basis. As a result, I understand how they feel about the need for wider European unity and cooperation.

This year’s EU referendum requires the people of our country to think seriously about a range of questions. Is Europe just a marriage of convenience or has it a set of common values? How can we ensure that the engagement and debate of the weeks leading up to the referendum are not held at the level of the lowest common denominator or simply reduced to the utilitarian?

Is there the risk of a wave of English nationalism? Would a vote to leave the EU lead to Scottish secession? Would it confuse and complicate the relations between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland? The EU has been a stabilising force in Europe over the past 60 years: how would those advocating a ‘leave’ argument build bridges with the EU rather than barriers? How can all Europeans take up the challenge of the popes to refocus and to renew Europe?

It seems to me that all the above is not just a British problem but one shared by the whole of Europe. Our continent has reached a crossroads. There are very many crises facing Europe. The referendum in the UK is about much more than simply whether this country remains in the EU. It touches, as our friends from beyond the borders of Europe have reminded us in recent weeks, fundamental issues about Britain’s place in the world.

Personally, I regret that this referendum is taking place without sufficient awareness and reflection on the more profound issues of our time. Those campaigning for Britain to stay in the EU need to show that the challenges facing the UK and our European partners are better faced together than apart, and they need to explain why this is the case. A narrow utilitarian approach — trying to demonstrate how much better off each family might be in pounds and pence — will not work. The need for reform and renewal in Europe is evident. It is still not clear whether the EU is capable of such renewal, but the UK’s withdrawal would, I think, make renewal even more difficult.

That is the main reason why I wish Britain to remain a part of the European community and cooperate with its partners in making a vital contribution to that renewal with its own particular creativity and its desire to build a union that is greater than the sum of its parts. The UK should not only look for its own interests, but be concerned for all human society on our continent and throughout the world.

Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O’Connor is the Archbishop Emeritus of Westminster.
MARY WAKEFIELD

In praise of doctors’ handwriting

My baby and I excel at blood tests. He (tiny, jaundiced) stretches out naked under the hospital’s hot cot-lamps like a Saint-Tropez lothario. The nurse rubs his foot to bring blood to his veins, and I lean over the cot to feed the greedy midget, who squawks just once as he’s stabbed.

I watch the drops bulge and drip and I puzzle over the NHS and its mysteries. Why do nurses collect baby blood in glass straws with an opening no wider than a pin? It’s like an impossible task set by a whimsical tyrant.

Even more surreal is the way the NHS handles patient records. Because the midget and I have visited so many parts of the NHS — maternity wards, A&E, GP surgeries, neonatal units — we’ve become a crack two-man investigative team. Did you know that every hospital keeps separate records for the same patient, and that they don’t, often can’t, share them, even in an emergency? I had no idea.

My boy was born in a different hospital from this one, on the other side of town. He (tiny, jaundiced) stretches out naked under the hospital’s hot cot-lamps and I excel at blood tests.

But as we’ve hung around in waiting rooms, the midget and I, talking to nurses and GPs, to my surprise I’ve found my mind quite changed. Far from being straightforward and sensible, project ‘paper-free’ — however decentralised — is deeply unpopular and largely unworkable. It has all the hallmarks of another billion-pound digital turkey.

One of Jeremy Hunt’s great bugbears has been the lack of data available to frontline medics. ‘It’s crazy that paramedics cannot access a full medical history of someone they are picking up in an emergency,’ he’s said. The only time I’ve met Mr Hunt, in his vast, sunlit corner office, he repeated this refrain: ‘We need an iPad for every paramedic.’

I asked several paramedics what they thought, and back came a general sigh of despair: ‘Oh God. Not this again.’ Hunt’s iPads, they say, would endanger lives. It’s a waste of time to input data electronically. A patient’s medical records in an emergency. It’s a waste of time to input data electronically, too. Until the technology radically improves, it takes longer than handwriting.

Back in 2011, the brilliant Dr Max Pemberton wrote a piece for the Telegraph about the dangers of swapping notepads for screens. Max had been doing the rounds in a ward when he noticed that the place was chock-a-block with chunky-looking touchscreen tablets, turned off and unused. They were meant for recording patients’ data, explained a nurse, but no one bothered with them. If dropped, they broke, game over; the software didn’t sync properly with the central database; and anyway the Wi-Fi was often down. It took twice as long as handwriting, the nurse said.

Dr Max put me on to an excellent piece in the British Medical Journal this month by a GP called Margaret McCartney, which makes a chilling point about Hunt’s digital drive. Perhaps because they seem so sensible to any layman with an iPhone, there’s been no testing of the measures in this great electronic leap forward. None of these innovations have been subject to the usual scrutiny, she says. Anything new introduced to the NHS should, as a matter of course, have been rigorously tested, but this is not evidence-based.

The plan is to spend £30 million on ‘releasing time to care’ and ‘acceleration towards a paper-free environment’. But: ‘Where’s the evidence on time-saving?’ asks Dr McCartney. I used to spend four to five minutes completing death certificates in my neatest writing. Now it takes me much longer. My secretary used to type referrals; now I have to do them electronically, eating into time needed for direct patient care.’

As I look back over the past month of sunbeds and scans, baroque as the system seems, I can’t imagine how electronic note-taking and storing would have worked. When the midget and I next visit A&E for a break or bump, what use will endless screens of his bilirubin levels be? What I failed to think about when I cheered for project ‘paper-free’ is that it be useful, data needs curating, sorting and tailoring. And who in the NHS has the time for that?

The first ‘progress report’ into project ‘paper-free’ was, as it happens, released just a few weeks ago, with an introduction by a Mr Paul Rice, ‘head of technical strategy’, and the upshot of the report is that there’s been, no surprise, almost no progress. Paul begins with a joke about an Irishman, then ends with a little burst of desperate lyricism. ‘I grew up in a landscape of rolling drumlins, vertiginous cliff edges and apparently endless sandy strands,’ he writes. ‘For local communities, the route to paper-free may well share these characteristics: a reasonable map, sturdy boots. Companions. A sense of purpose. Best foot forward.’

What Paul means, I think, is that though billions have been pledged and millions spent, his boots have already sunk into a sandy strand, the map is drenched and unreadable, and his companions, quite sensibly, have fled.
The slow death of environmentalism

WOuld you describe yourself as an ‘environmentalist’? I would, mainly to annoy greenies, but also because it’s true. If your definition of an environmentalist is someone who loves immersing himself in the natural world, makes a study of its ways and cares deeply about its future, I’m at least as much of one as David Attenborough.

But I can see why many fellow nature lovers might balk at the term, especially now that it has become so grievously politicised. That would explain the recent Gallup poll — it was taken in the US but I suspect it applies to Britain too — showing how dramatically this label has plunged in popularity. In 1991 the majority of Americans self-identified as environmentalists — 78 per cent of them. Now, it’s just 42 per cent: less than half.

Why has the term so fallen out of favour? Well there’s perhaps a clue in the fact that the decline has been far more precipitous among Republicans (down to 27 per cent) than among Democrats (down to 56 per cent). In other words, where 25 years ago the environment was considered everyone’s domain, it has since been hijacked by the left and turned into yet another partisan issue.

If you believe the greenies, the blame for this lies with an intransigent right so imprisoned by ideology that it stubbornly denies ‘the science’. Actually, though, I’d say it has more to do with the militant left exploiting environmentalism as a fashionable cloak for its ongoing war on liberty, free markets and small government.

Note the tactics. Like the Viet Minh or the Taleban, the environmental movement has become hugely skilled in the art of asymmetric warfare. The number of true believers is much smaller than you’d think — but they’ve managed in recent years to punch massively above their weight by infiltrating all the key positions of influence and by terrorising those who disagree with them.

Challenge the ‘consensus’ — whether you’re a scientist like Willie Soon or even a cuddly TV presenter like David Bellamy or Johnny Ball — and these people will stop at nothing to try to destroy your career. This is the tactic that the Marxist urban revolutionary Saul Alinsky advised in his manifesto Rules for Radicals: ‘Pick the target, freeze it, personalise it and polarise it.’

Which goes some way towards explaining, I think, why private people tend to be more vocally sceptical about stuff like global warming or the pointlessness of recycling or carbon taxes etc. than they are in public. No one wants to be caught speaking out of turn by the green Stasi, for fear of the consequences for their reputation or their job prospects.

Look at what happened to our own Matt Ridley when he applied for the chairmanship of the Natural History Museum. A distinguished, Oxford-educated scientist and a brilliant, internationally respected communicator, Ridley would have been perfect for the job. But as Charles Moore reported in his Notes the other week, Ridley’s mild climate scepticism ruled him out of contention.

When you write about this sort of thing, you run the risk of being tarred by the green lobby as a paranoid conspiracy theorist. Again, this is very much part of the environmentalist modus operandi. Activists like Bob Ward of the Grantham Institute and Richard Black of the EU-funded Energy and Climate Intelligence Unit are paid handsomely to pour ridicule on ‘deniers’, make noisy complaints to the press regulator Ipso and concoct letters like the one recently sent to the editor of the Times warning that by giving voice to sceptics he was turning his paper into a ‘laughing stock’.

The letter (sent privately, but leaked in the Guardian) was signed by no fewer than 13 members of the House of Lords, several of them scientists, who had held distinguished offices ranging from Astronomer Royal and president of the Royal Society to chairman of the Financial Services Authority. Any casual observer might naturally assume that such pillars of the establishment must have a point.

It’s only if you’re familiar with the territory that you realise how often the same names — Lords May, Rees, Stern and Deben; Sir Crispin Tickell; Sir Paul Nurse, et al — recur with tiresome regularity. Probably in their fields they were oncerather good. But since then prestige has gone to their heads and they’ve turned into professional political activists brandishing a spurious environmental authority which is all too persuasive to people who don’t know better.

This is precisely the strategy that one of the progenitors of cultural Marxism, Antonio Gramsci, was advocating when he talked about the ‘long march through the institutions’. In order to dominate the political argument, he realised, you don’t necessarily need to be in government. You just need to make sure you’ve nabbed all the influential posts in academe, the media, the arts, big business and so on.

Not all these figures are on the left. Lord Deben — still best known for the incident when, as John Selwyn Gummer, he publicly fed his young daughter a beefburger to show us we weren’t all going to die of BSE — no doubt thinks of himself as a Conservative.

Nor are they all necessarily political. Some are in it for the money (remember, this is now an annual $1.5 trillion industry, so there’s plenty of trough room for the snouts); some — luvvies especially — are in it because all their mates are; some because they’ve taken the environmentalists at their word and genuinely, sincerely believe that this is about saving the planet.

But regardless of their motivation, the result is always the same: bigger government, higher taxes, more regulation, less freedom. Ordinary people can smell a rat, even if they’re not quite sure where the body is or why it’s stinking. They just know something’s rotten in the state of environmentalism; they don’t want to be tainted by it, and very sensibly they are too.

‘Do you ever feel like you’re stuck in a rut?’

JAMES DELINGPOLE

Notes the other week, Ridley’s mild climate scepticism ruled him out of contention.

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LETTERS

The EU gravy train
Sir: Despite his splendid forename, your deputy editor Freddy Gray has a very tenuous grasp of human nature. Having accurately detected a simmering voter mutiny across much of Europe and the UK, he decrees that those heartily sick and tired of being constantly lied to and thus treated with contempt by the EU gravy-train-riding establishments must be either extreme right-wing or mad (‘A right mess’, 30 April). Actually, we are neither.

Does he really believe it to be coincidental that 95 per cent of the UK establishment (there are still a few good ‘uns in the mix) are screaming, desperate that their gravy train not be derailed by mere electors? The EU is the biggest taxpayer-funded free ride in the world, and there is nothing right-wing or insane in deciding enough is enough.

Finally, is it not odd that the same faces and the same voices warned us that we would face disaster unless we abolished the pound sterling and adopted the euro? The Remain campaign of today is the same tripe we were fed back then.

Frederick Forsyth
Beaconsfield, Bucks

Cameron’s Scottish absence
Sir: The Prime Minister’s decision not to make an appearance on behalf of the Scottish Conservatives during this Scottish parliamentary election is extremely disappointing. I wonder if this was his idea? Either way, it doesn’t look good. Of course, it takes a good deal of moral courage, not to say a thick skin, to take on the SNP bully boys. But can you imagine Boris Johnson being afraid to take on the challenge?

David Cameron has been a godsend of a Prime Minister in these difficult economic times. But electing to stay away from the Scottish election plays beautifully to the SNP’s separatist agenda. We voted by a good margin to stay part of the United Kingdom in September 2014. By staying away from Scotland during these Scottish elections, the Prime Minister has made a huge political error.

Andrew Hamilton
Gifford, East Lothian

Deaths from Chernobyl
Sir: Your Barometer (30 April) significantly understates the deaths resulting from the Chernobyl disaster, particularly among the many ‘volunteers’ for the clear-up operations, who were attracted by the promise of a year off army service, and who worked totally without appropriate protection. I doubt we will ever get reliable statistics. Six years ago, when I visited the site with a group of journalists, the then head of operations at Chernobyl told us that of 40 people in the vicinity of the reactor, 39 had died instantly or within weeks; only one survived, dying in 2003.

David Conway
Enfield

Environmental protection
Sir: In their letter to The Spectator (Letters, 30 April), John Gummer, Michael Heseltine, Chris Patten et al seem to have inadvertently exposed the fatal failure of the Remain campaign to grasp the fundamentals of basic democracy. They stated that leaving the EU would ‘undercut existing UK environmental protections, since there is no guarantee that the high standards we have negotiated within Europe will remain in place in Britain’.

What an odd thing to say. An independent UK could decide whatever levels of environmental protection it thought appropriate for the UK. These former government ministers, however, seem to suggest that it is better to have standards imposed upon us from outside because our elected government is incapable of managing our own affairs.

Anthony Whitehead
Bristol

Cluff’s Borneo adventures
Sir: Harry Mount’s wonderful interview with Algy Cluff (‘The unlikely oilman’, 30 April) could ring a bell in many paratroopers and guardsmen’s minds. As the article reminds us, he served in the Grenadier Guards in Africa, Cyprus and Malaysia and, which was not mentioned, also in the No. 1 (Gds) Independent Paras in the Borneo jungle. I know this because I have Peter Harclerode’s outstanding history of our airborne forces, Paral, and among the photographs is one of Algy Cluff preparing to deploy into the jungle.

Edward Brandt
Ropley, Hampshire

If Larkin were here…
Sir: I have been reading The Spectator for more than half a century, but never before have I been moved to tears by an article. Douglas Murray’s poetry competition moistened my eyes, however, because of its fierce (and fearless) defence of free speech (‘A poem for Erdogan’, 23 April). It calls for the scatological vocabulary and the poetic gifts of my erstwhile acquaintance Philip Larkin. I am sure he would have submitted something juicy to annoy President Erdogan. To think: we might soon decide to remain in an EU of which Mrs Merkel will have Turkey as a member.

Francis Bown
London E3

Mexican bullfighters
Sir: Your bon viveur Bruce Anderson considers that ‘bullfighting is only suitable for Spaniards’ (Drink, 23 April). What about the great Mexican toreros Manolo Martinez, Eloy Cavazos et al?

Bob Hands
Bridport, Dorset

Poetry appreciation
Sir: A brief note of appreciation for the Clive James poem ‘Hiatus’ (30 April), Inevitably, it is tinged with sadness in the knowledge that we shall not have his wit and silken thoughts for much longer, but it made such a refreshing change. While you still have strength in your fingers to attack a keyboard, Clive, let’s have more.

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Scrapping RBS’s toxic brand should be a step towards a final break-up

Royal Bank of Scotland is at last about to dump the ‘RBS’ logotype promoted by its fallen chieftain Fred Goodwin, who thought ‘Scotland’ too parochial for a bank with global ambitions, though he was famously keen on royal connections. The wonder is that this decision has taken seven-and-a-half years since the bank was saved by £46 billion of taxpayers’ money. I suppose Goodwin’s successors, now led by Ross McEwan, have had too many other fires to fight, what with losses piling upon losses (first-quarter results twice as bad as last year’s), delays in the spin-off of the Williams & Glyn subsidiary, computer problems, and a looming scandal in the Swiss branch of Coutts, the group’s wealth arm.

But it was ever thus in large banking groups, and recognition that the parent brand was terminally tainted — while those of subsidiaries such as NatWest and Ulster Bank were still capable of rehabilitation — should have come much sooner. All this is tied up with a belief in the Treasury, prompted by McEwan’s predecessor Stephen Hester, that a higher sale price will eventually be achieved for the taxpayers’ 73 per cent stake in ex-RBS if it is largely held together rather than sold in chunks.

I beg to differ: I believe it will only be saleable if broken up, and I’m hoping this debranding might prepare the ground. Meanwhile, I gather that NatWest — in which the group’s corporate lending will henceforth be focused — would like to be seen as a reinvigorated ‘challenger’ specialising in the lost art of relationship banking: that’s a worthy aspiration.

Don’t call me AOB

It’s a useful rule of thumb that any business which reduces its name to its initials is heading for trouble. Having gone that way under Goodwin, RBS almost doubled down last year by becoming the lower-case ‘rbs’, before apparently thinking better of it. British Petroleum became ‘BP’ after its 1998 merger with Amoco, tried to claim a greener image by suggesting that the B might stand for ‘Beyond’, and has never really been stable since. ‘British’, like Scottish, was evidently an unsuitable tag for a global player.

Likewise BG, the former exploration arm of British Gas, was an unhappy ship for years before its recent takeover by the robustly unabbreviated Royal Dutch Shell. The homely British Home Stores became faux-trendy BhS (later Bhs and BHS, as if it made any difference) as the lost sheep of the Storehouse group, following its merger with Habitat and Mothercare in 1986; when the full name was eventually revived in small print below the big letters, it was too late.

You’ve probably got the gist of this theory by now, but I’ve always wondered why Kentucky Fried Chicken — as part of a lacklustre fast-food division of PepsiCo in the early 1990s — reduced itself to ‘KFC’. Some say it’s because ‘Fried’ sounded bad, even though pressure-frying in super-hot oil was what most customers thought made the product ‘finger lickin’ good’. Others claimed that it was because the product wasn’t actually ‘Chicken’, but meat of a factory-bred featherless mutant. That — I hasten to add — was categorically an urban myth.

Zero to hero?

This column may be the only one in the national press that has ever said anything kind about Mike Ashley, the Sports Direct tycoon and Newcastle United owner — even if some of my remarks were tongue-in-cheek. So I’m pleased to see Ashley poised as the white knight of BHS, having revealed that he’s contemplating a bid for the chain in which there ‘would not be any job losses… and all stores would remain open’.

That would be a remarkable outcome, but for all his rebarbative traits Ashley is, as I wrote here, ‘a remarkable self-made success story’. And if the rescue happens it will tie his detractors in knots. MPs of all colours are exercised over billionaire former BHS boss Sir Philip Green’s ripping out of giant dividends on behalf of his Monaco-based wife and his sale of the business for £1, leaving huge pension liabilities: it was a Tory who resorted to that tired cliché, ‘the unacceptable face of capitalism’. Ashley is also a billionaire, and is hated by the left for his allegedly ruthless employment practices at Sports Direct. Both are likely to resist summonses to be grilled by the Commons business select committee. But 11,000 BHS jobs rescued, even on Ashley’s terms, would be a lot better than 11,000 jobs lost; he will go from zero to hero, and I will feel quietly smug for having stuck up for him.

The other Ranieri

The world now has two famous managers called Ranieri. One is Lew Ranieri, the corpulent monster of Salomon Brothers’ 1980s New York trading floor. Thanks to Michael Lewis’s Liar’s Poker, that Ranieri is forever associated with ‘Food Frenzy Fridays’ — vast pig-outs of Mexican and Italian takeaway — and the observation by a fellow trader that ‘Lewie would piss on your desk’. He was eventually fired by Salomon and withdrew into sulky seclusion before returning to become even more notorious as the progenitor of the mortgage-backed securities market that nearly destroyed the global banking system. He was named by Time as one of ‘The 25 People to Blame for the Financial Crisis’.

The other Ranieri, four years younger, is Claudio, the heroically understated manager of Leicester City FC. We’re all now studying Claudio’s management techniques as closely as stock-pickers soak up the wisdom of Warren Buffett. I note so far that he relies on solid defensive strategies, rarely bothers with new tactics and changes of line-up, and has no truck with excessive pay for so-called stars. He also keeps his cool and his dignity when events run against him.

So I think I know which Ranieri I would pick to look after my investment portfolio. But I also see that Claudio, like Lew, likes to throw pizza parties for his team. I wonder whether they are related?
The UK is on the final approach to Heathrow expansion and a prosperous future. We apologise for a delay while First Officer Osborne waits for the Captain to make some final checks.

A new runway at Heathrow is backed by local residents, businesses, exporters, airlines, trade unions, regional airports and a majority of MPs. Heathrow is the “clear and unanimous choice” of independent experts commissioned by the Government to decide where to build new airport capacity.

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Unmask the real Venice

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Your passport to a better trip
Mark Cocker fears that Kathmandu’s Shangri-La magic is beginning to wear a bit thin
Alexandra Coghlan explores an age-old tendency to brand female composers as loose women and even witches
Suzi Feay advises stock-piling the tins after reading Lionel Shriver’s new dystopian novel
Rupert Christiansen and Deborah Ross try to get to the bottom of the bonkers Florence Foster Jenkins
Lloyd Evans finds Dr Faustus mooning the dress circle and Satan buggering a goblin at Duke of York’s
Peter Phillips bids farewell to his music column after 33 years

‘Pineapple with cockroaches’, 1702–03, by Maria Merian
Mathew Dennison — p46
In a recent interview, the African American actor Wendell Pierce revealed he had once been told by the head of casting at a Hollywood studio: ‘I couldn’t put you in a Shakespeare movie, because they didn’t have black people then.’ The story was repeated on social media with a mixture of horror and hilarity, many responding — as Pierce himself did — ‘You ever heard of Othello?’

Yet the head of casting’s comments represent a common misconception and a significant gap in historical memory. Black Africans have been a visible presence in European life for centuries — and not only as slaves. In the 16th century, there were black musicians, such as Henry VIII’s trumpeter, John Blanke. There were black scholars, such as the Spanish poet and professor of Latin Juan Latino. There were black holy men, such as St Benedict of Palermo. There were entirely ordinary black people: a 1565 collection of etchings of 72 Flemish peasants, apparently based on the paintings of Pieter Brueghel, included three distinctly African faces. And it seems there was at least one black (or mixed-race) head of state: Alessandro de’ Medici, Duke of Florence, husband to a daughter of the Holy Roman Emperor and half-brother to the Queen of France.

Alessandro was born in 1511 or 1512. His mother was an enslaved African or part-African woman; his father was Lorenzo II, Duke of Urbino, the last legitimate heir to the main branch of the Medici family. There were rumours at the time that Alessandro’s real father was Lorenzo’s cousin Giulio de’ Medici, who became Pope Clement VII. This would be irresistible to a writer of fiction — making Alessandro perhaps the only person in history to be the offspring of a Pope and an African slave.

As a writer of history, Catherine Fletcher accepts the more likely story that he was Lorenzo’s son. Even so, Clement’s devotion to Alessandro brought the young prince many of his luckiest breaks. His cousin and lifelong rival Ippolito de’ Medici, the other illegitimate hope of the dynasty, grudgingly accepted a position as a cardinal while Alessandro became a duke. It would not end there: this account of the scions’ struggle against each other and the world bursts with stabbings, poisonings, duels, eye-gouging, arquebus shootouts and people being run through with swords.

Fletcher’s approach is scholarly yet dramatic, immersed in Renaissance glamour. In 1530, Alessandro attended the first coronation of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in Bologna. Fletcher sets the scene: Alessandro’s men wore livery of ‘shimmering pea-cock purple’ and ‘dark, fiery red’; he wore ‘dark damask lined with wolfskin’ and was honoured to carry the orb, ‘a golden globe adorned with gems dividing it into Asia, Africa and Europe’. Perhaps Alessandro’s racially mixed appearance symbolically underlined the emperor’s claim to global power as he took the Iron Crown.

Charles V became close to Alessandro and allowed his own illegitimate daughter, Margaret of Austria, to marry him. Had it resulted in living heirs, this Medici-Habsburg match might have had major implications for history. Alessandro’s half-sister Catherine de’ Medici — his father’s only legitimate child — had already married into the French Valois family, the Habsburgs’ great rivals, and would go on to become the most powerful woman in Europe.

‘It was the misfortune of Alessandro de’ Medici to be assassinated twice,’ Fletcher writes, ‘first with a sword, then with a pen.’ Accounts of his life by those who benefited from his death, and by generations of European historians who despised his race, portrayed him as ugly, stupid and cruel; a tyrant and a murderer. He probably did order a murder or two, but that was hardly out of turn for a Renaissance prince. Fletcher does a thorough job of debunking all the other allegations, creating a portrait of an intelligent, politically skilled man with a sense of social responsibility, providing dowries for poor families in Florence. He loved dogs, hunting and art. His mistresses included a wealthy widow who gave him two children. His relationship with his wife was generous, considerate and affectionate on both sides.

Alessandro seems to have had a defiant sense of humour about his origins and status. His wardrobe contained an elaborate Turkish costume. His contemporary Henry VIII also dressed up as a Turk, but he was legitimate and white; the King of England was not inviting a shockingly direct comparison to the Ottoman sultans, whose mothers were slaves. ‘Were Alessandro and his courtiers mocking the critics of the duke’s low birth?’ Fletcher asks. For a carnival in 1534, Alessandro and his entourage dressed as gypsies and peasants. Another snook was cocked at those who derided his favour for the lower classes: ‘It is as if Alessandro and his court were saying yes, we know what you say about us, and we don’t care much.’

This insouciant streak may have been Alessandro’s undoing. In 1537, his cousin Lorenzo de’ Medici offered to facilitate a liaison with a noblewoman. The duke let his guard down and waited for the lady in Lorenzo’s chamber — but was ambushed and hacked to death. He was still only in his mid-twenties. His reputation did not begin to recover until he was championed by African-American writers in the early 20th century. Catherine Fletcher’s engaging biography is a tremendous step forward in our knowledge of this intriguing man. Perhaps even the casting directors of Hollywood will one day concede that there were, in fact, black people in 16th-century Europe — and some of their stories are as gripping as any ‘Shakespeare movie’.
The American dream goes bust
Suzi Feay

The Mandibles: A Family 2029—2047
by Lionel Shriver

One happy aspect of Lionel Shriver’s peek into the near future (the novel opens in 2029) is the number of unusually rounded elderly characters she presents. Her pitiless eye notes every mark of age and vanity in the older generation of the Mandible family, but they remain in robust health, sharp without being merely spry, and full of personality. They have too much life as far as the younger family members are concerned, waiting impatiently for the wealth to trickle downwards.

Jayne and Carter, already in their sixties, will be disappointed, for Shriver’s doomsday scenario concerns a catastrophic devaluation of the dollar which wipes out the family fortune overnight. The Mandibles descend the social order rapidly, along with everyone else in the United States. It’s a short step from dinner parties to dumpster diving as the American dream goes bust.

Shriver articulates a fierce resentment of the Boomer generation, who will be the least inconvenienced by the turmoil; they had it good for most of their lives, after all. Her future America is both horribly plausible and slyly amusing. Mexico is on the rise and the US president is Latino. There has been a Chelsea Clinton administration, phones and tablets have been replaced by a cloth-resembling folding device called a FleX that people have been known to mistake for a tissue, and the latest bafflingly trendy cuisine in New York is Canadian: ‘The city’s elite was running out of new ethnicities whose food could become fashionable.’ First there’s a run on extra virgin olive oil; then cabbages cost $20; soon there isn’t any toilet paper to be had, and eventually lawlessness reigns.

Jayne and Carter’s two daughters, Avery, married to Lowell, a pontificating economics professor, and the less well-off, more practical Florence, anchor the tale, though Florence’s son Willing becomes its main character. They have too much life as far as the younger family members are concerned, waiting impatiently for the wealth to trickle downwards.

In the vertical community within one of Lubetkin’s postwar blocks of flats in East London we meet hapless Bertie, resting actor caught on the hop by the spare-inquiries of the legal system. Not that Shriver doesn’t have some stand-out scenes, especially when civilisation goes feral; it’s just that the exposition far outweighs the action. Her intricately constructed modelling is as intellectually impressive as it is dramatically inert. If only they’d leave off their prating and kill each other, you find yourself wishing.

For all that, The Mandibles is a scary, depressing and convincing horror story, akin to reading about teetering on the edge of a precipice while actually teetering on the edge of a precipice. Start stockpiling the tins.

All is not lost
Charlotte Hobson

The Lubetkin Legacy
by Marina Lewycka
Fig Tree, £14.99, pp. 368, ISBN 97819105490561

Marina Lewycka’s latest happy-go-lucky tale of migrant folk in Britain takes a remark by the modernist architect Berthold Lubetkin as its epigraph: ‘Nothing is too good for ordinary people.’

In the vertical community within one of Lubetkin’s postwar blocks of flats in East London we meet hapless Bertie, resting actor caught on the hop by the spare-bedroom tax; disabled Len, thinking positive about his benefit reassessment; Violet, dreaming of her childhood in Kenya at her desk in a City insurance firm; and many more — some powering ahead in our new age of golden job opportunities and zero-hour contracts, others not so much. In fact, after his mother’s death, Bertie decides the only way he’s going to avoid homelessness is to find himself a mother-impersonator.

Enter steely, twinkling Inna, Ukrainian granny, who steals the show with her frequent culinary announcements: ‘I mekkit golbashky! From my country, best in world!’ — followed by the barked command: ‘Ittt!’ Inna’s terms of address are bigoted, in a friendly sort of way — Violet is greeted: ‘alo, Blackie!’ and Bertie, being unmarried in his forties, must be ‘homosexy’ — though, as she readily says, ‘It no problem wit me. Everyone is children of God. Anyways, I know nothing.

In my country everybody normal!’

Berthold Lubetkin (whom the fictional Bertie is named after) studied in Moscow in the 1920s and never lost the conviction, typical of Soviet designers of the period, that architecture should be based not just on the modernist aesthetic, but on humanist values and social commitment. He imagined social housing that combined the latest comforts (lifts, central heating, balconies) with harmonious communal spaces: the sculptural curves of a Constructivist staircase, a ‘wind roof’ for drying clothes.

Britain’s postwar austerity resulted in radical economies to his social housing plans. The shared services he had envisaged as part of his buildings (a nursery, a community centre) were dropped, and Lubetkin found successful ways of using pre-fab building materials to cut costs. We all know what the result was when poor imitations of Lubetkin’s modernist aesthetic, built with cheap materials, were rolled out across the country.

Yet his early, properly financed creations, such as the Highpoint apartments in Highgate, still cause a stir whenever one goes on the market — a three-bedroom flat is worth over a million these days. Consider this, Mr Osborne: how many billions of public funds might have been saved if only the money had been spent in the first place.

In Lewycka’s tower block, developers are after the communal garden and ‘right-to-buy’ owners are packing in seven students to a flat, while the last council tenants quake at the arrival of the housing officer. In the warmhearted, gently ironic universe that Lewycka’s novels inhabit, however, all is never lost. Bertie will step out with a nice lady with a teddy collection, Inna will meet a handsome new Ukrainian boyfriend with a nose like a half-eaten pork pie. Even the one-legged pigeon will find romance. The rich might be getting richer while the poor become less and less able to afford a roof over their heads, but at least, as Inna would say, loft is free.
A clash of two cultures
David Wootton

No Need for Geniuses: Revolutionary Science in the Age of the Guillotine
by Steve Jones
Little, Brown, £25, pp. 384, ISBN 9780349405452

‘They fuck you up, your mum and dad.’ Philip Larkin’s most famous line has appeared in the Spectator repeatedly, and there has even been a competition devoted to its refutation. Steve Jones, though, thinks it too coarse to be quoted in what he himself describes as a popular science book. This is just one of many indications of the way in which this book is haunted by C.P. Snow’s two cultures.

I was a bit shocked to see Jones describe his book as popular science because I had been under the impression that he thought it was, in part at least, a history book. As a popular science book, it’s quite good. As history, not.

Jones begins by looking out over Paris from the Eiffel Tower and identifying places where important science was done. Every chapter, more or less, has an 18th-century start, but they wander happily into 21st-century science. There’s no attempt, at any point, to grapple with the possibility that there might be some fundamental discontinuities between our science and Enlightenment science.

Thus Lavoisier’s ‘discovery’ of oxygen is told in the most old-fashioned heroic terms. There’s no sympathy for Joseph Priestley, who consistently opposed Lavoisier, and no sense of the limits of Lavoisier’s understanding. On the contrary, Jones think’s Lavoisier ‘dismantled’ Priestley’s work ‘with a simple experiment’. ‘Soon the whole of chemistry began to fall into place.’ Well, more than 50 years ago Thomas Kuhn himself demolished this sort of account of Lavoisier’s work in a short, classic article which Jones evidently hasn’t read.

The truth is, Jones doesn’t have much interest in history. Every chapter begins with a quotation from Carlyle’s French Revolution (1837). He only mentions two other books on the Revolution: Dickens’s A Tale of Two Cities (1859) and Simon Schama’s Citizens (1989). That’s it. He doesn’t mention a single work on the history of science. Not one single one. There are no notes, bibliography or suggestions for further reading. So one has to use a search engine. A quotation from Galileo isn’t from Galileo. A quotation about Haussmann’s Paris is from the Wikipedia article. We are told there were 3,000 ‘factories’ in Paris in 1801.

I can’t trace the source, but it must have been referring to workshops or manufactories, not factories, of which, by any sensible definition, there can’t have been 3,000 in the world in 1801. We are told that ‘within a couple of decades of the Revolution’ Paris became ‘a sordid, ugly town... the atmosphere is a blend of railway tunnel, hospital ward, gasworks and open sewer’. ‘This is in fact,’ says Jones disarming, ‘a 19th-century description of St Helens in Lancashire, but just the same, if not worse, could be said of contemporary Paris.’ Except this is a description of St Helens in 1899, and as far as the reader can tell we are discussing Paris in the 1810s; the first Parisian gasometer was built in 1823, the first railway in Paris dates to 1837; within a couple of decades of the Revolution Paris might have been described as having the atmosphere of a hospital ward or an open sewer, but not of a railway tunnel or a gasworks. As for the city in 1899, it was de-industrialising, and nothing like St Helens.

We are told that in 1801 Paris had 3,000 factories. But there can’t have been 3,000 factories in the world then.

There is no mention of workshops or manufactories because it is clearly a bit like a box of chocolates where the key identifying the different flavours has got lost. And the problem is that we get to nibble on all sorts of chocolates, but we never get a decent meal. On Coriolis we get two and a half pages — not enough to begin to understand his significance (the next about history. (I’m really not exaggerating here; and I don’t think they are right.) But it seems to me we can’t just blame the scientists; the historians have their responsibility too. Evidently, Jones has never come across a history of science that really got him thinking, and much of the blame has to lie with the historians who (to be honest) stopped trying to make sense to scientists at least 30 years ago.

So what we have here is two cultures apparently incapable of communicating with each other. It really doesn’t have to be like this. Stephen Jay Gould was both a good historian and a fine scientist — his example is there for anyone who wants to follow. But what interested Gould wasn’t just good science in the past, but batty, bonkers, bizarre science — for at least he had the sense to realise that one day he too might look a bit batty, bonkers and bizarre. Jones writes history without any sense that there is a discipline here with its own standards and its own problems. He takes it for granted that if he knows the science he understands the history.

Take, as a sample, chapter five, ‘Einstein’s Pendulum’. Already with the title we are obviously far away from ‘Revolutionary Science in the Age of the Guillotine’. The chapter is primarily about Foucault’s Pendulum, first displayed in 1851 — long after the Revolution. From there we move back to the Coriolis effect, 1835 (Coriolis was ‘born in Year One of the Republic’, so evidently that makes this revolutionary science), and to Laplace (Celestial Mechanics, 1799 — much closer to the Revolution), and back further to the first heavier-than-air flight (1783), and then on to modern weather forecasting and chaos theory.

I enjoyed reading this chapter, but as far as I can see it has little to do with science in the age of the French Revolution, and I don’t imagine that anyone buying the book would expect to find a chapter on the Coriolis effect and chaos theory. So the book is a bit like a box of chocolates where the key identifying the different flavours has got lost. And the problem is that we get to nibble on all sorts of chocolates, but we never get a decent meal. On Coriolis we get two and a half pages — not enough to begin to understand his significance (the next
chapter is a little better in that it provides a somewhat fuller discussion of Laplace).

I’m not sure who this book is intended for. Is it for young scientists who can’t handle Larkin (who appears on GCSE-level syllabuses, though it must be acknowledged that he is not represented by his most famous poem)? Is it for Francophiles who want to learn something about French science and about Paris (in which case some further reading would be in order)? Or is it for fans of Steve Jones? Only this last answer makes sense.

I am sure plenty of people will buy the book, and many will enjoy it. But meanwhile those of us who hold that non-fiction books should have subjects and arguments will mutter that the world is going to hell in a handcart. For it calls in question the whole idea of what a book should be. Books are normally written by people who like books; they are, by their very nature, an intertextual performance. Jones evidently loves Darwin — and quite right too. But if he is going to write a book on Enlightenment science he needs to read more widely, and with more enthusiasm. When he appeared on Desert Island Discs, way back in 1992, he wanted to have the novels of Anthony Powell on his desert island. This book, alas, is no dance to the music of time.

Chance would be a fine thing
Simon Ings

The Perfect Bet: How Science and Maths are Taking the Luck out of Gambling
by Adam Kucharski
Profile, £12.99, pp. 272, ISBN 9781781255469

If I prang your car, we can swap insurance details. In the past, it would have been necessary for you to kill me. That’s the great thing about money: it makes liabilities payable and blood feud unnecessary.

Spare a thought, then, for the economist Robin Hanson, whose idea it was, in the years following the attacks on the World Trade Center, to create a market where traders could speculate on political atrocities. You could invest in the likelihood of a biochemical attack, for example, or a coup d’état, or the assassination of an Arab leader. The more knowledgeable you were, the more profit you would earn — but you would also be showing your hand to the Pentagon.

The US Senate responded with horror to this putative ‘market in death and destruction’, though if the recent BBC drama The Night Manager has taught us anything at all (except about the passing trend of tomato-red chinos), it is that there is already a global market in death and destruction, and it is not at all well abstracted. Its currency is lives and livelihoods. Its currency is blood. A little more abstraction, in this grim sphere, would be welcome.

Most books about money stop here, arrested, whether they admit it or not, in the park’n’ride zone of Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 essay The End of History. Adam Kucharski — a mathematician who lectures at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine — keeps his foot on the gas. The point of his book is that abstraction makes speculation not just possible, but essential. Gambling isn’t any kind of ‘underside’ to the legitimate economy. It is the economy’s entire basis, and ‘the line between luck and skill — and between gambling and investing — is rarely as clear as we think’.

When we don’t know everything, we have to speculate to progress. Speculation is by definition an insecure business, so we put a great deal of effort into knowing everything. The hope is that, the more cards we count, and the more attention we pay to the spin of the wheel, the more accurate our bets will become. This is the meat of Kucharski’s book, and occasions spirited accounts of observational, mathematical and computational derring-do amid the blackjack and roulette tables of Las Vegas and Monte Carlo. On one level, The Perfect Bet is a serviceable if not very original book about professional gambling.

When we come to the chapter on sports betting, however, the thin line between gambling and investment vanishes entirely, and Kucharski, outgrowing the need for roads, carries us into some strange territory indeed. Lay a bet on a tennis match:

If one bookmaker is offering odds of 2.1 on Nadal and another is offering 2.1 on Djokovic, betting $100 on each player will net you $210 — and cost you $100 — whatever the result. Whoever wins, you walk away with a profit of $10.

You don’t need to know anything about tennis. You don’t even need to know the result of the match.

Ten dollars is not a great deal of money, so these kinds of bets have to be made in bulk and at great speed to produce a healthy return. Which is where the robots come in: trading algorithms that — contrary to popular myth — are made simple (rarely running to more than ten lines of code) to keep them speedy. This is no small problem when you’re trying to automate the business of gaming the entire world. In 2013 — around the time that the US Senate stumbled across Robin Hanson’s ‘policy market’ idea — the S&P 500 stock index took a brief $136 billion dive when trading algorithms responded instantly to a malicious tweet claiming that bombs had gone off in the White House.

The subtitle of Kucharski’s book states that ‘science and maths are taking the luck out of gambling’, and there’s little here to undercut the gloomy forecast. But Kucharski is also prosecuting a cleverer, more entertaining and ultimately more disturbing line of argument. He is placing gambling at the heart of the body politic.

Risk reduction is every serious gambler’s avocation. The gambler is not there to take part. The gambler isn’t there to win. The gambler is there to find an edge: to game the table. The more parts, and the more interactions, the harder this is to do, but while it is true that the world is not simply deterministic, at a human scale, frankly, it might as well be.

In this smartphone-enabled and meta-data-enriched world, complete knowledge of human affairs is becoming increasingly possible. And imagine if: we ever do succeed in gaming our own markets, then the scope for unscripted action shrinks to a green zero. And we are done.
Gods and monsters
Mark Cocker

Kathmandu: Biography of a City
by Thomas Bell
Haus, £17.99, pp. 496,
ISBN 9781910376386

Although Nepal’s earthquake last April visited our television screens with images of seismic devastation, the disaster has probably had little impact upon the prevailing western impression of this country. For many the mountain state remains steadfastly exotic and remote.

This is not just a consequence of those sublimely unattainable Himalayan peaks. For generations Nepal was a source of western fantasy that bordered on the obsessive and carried an undercurrent of late-imperial eroticism. What had so stirred European appetites was the long-standing Nepalese policy of playing hard to get. A short, bitter conflict in 1814–1816 with the East India Company inspired its militant Gurkha elite to pursue the rigorous exclusion of all foreigners.

It was not until the 1950s that the country relented on its self-imposed purdah, by which time Nepal beckoned the modern world as a last frontier for high-octane mountain adventure and fresh, often drug-fuelled spiritual fulfilment. While something of this misty Shangri-La-like fiction still clings to Nepal, it should truly be blown away by Thomas Bell’s wide-ranging, deep-delving, clear-headed exposition of all things Kathmandu.

Technically this is a travel book, in the sense that its heterogeneous contents on a foreign country are bound together by a free-roaming first-person narrator. Mercifully, however, Bell intrudes little of his personal story into his major historical, political and personal connections to produce something of the team. Traumatised, Zubaida retreats

Tantric teachings about sex and blood sacrifice supply yet more spice to Kathmandu’s simmering exoticism

first supplied those kukri-wielding Gurkha troops that are still so lionised in Britain’s armies. The Ranas also managed to cling to power until another court putsch, when Nepal finally abandoned its isolationism in the 1950s.

Yet, as if to prove that the country could not let go of its medievalism, in 2001 the heir-apparent Prince Dipendra took an arsenal of assault rifles and murdered most of his family including his mother and father, the king and queen, and then turned the gun on himself. It is Bell’s unravelling of Nepal’s recent history, particularly the years that he covered as a newspaper correspondent, which form the real heart of his book.

The author is an admirably fair-minded guide to the origins and character of Nepal’s Maoist insurgency, which rose to prominence at the end of last century. While many western visitors come back from trekking holidays with impressions of rustic self-sufficiency and contentment in Nepal’s countryside, Bell tells us that the number of people in absolute poverty doubled from 1977 to 1996.

Two fifths of the population cannot even meet their nutritional needs, while wealth is concentrated in the hands of a small elite, with just 16 per cent of families owning around 60 per cent of Nepal’s land. When the Maoists triumphed in 2006 they forced the abdication of the monarchy and the creation of a democratic secular republic, yet they too have since been ejected from power by more political shenanigans among a self-serving establishment.

Bell puts other central parts of Kathmandu under the spotlight, such as the shortcomings of its ubiquitous development NGOs and the scandalous trade in art objects that drains the capital of its spectacular heritage. But for all his realism and his urge to expose the unadorned truth, Bell never loses sight of one key fact: Kathmandu is irrepressibly vibrant, eternally fascinating and still one of the great artefacts of Asian civilisation.

Crossing continents
Lee Langley

The Bones of Grace
by Tahmina Anam
Canongate, £14.99, pp. 407,
ISBN 9781847679772

Mysteries abound here — enigmas of identity and betrayal, long-buried secret transactions leading to quests — for a lost child, an abandoned wife, a missing mother... The Bones of Grace has a narrative as fragment-ed as a scattered jigsaw, initially puzzling, with seemingly disparate stories slowly coming together one by one, until the moment a last piece clicks sweetly into place to give us the revelation of a perfect, satisfying whole.

The book is conceived as a love letter from Zubaida, a young Bangladeshi palaeontologist at Harvard, to Elijah, a stranger who comforts her when she weeps at a Shostakovich concert. Love at first sight, but bad timing: she’s leaving to join a much-coveted expedition to Pakistan, to dig for the skeleton of Ambulocetus, the ‘walking whale’, an intriguing evolutionary blip. The dig is halted when the Pakistan military storm in and arrest (possibly murder) one of the team. Traumatised, Zubaida retreats...
Women and song
Alexandra Coghlan

Sounds and Sweet Airs: The Forgotten Women of Classical Music
by Anna Beer

Just a few weeks ago, Germany’s VAN magazine published an interview with the composer Olga Neuwirth. In it she describes her early career in the 1980s and ’90s — a ‘lone’ female voice in the ‘wilderness’ of classical music. So far, so sadly, so frustratingly predictable. But then she turns to the current situation and things become rather more startling. ‘I think it has become nastier,’ she says:

A more ‘elegant’ chauvinism prevails... When a woman calls attention to injustices today her objections are often dismissed as hysteria... She is kicked out and declared an adversary without further explanation or discussion.

We’re used to the idea that — in the arts at least — the feminist fight is all but over. Women take their place alongside men as authors, artists, choreographers and filmmakers, and it seems out of step with this shiny new equality to suggest that all might not be quite so entirely right on. But Neuwirth’s experiences as a ‘woman composer’ are by no means isolated.

Anna Beer’s Sounds and Sweet Airs offers vivid, colourful context on a situation that is echoed back through the centuries. Beer profiles eight ‘forgotten’ female composers, each a prism for the ideology, philosophy and fashions of her age. But whether we are in corsets or Converse, Medici Florence or 20th-century Paris, Louis XIV’s Versailles or 21st-century London, the stories are the same. Even in ninth-century Constantinople, we encounter Kassia — the earliest female composer whose music survives today — so disgraced by her wise and witty responses to Emperor Theophilus (auditioning for a bride) that she retires to a convent to compose a penitential hymn to Mary Magdalene.

Again and again, female genius confounds those who encounter it. Talented female composers must either be ‘angels’ or ‘sorceresses’ to possess such gifts, and that’s just the lucky ones. The others must constantly dodge the ‘shadow of the courtesan’ that threatens to engulf anyone bold enough to present herself and her skills to the public. Beer even goes so far as to suggest that Clara Schumann’s ‘relessentless pregnancies’ were, at least in part, an attempt to reassure her audience of her unthreatening propriety — an ‘Angel in the House’ rather than a lady of the night.

It’s as heartbreaking as it is maddening to read of Schumann, beaten down by parental and societal pressure, writing resignedly,

I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose — not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?

It’s even more frustrating to learn that, nearly 100 years later, when Elizabeth Maconchy was denied a prestigious Royal College of Music scholarship, the excuse given was, ‘If we’d given it to you, you’d only have got married and never written another note!’ But, in common with all the women profiled here, neither Schumann nor Maconchy did give up. Beer explains her selection process in the introduction, engagingly don’t entirely bear this out. Featuring Olga Neuwirth’s experiences as a ‘woman composer’ not be quite so entirely right on. But Neuwirth’s experiences as a ‘woman composer’ are by no means isolated.

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It’s even more frustrating to learn that, nearly 100 years later, when Elizabeth Maconchy was denied a prestigious Royal College of Music scholarship, the excuse given was, ‘If we’d given it to you, you’d only have got married and never written another note!’ But, in common with all the women profiled here, neither Schumann nor Maconchy did give up. Beer explains her selection process in the introduction, engagingly don’t entirely bear this out. Featuring Olga Neuwirth’s experiences as a ‘woman composer’ not be quite so entirely right on. But Neuwirth’s experiences as a ‘woman composer’ are by no means isolated.

Anna Beer’s Sounds and Sweet Airs offers vivid, colourful context on a situation that is echoed back through the centuries. Beer profiles eight ‘forgotten’ female composers, each a prism for the ideology, philosophy and fashions of her age. But whether we are in corsets or Converse, Medici Florence or 20th-century Paris, Louis XIV’s Versailles or 21st-century London, the stories are the same. Even in ninth-century Constantinople, we encounter Kassia — the earliest female composer whose music survives today — so disgraced by her wise and witty responses to Emperor Theophilus (auditioning for a bride) that she retires to a convent to compose a penitential hymn to Mary Magdalene.

Again and again, female genius confounds those who encounter it. Talented female composers must either be ‘angels’ or ‘sorceresses’ to possess such gifts, and that’s just the lucky ones. The others must constantly dodge the ‘shadow of the courtesan’ that threatens to engulf anyone bold enough to present herself and her skills to the public. Beer even goes so far as to suggest that Clara Schumann’s ‘relessentless pregnancies’ were, at least in part, an attempt to reassure her audience of her unthreatening propriety — an ‘Angel in the House’ rather than a lady of the night.

It’s as heartbreaking as it is maddening to read of Schumann, beaten down by parental and societal pressure, writing resignedly,

I once thought that I possessed creative talent, but I have given up this idea; a woman must not desire to compose — not one has been able to do it, and why should I expect to?
motherhood, that allowed them to flourish professionally — that, and some surprisingly supportive husbands, brothers and fathers. Their lives were models of middle-class propriety, virtuous enough to carry off a quirk like composition. Earlier pioneers Francesca Caccini and Barbara Strozzi played a more dangerous game, with Strozzi in particular embracing a necessary notoriety, but even they did little to disturb the patriarchal universe.

Readable and wide-ranging, Beer’s deft sketches are an elegant introduction to their subjects. But there is a flaw at the heart of *Sounds and Sweet Airs* that is hard to accept. Beer’s explicit aim is to hold up a megaphone to the voices of female composers that have remained unheard, ignored or suppressed. Yet women who have consistently been forced to express themselves through their lives rather than their art here find that process replicated. We hear lots about these composers’ loves, illnesses, their families and domestic responsibilities, but very little about their music.

So, in many ways, this book is just an introduction — a formal handshake after a few whispered biographical asides. If you really want to get to know Barbara Strozzi, Fanny Hensel or Lili Boulanger you’d do better to skip the intermediary. Just listen to their music; it’s here and here only that you’ll find the true selves of classical music’s ‘forgotten’ women, in works that need no biographical defence, no historical apology, to stand alongside those of their male counterparts.

**Escape from the hood**

*Lindsay Johns*

**The Beautiful Struggle: A Memoir**

*by Ta-Nehisi Coates*


The author of the bestseller *Between the World and Me* and recipient of a MacArthur ‘Genius Grant’ last year, Ta-Nehisi Coates is a much-lauded African-American journalist on the *Atlantic*, best known for his trenchant 2014 essay making the case for reparations for black Americans.

*A bona fide* heir to the mantle of ‘hip-hop intellectual’ (last claimed with any credibility by Michael Eric Dyson), Coates is a *rara avis*, able to move with ease between Rakim, Q-Tip, W.E.B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington.

*The Beautiful Struggle*, written in 2008 but only now published in the UK, is a memoir of the writer’s perilous journey from boyhood to manhood in inner-city Baltimore in the late 1980s and early 1990s — when it was ravaged by crack cocaine and gang warfare. As he navigates the maelstroms of adolescence, Coates’s journey takes him from socially gauche teenager surrounded by B-boys with hoop dreams to unexpected academic high-achiever.

At its core, *The Beautiful Struggle* is a moving story of education for liberation and the search for anchorage and self-knowledge in a hostile, unforgiving world — one in which the odds are still heinously stacked against young men of colour.

It is also a heartfelt and poignantly beautiful ode to his father — a Vietnam vet, former Black Panther revolutionary, autodidact, printer of arcane black tracts, old-school disciplinarian and paterfamilias (with seven children from four different women) who haunts every page of this beguiling memoir. His father is a towering and saintly presence: a lone male parent in a sea of absent dads, and an ardent bibliophile striving to impart Afrocentric knowledge and values to his son.

Empowering, perceptive and often witty, *The Beautiful Struggle* is also a gilded encomium to the power of books and the freedom self-knowledge can bring. We learn of Coates’s wayward school years, his elder brother Bill’s escapades, his teenage crushes, being sent to summer camps for the Afrocentric ‘conscious’ movement, his passion for djembe drumming, his penchant for hip-hop music and why it resonated with him. The memoir concludes with his acceptance, aged 18, by Howard University; remarkably, he is the fourth of his siblings to attend this bastion of black intellectual life.

Coates is particularly good on articulating the virtues of the Knowledge (black street savoir-faire which helps him survive), understanding the well-intentioned but at times painful over-romanticisation of Africa, and his awareness of the pitfalls of his ‘conscious’ upbringing — all dashikis and militant black books, although ironically it is this instillation of discipline and mental resilience which ultimately saves him from succumbing to the lure of the streets.

The memoir also functions as both a potent critique of the imprisoning paradigms of black masculinity and an evocation of the pathologies which decimate the neighbourhood and blight his childhood: drugs, philandering, the obsession with basketball and vacuous fripperies like new trainers.

Coates’s deft use of aposope lyrics by luminaries from the golden era of hip-hop as chapter titles not only embodies the contemporary zeitgeist, but serves to underlie the author’s deep respect for the genre as the soundtrack to his youth and what it has given him. In fact, the memoir at times becomes philosophical moralising on beats, rhymes and life.

While heavily rooted in the painful exigencies of the African-American urban experience, this is also a universal
Running the triple crown
Michael Beloff

Today We Die a Little: The Rise and Fall of Emil Zátopek, Olympic Legend
by Richard Askwith

Endurance: The Extraordinary Life and Times of Emil Zátopek
by Rick Broadbent

The story of the Czechoslovak runner Emil Zátopek is a tale from athletics’ age of innocence. Without the aid of qualified coaches, state-of-the-art equipment or ‘performance-enhancing’ drugs, Emil Zátopek set no fewer than 18 world records over distances between 5,000 and 30,000 metres with a style memorably described as that of ‘a man wrestling with an octopus on a conveyor belt’: all eccentricity above the waist, all efficiency below it. Brought up in poverty, he ate when he could and what he could, and treated beer as a prototype isotonic drink.

His sporting career was set in the brief period of dominance of his specialist events enjoyed by runners from behind the Iron Curtain, an interregnum which lay between the era of the Flying Finns and the decades when the mantle of the so-called ‘kings of distance’ passed to runners from the Maghreb, Kenya and Ethiopia.

Zátopek devised high-mileage routines, running constant repetitions over short distances, sometimes training in army boots, in the snow and the dark, learning to endure high levels of pain. When his instinct told him to slow his pace, he increased it. Such new and unorthodox methods were alien to English rivals such as Christopher Chataway, though copied by others such as Gordon Pirie. Zátopek raced frequently and indiscriminately, both home and abroad, rather than concentrating like modern athletes only on major events. His popularity was enhanced by his generosity towards his opponents, whom he would encourage in mid-race, often in their own language. The rhythmic tri-syllabic cry ‘Zá-to-pek’ echoed round the stadia of Europe.

Of course his records have long since been broken. His main achievement — incapable of emulation — was the winning of a triple crown of gold medals at the 1952 Helsinki Olympics in the 5,000 metres, 10,000 metres and the marathon — a success made even more remarkable by the fact that he’d never run a marathon before. Sticking closely to the then world-record-holder Jim Peters, he asked him at the midway point whether the pace was good enough, to which Peters replied with calculated inaccuracy ‘pace too slow’. This retort caused Zátopek not (as Peters hoped) to buckle but to accelerate to victory.

Yet Zátopek might not have been in Helsinki at all. He had refused to go unless the team included another athlete denied selection for political reasons. Both Richard Askwith and Rick Broadbent, tracing Zátopek’s life beyond the track, describe his volatile relationship with Czechoslovakia’s establishment, conditioned by the many changes to the country’s status throughout his career.

Zátopek’s first job was for the Bata shoe factory, which, during the second world war, supplied footwear for the soldiers of the Reich. Later he joined the army, rising to the rank of lieutenant colonel. A vocal supporter of the Prague Spring of 1968, he paid the price when the Russian tanks rolled in. He was exiled, far from his wife and home, to work as a manual labourer in drilling operations, and sought solace in alcohol.

He then twice publicly (and maybe pragmatically) recanted his earlier views, thereby alienating himself from the reformers, though remaining an object of suspicion to the communist elite. Nonetheless, these statements enabled him to find new employment in Czech television, monitoring overseas developments in sports science. Once again he was able to travel abroad and to acquire various awards.

There were accusations that he was not merely a turncoat but a spy for the security services. Both authors, after reviewing the evidence, acquit him of the charge, presenting him as a victim rather than a villain. When he died in 2000 after suffering multiple strokes, a state funeral was proposed, but rejected. Nonetheless, the private ceremony held in the National Theatre in Prague was attended by the Czech prime minister. The reconciliation of the man with his country was complete, and the diversity of the crowd who attended proved that he was a sporting hero not just for his time but for all time.

It seems to have been a coincidence that, without celebrating any anniversary, these two books on Zátopek, both by award-winning sports writers, are published at the same time (and at the same price). Rick Broadbent claims ‘extensive access’, and Richard Askwith ‘unparalleled access’ to those who knew Zátopek, and their acknowledgments suggest a considerable overlap in oral sources, not least Zátopek’s volatile nonagenarian widow, herself a vocal supporter of the Prague Spring. Both authors, after reviewing the evidence, acquit him of the charge, presenting him as a victim rather than a villain. When he died in 2000 after suffering multiple strokes, a state funeral was proposed, but rejected. Nonetheless, the private ceremony held in the National Theatre in Prague was attended by the Czech prime minister. The reconciliation of the man with his country was complete, and the diversity of the crowd who attended proved that he was a sporting hero not just for his time but for all time.

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In the 17th century it was thought that chronic fever could be cured by sleeping with Homer under one’s pillow.
‘Allah’, and in 2001 the New Oxford American Dictionary included the made-up esquivelation (‘the wilful avoidance of one’s official responsibilities’) in order to catch out rivals who habitually cribbed its entries.

Although he doesn’t set out to be comprehensive, Lynch manages to cover a lot of ground. The Dictionary of National Biography is absent, and the Kama Sutra gets only half a page, but he makes an attractive case for the importance of less familiar works. Among the most bizarre is Sir Thomas Browne’s 17th-century Pseudodoxia Epidemica, a compendium of erroneous beliefs common at the time — for instance, that a chronic fever can be relieved by sleeping with a volume of Homer under one’s pillow.

You Could Look It Up is the sort of densely informative book that’s best read two or three chapters at a time. Dipping into it recalls the sensation of being left unattended in a well-stocked library. Lynch explodes the old chestnut that reference books are hopelessly dry — and the relation of corrected positions is that every work of books is hopelessly dry — and the relation to itself.

### A selection of short stories

**Matilda Bathurst**

**Under the Rose: Selected Stories**
by Julia O’Faolain

**Dinosaurs on Other Planets**
by Danielle McLaughlin

**Prodigals**
by Greg Jackson

**Scary Old Sex**
by Arlene Heyman

How many debut collections does it take to stand up to one of the most accomplished short-story writers of the past half-century? In this case, it’s three against one. *Under the Rose* is Julia O’Faolain’s first short-story collection in over 20 years, bringing together stories published between 1968 and 2006. Danielle McLaughlin follows in her wake, picking up the pieces of post-crash Ireland in her debut *Dinosaurs on Other Planets*. Greg Jackson is the latest virtuoso on the US literary scene, writing stylistically self-conscious stories with titles like ‘Wagner in the Desert’ and ‘Metanarrative Breakdown’. As a practising psychiatrist in New York City, Arlene Heyman has no shortage of material. Her first book, *Scary Old Sex*, dares to broach the subject of lust in later life.

Julia O’Faolain is the author of seven novels, but her earliest fiction took the form of short stories. Her father, Sean O’Faolain, won acclaim for his politically charged stories of Irish life, and Julia’s Ireland is a country of complex social codes, defined by the ‘trip wires of class and cruelty’. Other stories reflect her life in Paris, Rome, Los Angeles and London, and she is at her most incisive when using the first-person voice. Readers should be warned that there’s no holding in these stories: you are plunged straight into a character’s psyche, far beyond the logic of linear narrative. This is particularly exhilarating when the characters themselves have erratic tendencies, as demonstrated in ‘Man in the Cellar’ — a lengthy letter from a wife to her mother-in-law, cheerfully describing the revenge she has taken on her abusive husband. Gossip, pride and social assumptions all play a part in skewing the truth.

Danielle McLaughlin’s stories have none of the psychological nuance of O’Faolain’s, but she writes with a meditative intensity which gives her subject matter (domestic friction and failing affections) a certain gravitas. The prevailing mood is portentous sincerity with occasional forays into the absurd. In ‘The Act of Falling’ an avian apocalypse (birds dropping from the sky) is an eerie equivalent to a family’s plummeting finances; when the protagonist witnesses a flurry of new ducks being secretly released into a park lake, she interprets the scene as an allegory of society’s willingness to be deceived. In this case, the misplaced poignancy is not without humour. However, all too often the stories end on a note of melodramatic lyricism, as the characters cast their gaze plaintively towards the sky, the stars or the sea. As a collection, the stories can seem like a string of ‘little losses’ — an extended ellipsis.

If the tagline ‘stories of existential crisis from the privileged middle classes’ hasn’t already put you off, it’s worth persevering with Greg Jackson’s *Prodigals*. The post-Foster Wallace generation of American writers tends to channel the jittering verbosity of the tortured genius, and Jackson’s drugged-up trust-funders are well suited to the task. His stories of writers, film-makers and professional tennis players are based upon a theoretical concept rather than a plot, and the characters inevitably end up reflecting on the futility of their existence. The locations are lavish (Palm Springs, Provence), the prose is sonorous (‘Hara and Lyric moved through
their vinyasa poses’), and the metaphors are just short of ridiculous (‘I had the familiar feeling of being a cracked vessel refilled by blind servants’). The book screams of youth trying to prove itself, but Jackson wouldn’t necessarily disagree. Instead, it’s part of the book’s performance, what one character describes as the ‘speaking aloud of cleverly formulated ideas’. You couldn’t exactly call it self-satire, but it does act as a buffer between Jackson and his critics.

While Prodigals represents the most fashionable form of the short story, nibbling at its own limits like a frantic addict, Arlene Heyman’s Scary Old Sex is at the other end of the spectrum. Her stories are measured and sober, but they break taboos undreamt of by Jackson’s lot. The subject matter is spelt out in the title. Bodies long past their best attempt feats of flexibility described with the exactitude of an anatomist and the compassion of a well-trained shrink. It’s Heyman’s sensitivity to the tragicomic potential of the situation which makes her prose so extraordinary; the story ‘Dancing’, which combines themes of sex, terminal illness and the fall of the Twin Towers, would seem impossibly bad taste in the hands of another writer. Heyman isn’t exactly a newcomer (in her youth she was the muse of Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth), but her stories suggest someone who has lived a life other than writing, and learnt from it. Danielle McLaughlin, likewise, was a solicitor before publishing her first story in the New Yorker. It just goes to show, you’re never too old.

The gooseberry fool
Kate Chisholm

Brothers of the Quill: Oliver Goldsmith in Grub Street
by Norma Clarke
Harvard University Press, £25, pp. 399,
ISBN 9780674736573

On 10 April 1772, the biographer James Boswell recorded in his diary that he had hugged himself with pleasure on discovering himself. He devotes several pages of his own groupie, was fascinated by Goldsmith (although Goldsmith did know Johnson intimately). On the contrary, Boswell, the literary groupie, was fascinated by Goldsmith himself. He devotes several pages of his Life of Johnson to him in an attempt ‘to make my readers in some degree acquainted with his singular character’. But, frustratingly, Goldsmith remains an enigmatic figure.

Boswell reports how Johnson said of him that he ‘touched every kind of writing, and touched none that he did adorn’, which was praise indeed from a critic who enjoyed savaging those writers who did not meet his high standards of probity, meaning and cut-glass clarity. But Johnson also remarks that it’s ‘amazing how little Goldsmith knows. He seldom comes where he is not more ignorant than any one else.’ How could such a talented writer (who in his life of Beau Nash described the MC of fashionable Bath as a man who ‘dressed to the edge of his finances’) be also such a bore in conversation?

These contradictions perhaps explain why Goldsmith appears but dimly cast in Norma Clarke’s latest study of literary London in the 18th century. She argues that ‘there is no better writer to take us behind the scenes and under the surface of British literary culture’ of his period. But of Goldsmith himself we catch only glimpses, not helped by a lack of letters or a journal from which to determine his true character or the impulse for his talent. Just before he died (in 1774, aged 45) he began dictating his life story to his friend Thomas Percy, but as with most projects touched by Goldsmith, except his literary endeavours, Percy’s study was short, insufficient and delayed by 25 years.

Goldsmith, argues Clarke, arrived in Grub Street knowing exactly what he wanted to do, and it wasn’t just to make his name. He employed a variety of literary genres, only to subvert them as a way of seeking out the truth about patronage networks, colonialism and the exploitation not just of his native Ireland but of all those without powerful connections.

As for how writers were funded, he was determined to change the way that Grub Street functioned, where ‘hackneyed’ writers were in thrall to money-pincing booksellers or, worse, funded by watchful patrons whom they wrote to please.

Typically, even in this Goldsmith appears inconsistent. He signed a fairly lucrative contract with Ralph Griffiths, publisher of the Monthly Review, which kept him tied to Griffiths’s demands. Then, when that failed, he secured the monetary support and friendship of Robert Nugent, MP later Viscount Nugent. Yet no one ever accuses Goldsmith of hypocrisy, perhaps because even with these arrangements he was always less than successful, often so close to debt that there were times he dared not leave the house.

Writing for a living, then as now, was always a precarious existence. Johnson himself only escaped the sponging houses of London by being granted a royal pension worth £300 in 1762 (for which he was much pilloried by his colleagues). The middle years of the 18th century were as difficult for authors as our own recent times, new technologies and a dramatic increase in the number of publications creating huge opportunities to make money by the quill but also severe competition for the spoils. Indeed, there is much in Goldsmith that has sharp relevance; his choice of a Chinese visitor as the narrator of his Citizen of the World essays, for example, was designed to point out through the eyes of an oriental observer how London had become a city in which culture was a commodity and instead of reading books people were interested in nothing but ‘sights and monsters’.

Clarke’s solution to Goldsmith’s elusiveness is to resuscitate several of his Grub Street contemporaries who she argues were the inspiration for some of his most popular characters. Writers like Samuel Derrick, who worked on a scholarly edition of John Dryden’s poems in four volumes but also kept Harris’s List of Covent Garden Ladies up to date, largely through his own after-dark researches (in which he was often joined by the young Boswell). Or John Plithington, who funded his literary efforts by subscription, even persuading the Archbishop of Canterbury to cough up one guinea for a copy of his fictional memoir The Adventures of Jack Luckless (proposals for which were issued on 1 April 1758; note the date).

Goldsmith, though, shines through as the most interesting figure. We simply want to know more about him. He once described himself as ‘a gooseberry fool’, which does perhaps accurately convey the quality of his most popular works, She Stoops to Conquer and The Vicar of Wakefield. Both might appear like flem-flam but on reading have a tart piqancy.
Deluded divas

Were Florence Foster Jenkins and her fellow culprits touchingly heroic, cynically fraudulent or just plain bonkers? Rupert Christiansen reports

When the Fat Lady Sings, everyone is primed to chortle, even if she is Montserrat Caballé and doing it wonderfully well. Hergé’s cartoon creation of Bianca Castafiore embodies the type: with her flaxen plaits and heaving embonpoint, she is a ridiculously bad fit for the simpering virginal heroine of Gounod’s Faust, particularly when carolling her Jewel Song at such a pitch that an agonised Tintin and Captain Haddock are forced to cover their ears. But at least Madame Castafiore has a brilliant international career: what about the Fat Lady who Can’t Sing — the diva deluded into thinking she is a nightingale when in fact she is nothing but a crow?

Two recent films explore this tragicomic syndrome. Both are based on the case of Florence Foster Jenkins, an American soprano of the interwar years whose dreadful recordings of classic songs and arias have been cult bestsellers for 70 years. Marguerite, released earlier this year, fictionalises the story in a Parisian and Proustian setting; Florence Foster Jenkins, which is in cinemas now, follows the known facts more closely and stars Meryl Streep, no less.

As it stands, the tale of Foster Jenkins looks tall, if not fishy. Born in 1868 into a wealthy Pennsylvanian family, she was a ‘child prodigy’ pianist prevented by her repressive father from following her passion for music professionally. A doctor with whom she eloped is thought to have infected her with syphilis, but after he vanished from the scene, she inherited money from her parents and took up with a bogus English Shakespearean actor, St Clair Bayfield, who became her common-law husband and manager.

Shortly before the first world war, unable to continue as a pianist because of an injury, she began singing at soirées in fashionable salons and at ‘subscription only’ recitals in hotel ballrooms across New York and New England. She also hosted something exclusive called the Verdi Club, where she presented herself as the regal figure in elaborate tableaux vivants.

It appears that she had some vocal tuition, and it is conceivable that she may originally have been no worse than a lot of after-dinner lady singers of the time. But as she aged and her control of pitch and rhythm declined (an effect of syphilis?), her act became eccentric to the point that she accumulated a cult following who came only to snigger.

To what extent she was aware of this and cynically capitalised on her bonkers reputation to make money is unclear. But the climax came in the early 1940s when she decided to enter a studio and record nine tracks — the legacy on which her fame now rests. Finally, in 1944, after the war and after she and her husband emigrated to the USA, she and her husband emigrated to the USA, a move that seems to have both shaken her marbles and corroded her vocal cords.

Although Foster Jenkins appears to have been a pretty unpleasant piece of work — mean, snobbish, vain and insistent on being addressed as Lady Florence — much of what is known about her comes from an unreliable source, namely her pianist Cosmé McMoon, an old rogue who ended up running a male brothel. A new biography by Jasper Rees exposes some of the myths and also contains some revelations.

Foster Jenkins was not unique. As we all know, singing can be an intensely pleasurable activity, so long as one cannot hear oneself. Many women of her era and class nursed the dream of becoming a star of grand opera — a destiny once considered wildly glamorous — and with the help of private income, iron will and the flattery of false friends, several of them made a career of sorts on its distant fringes.

A CD on the Homophone label entitled The Muse Surmounted usefully presents the surviving recorded evidence, together with a booklet providing biographical sketches of the culprits.

Is there something touchingly heroic about their fearless self-exposure? Or do they merely illustrate the extent to which people can pathetically kid themselves? Most of us are wise enough to keep our versions of ‘Casta diva’ or ‘Nessun dorma’ confined to the bathroom; these dames were not.

Take Olive Middleton, for example. Born in England in 1891, she made a genuine name for herself in the 1920s, working under Thomas Beecham and appearing in solo roles at Covent Garden. But after the war she and her husband emigrated to the USA, a move that seems to have both shaken her marbles and corroded her vocal cords.

Throughout the 1950s she continued to star in leading roles such as Norma and Tosca for a threadbare outfit called La Puma Opera, keeping alive the glorious traditions of yesteryear in singing that makes up in
totally fictitious appearances with the ‘Philadelphia La Scala Opera’ and an association with the ‘Russian Prince Alexis Orloff’.

Even more bizarrely, she issued LP recordings of her effusions under a meticulous counterfeit of the Philips label, their covers emblazoned with accolades purloined from the press reviews of Joan Sutherland and stickers announcing ‘Grand Prix — Académie du Disque Française’.

The joke, of course, soon wears thin. Most of these ladies were at bottom merely fantasists in need of psychiatric attention — and the ghastly noises they make are about as funny as a pratfall or those plays about plays that go wrong.

Much more interesting (indeed an essential study for all students of the art) are the bloopers assembled on YouTube under the monicker of Perle Nere (‘Black Pearls’). This is a collection of vocal accidents and disasters, complete with incisive scholarly commentary, largely taken from pirated recordings of live operatic performances and perpetrated by some of the greatest names in the business, including Caruso, Domingo, Pavarotti, Tebaldi, Caballé and Gobbi.

Witnessing these highly trained and experienced singers skidding on the high wire, one can begin to understand what a delicate and complex art opera singing is. We can smugly laugh at this deranged sisterhood when its votaries lose the beat, veer into the wrong key, crack on the high note or allow intonation to sag. But when Tebaldi and Pavarotti do it too, the effect isn’t so much trivially ludicrous as downright shocking.

Deborah Ross reviews Florence Foster Jenkins on p48.
Theatre

Literary lap dance

Lloyd Evans

Doctor Faustus

Duke of York’s Theatre, until 25 June

The Suicide

Lyttelton, in rep until 25 June

Great excitement for play-goers as a rare version of a theatrical masterpiece arrives in the West End. Doctor Faustus stars Kit Harington, a handsome, bearded bantamweight with round glasses and rock-star curl. We first meet him wearing a grey hoodie and lounging in a bedsit surrounded by cheap Catholic statuary. The druggy clothes and the religious iconography suggest a criminal Jesus-freak, possibly of Mexican origin, hiding out from coke dealers. Marlowe’s creation is somewhat different. Dr Faustus is a medieval potentate, a scholar of genius, a rich and celebrated German polymath admired by emperors and cardinals, who decides to exchange his earthly ambitions for the chance to wield supernatural powers for 24 years. But hell awaits him when the contract expires.

It’s an amazing story told by a playwright reaching a pitch of rhetorical magnificence attained by no other English dramatist, bar Shakespeare, and to stick the whole shebang in a crummy old flat suggests either wilful vandalism or culpable lethargy. The show’s creators, Jamie Lloyd and Colin Teevan, seem not to understand the play at all, still less to trust audiences to understand it. Faustus’s squat is populated by semi-naked actors leering out from the shadowy alcoves. One is a skinhead in a negligence. Another wears a string vest. A woman with an exposed teat glares at us with sulky accusation. These figures represent demons and fallen angels on a temporary visit to the mortal world but they all sport unflattering nylon underwear, chewing-gum grey, drawn apparently from a catalogue of 1970s pants.

The result would be hilarious if it weren’t so pious and stately. An anxious couple enter, stark naked, looking like Adam and Eve caught dogging at Redcar services. I doubt if I’ve ever seen a classic play mounted with so little connection to its original text. A nudist with an Irish accent walks in and buggers a gooblin to indicate that he’s a natty sort of chap. His name happens to be Satan but the word evidently carries no connotation of evil for a modern audience, so the sodomistic rape is added in the interests of clarity. Otherwise we might think he was Francis of Assisi or Bob Geldof. The daft anachronisms of the opening scenes can’t fully obscure the rough-hewn grandeur of Marlowe’s verse but the play’s motifs of vanity and megalomania are left unilluminated because the ground plan is illiterate. The play’s middle section consists of anti-papal slapstick, which is often altered or dropped. Here the replacement is a modern romance which functions quite well because the dialogue and the design are on friendly terms and not fighting each other across a gulf of 450 years.

But the drama lacks meat. Faustus has become a needy superstar with a feeble crush on his personal assistant, Grace Wagner. ‘Am I shallow?’ he wheedles at her. The closing scenes return to Marlowe’s original as Faustus contemplates the surrender of his diabolical powers. Conjuring up Helen of Troy’s spirit he delivers his monumental final words to antiquity’s paragon of erotic desire. ‘Sweet Helen, make me immortal with a kiss/ Her lips suck forth my soul, see where it flies.’ The sublime text is enlivened, perhaps unnecessarily, by a new piece of stage business as Faustus picks up a vegetable knife, stabs Helen in the kidneys, and humps her to death like a triumphant gorilla as her guts spill out over the mattress. I predict a box-office triumph for this shrill, muddled nonsense.

Around me smitten women in spectacles clutched at their handbags as Harington strutted and paraded before them. This seemed to be just what the dress circle wanted. The show is a literary lap dance rather than an encounter with an Elizabethan masterpiece and the fans will find all their desires met and their expectations satisfied. Marlovians, look elsewhere.

The Suicide by Nicolai Erdman is an ingenious satire written in Russia in 1928. A depressed citizen informs his neighbours that he plans to top himself, but rather than dissuading him they decide to profit from his early demise. ‘I’d do the same,’ says an intellectual, ‘but I’m needed.’ Suhayla El-Bushra has transposed this macabre sketch to inner-city London. The action opens as a tepid, sweaty soap opera but it rapidly finds its feet and becomes a smart contemporary spoof executed with lots of verve and inventiveness. Sam, a jobless wannabe, is filmed...
Peter Prendergast was widely regarded as the finest landscape painter in Wales, effectively the successor to Kyffin Williams in national identity, if not actual technique. He was born and brought up in Abertridwr, near Caerphilly, and throughout his entire career, the landscape of South Wales informed his work.

He trained with Frank Auerbach, who based his instruction on the direct visual approach he himself had learned from David Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic. Prendergast developed an immediate, visceral, yet highly disciplined approach to painting that lent his work a tactile energy, regardless of his subject matter. Most of his paintings are landscapes, such as this boldly atmospheric, gestural view from the Gwynedd Penninsula, near his home in North Wales.
Exhibitions

Wings of desire
Matthew Dennison

Maria Merian’s Butterflies
The Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, until 9 October

Maria Sibylla Merian was a game old bird of entrepreneurial bent, with an overwhelming obsession with insects. Born in Frankfurt in 1647, she sacrificed her health and financial stability in pursuit of her passion. It carried her halfway across the globe and earned her lasting renown among a handful of cognoscenti.

Merian was 15 when Jan Goedart published the first of his three volumes of *Metamorphosis et historia naturalis insectorum* and is unlikely to have seen the book until later. Goedart’s purpose, based on close observation of a range of insects, was a fuller understanding of insect life cycles. It was the same purpose to which Maria Merian devoted herself — even resorting to selling snakes, lizards, a tortoise and a crocodile to fund her compulsion. Like Goedart and his contemporary Jan Swammerdam, Merian’s published work would explode the belief that butterflies burst into being spontaneously rather than through processes of metamorphosis.

Silkworms were her first enthusiasm. Afterwards she focused on ‘the far more beautiful butterflies and moths that developed from caterpillars other than silkworms’, notably those she saw in the Dutch colony of Suriname, on the north-east coast of South America. Surinamese specimens are showcased in her best-known work, *Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensium*, published in 1705. Hand-coloured plates from the latter, printed on vellum and acquired by George III in the late 1760s, comprise the current exhibition at the Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace.

Merian made no bones that hers was a vocation and she presented herself as a dedicated naturalist. She would claim that, in order to study insect metamorphosis, she ‘withdrew from society and devoted myself to . . . investigations’; she claimed, too, that her interest in painting arose specifically from entomological curiosity: ‘I wished to become proficient in the skill of painting in order to paint and describe them from life.’ In fact, art dominated her life from childhood. Her stepfather, Jacob Marrel, was a flower painter, whose art collection included works by Titian, Van Dyck and Gerrit van Honthorst. He taught Maria to paint, who in turn taught the burgher daughters of Nuremberg.

In the free time available to her between teaching, looking after her infant daughters and the demands of late-17th-century housekeeping, Merian painted flowers for herself. She consistently strove for botanical and scientific exactitude, precise in every filament and fibre. A glowing quality to her palette — as iridescent as stained glass — suggests a romantic side, too. Observe, for example, her later study of tattered leaves of the gumbo-limbo tree, on which she depicted white witch moths, or the bulbous roots of cassava, a platform for sphinx moth eggs.

She did not, however, forfeit her first love for the more lucrative pursuit of flower painting. Following what appears to have been an amicable split from her husband and six years in a religious commune in the Netherlands, Merian placed an advertisement in an Amsterdam newspaper, offering for sale the entire contents of her studio. Her purpose was to fund a costly trip to Suriname to study insects in the wild.

Accompanied by her younger daughter Dorothea, Merian set sail in June 1699. She would return two years later on grounds of ill health, possibly malaria. In the meantime, assisted by local guides — who were also Dutch slaves — she hacked her way through Surinamese forest undergrowth in pursuit of caterpillars and their host plants. At home, she made annotated drawings and paintings. Back in Amsterdam, she spent four years contemplating a death leap from the roof of his towerblock. The clip goes viral. Greedy locals pounce. Politicians demand government action. A performance poet bursts into song. A thuggish media type (an outstanding Paul Kaye) hopes to turn Sam’s death into the birth of his film career. A rackety slice of brilliant satirical fun.
transforming preliminary sketches into the dazzling plates currently on display at Buckingham Palace.

At first glance, the vivid luminescence of these images is startling. The dominant carmine reds and bright Prussian blue of ‘Branch of Pomegranate and Menelaus Blue Morpho Butterfly’ and the contrasting yellow-amber and blue-brown highlights of ‘Branch of West Indian Cherry with Achilles Morpho Butterfly’ glitter like the coloured shards in a kaleidoscope. For all her entomological earnestness, Merian evinces an unabashed joy in colour. The yellow-blue contrasts in ‘Branch of Pomelo with Green-Banded Urania Moth’, bisected by a bold slash of green in the form of the pome- lo branch, recall handpainted Chinese silk wallpapers exported later in the century. That she revelled in gentler tonalities, too, is clear from the nougat-coloured swirls of the insect wings in ‘Branch of Pomegranate with Lanternfly and Cicada’ or the soft pink furbelows of petals in ‘Confederate Rose with Androgeous Swallowtail Butterfly’. Thanks to the fineness of Merian’s technique and the velum grounds, the pictures’ surfaces suggest the softness of peach skin. Readers with an interest in 18th-century decorative arts will be unsurprised to learn that Merian’s images were among influences on painters at the Chelsea porcelain factory.

Metamorphosis Insectorum Surinamensi won instant acclaim. It failed to make Merian’s fortune, but in depicting each life stage of its subjects, it changed for ever not only our understanding of the insect life cycle but also the appearance of scientific illustration.

Music

Last words

Peter Phillips

This, my 479th, is to be my last contribution as a regular columnist to The Spectator. I have written here for 33 years and 4 months, a way of life really, and one I have greatly enjoyed. I thank Auberon Waugh in absentia for suggesting me to Alexander Chancellor in the first place; and Charles Moore for keeping me on in the early years, once we were up and running. I also thank quite exceptional arts editors: Gina Lewis, Jenny Naipaul and the doyenne of these pages, Liz Anderson.

Things have moved on from my habitual think pieces, outraged rants, ad hominem demolition of palpable idiots written in the back of aeroplanes. Perhaps if I had shot less often from the hip I would have been saved some of my more unfortunate calls to order, like the occasion I was summoned to Buckingham Palace for a dress-down, resulting in the imposition of the Official Secrets Act. It was fun, though, in retrospect. I still stand amazed at the power of the written word. People will tolerate almost anything but being on the wrong side of a published opinion.

My first column was dated 8 January 1983. I wrote it under the pseudonym A.S. Henry, a camouflage I kept up for six months. Before me, an irregular music column had been written by Anthony Burgess from his mobile home in southern France. The main problem with this arrangement had been the difficulty of sending it to him for review. Something more reliable was needed, and until 1989 I was asked to write fortnightly, alternating with Rodney Milnes on opera.

That was the year I also wrote a cricket column, soon abandoned for similar reasons to those I have just outlined — it is hard to keep abreast of games that take five days from the back of an aeroplane. Neville Cardus, my model, had done rather better.

Filing copy before the advent of email was an inexact science. Of course one could risk putting the piece in the post, but that meant being ahead of oneself time-wise. The surest method was to type it out (double spaced) and push it through the letter-box of 56 Doughty Street. We rarely used fax

I was once summoned to the Palace for a dress-down, resulting in the imposition of the Official Secrets Act for some reason, but I did once, in 1985, send in an article by telex. I was working with the Dutch Chamber Choir in Amsterdam, where the deadline had caught me on the hop. Telex was a system that punched letters into a thin strip of white tape, which fed into a machine, then telegraphed the letters to a dedicated machine at the other end. The problem was that there was no way of correcting a typing error, and an 800-word article yielded count- less yards of tape which, on this occasion, went down the stairs and into the premises of a neighbouring business. Also the tape could break at any time. The article took hours to convey — dictating it over the telephone was deemed to be too expensive.

It is no good being doctrinaire in pages like these. From the beginning I followed Auberon Waugh’s advice and wrote as if I were making an after-dinner speech. I didn’t think that it is acceptable to use the column to advertise myself or the Tal- lis Scholars, though sometimes I couldn’t keep us out of it, as when we were caught at Heathrow on the day bombs were found on commercial flights, and it took us seven hours to check in, with no possessions allowed in the cabin at all. Or the day I arrived on the stage of the Albert Hall to find that my music stand had been cleared away and locked up, with the live broad- cast starting immediately. I thought these things fair game. Otherwise I tried to do what it said on the label, and spectate.

But I will finish with a statement. Like any priest I have a mission in life, which I will pursue relentlessly anywhere for any (or no) money. This is to encourage interest in renaiss- ance polyphony. I agree with J.M. Whistler that art is for art’s sake, that beauty (not mor- als or messages) should be the primary goal and meaning of a work of art. It is my expe- rience that the moment people start looking for hidden meanings and relevancies, conven- ient to their own agendas, they are in danger of colonising the work in question, inevitably to its detriment, even as if beauty in itself is too simple, too naked, and therefore frightening. This is very much the case with polyphony, I’m also with Abbot Suger, who believed that we can only come to understand absolute beauty, which is God, through the effect of precious and beautiful things on our senses. Get your ego out of the way, and let the beauty speak for itself.

Opera

Bell canto

Michael Tanner

Tannhäuser

Royal Opera, in rep until 15 May

Cursed, or perhaps blessed, with almost no visual memory at all, I had almost completely forgotten what the Royal Opera’s current Tannhäuser, directed by Tim Albery and with set designs by Michael Levine, looks like. Or perhaps it was the natural tendency to repress the memory of unpleasant expe- riences. Wanting to enjoy the Overture, I closed my eyes until the moment the Venusberg ballet that Wagner composed for the doomed Paris version in 1861 began. How- ever many hundreds of times I hear that Overture, with its wind chorale and weary strings, I still hang on every bar.

It was instantly clear that Hartmut Haen- chen, the conductor of this first revival, was going to be lighter and faster than Semyon Bychkov had been first time round. Mainly, Haenchens way is preferable. With Bychkov there were puzzling pauses, dragging orchestral bridge passages, general stasis. Haenchens knocked a quar- ter of an hour off Bychkov’s timing, with enlivening effect. On the other hand, there was unusually poor ensemble, both from the orchestra, occasionally, and the chorus, whose magnificent grand ensembles in Act II were ragged and their projection poor. You would hardly have guessed that the ensemble in Act II, when Elisabeth rush- es to defend Tannhäuser, is the grandest in opera, it was so subdued, no doubt for the benefit of the soloists.

On the other hand, the scandalous Paris Venusberg music was thrilling and shock-
Books & Arts

Cinema
Striking the wrong note
Deborah Ross

Florence Foster Jenkins
PG, Nationwide

Before we turn our attention to Florence Foster Jenkins — but if you can’t wait, it’s so-so — I feel I should address the several hundred (and counting; hell’s bells) comments below my negative review of Captain America: Civil War last week, and the many pleas that I should ‘get a life!’, which seemed a bit rich. Indeed, as I’m not the one overly invested in a film franchise where the films are barely films, just noisy assemblages of CGI set pieces, am I the one most in need of this ‘life’ being talked about? And now I hope to put this argument to bed, otherwise 1) we’ll be here for ever and poor Florence won’t get a look in and 2) as a person whose ‘opinion’ doesn’t matter and who was plainly ‘biast’ I feel I’ve already experienced enough adventures in spelling to last a lifetime, and therefore don’t wish to kick it all off again.

And now on to Florence. This is based on the rich, real-life 1940s New York socialite who fancied herself as a gifted singer whereas, in truth, she was appalling. Rupert Christiansen has detailed her life on page 42, so I refer you to that, rather than repeat everything here. I will say only that I’ve listened to the original recordings, as available on YouTube, and her Queen of the Night aria may be the worst sound I have ever heard aside, perhaps, from foxes having sex in the middle of the night. It may even be that foxes having sex in the middle of the night are more tuneful. Why didn’t she know? It’s possible there is no answer to that, given the delusional nature of delusions, but I do wish this film had asked anyhow.

It’s directed by Stephen Frears, who has had his highs (My Beautiful Laundrette, Dangerous Liaisons, Dirty Pretty Things, The Queen, Philomena) and his lows (Tamara Drewe, Mrs Henderson Presents) and this is neither high nor low but a middling one, taking its place alongside The Program, say. It gets us from A to B. It does the job. It’s not a trip to the cinema you’ll bitterly resent, as can happen when, for example, it’s just hours and hours of one thing smashing into another thing. But it can never quite decide whether it wants to be comic or tragic, whether it wants us to laugh at or with, and in fully committing to neither, it often lapses into sentimentality of the most cloying kind.

Meryl Streep, at her most winsome, stars as Florence, who is certainly introduced comically. Here she is, a vision in chiffon and angel-wings, being lowered stutteringly from the ceiling as part of a variety show performed for the Verdi Club, an organisation of her own founding. In attendance is St Clair Bayfield (Hugh Grant, at his most Hugh Grant-ish, which is strangely touch-}

Once Frears has had his big reveal, there’s nowhere else to go
Dance
Fade to grey
Ismene Brown

Swan Lake
Theatre Royal, Glasgow, touring until 4 June

Tannhäuser; (in between)
Royal Opera House; Sadler’s Wells

Life.
Sadler’s Wells, touring until 13 October

Every ballet company wants a box-office earner. But why Scottish Ballet’s leader Christopher Hampson kept on at David Dawson until he agreed to do a new Swan Lake is difficult to understand given the meh results. Dawson is a polite, undeemonstrative choreographer, and his lack of enthusiasm has rather predictably produced an asthenic result.

Obviously, abandon thoughts of white swans, or royalty, or Matthew Bourne’s brilliant, vaudevillian 1995 rewrite. This is, literally, a grey production in every way — or rather greyed-out, as if it were the ghost of something that was functional but is now impotent. Dawson doesn’t display the theatrical or choreographic skills here that would have made that disabling of older functions (enchantment, technique, musicality) a deliberate, interesting choice.

The grey setting shows a lattice of crashed girders, with a minimalist dish of white light representing the lake, designed by John Otto. The party scenes look like a cheerless staff do in the backrooms of a posh hotel, men in grey jackets and black trousers, women in frumpy midi-dresses, rhubarbing generically.

The story is mumbled rather than explored: moody no-mates Siegfried mooching next to his Tiggerish friend Benno, who gets the lion’s share of the dancing at first, but nothing emerges of the crucial sexual subtext. Is Siegfried in love with Benno — or jealous of him or something? Are the party guests deferential management subordinates (i.e., old-school courtiers) or the typically boring friends of boring men?

Dawson’s unfocused choreography ignores Tchaikovsky’s distinctive, varied tempi and pulses, and only tentatively allowed moments of focused formations in the ensemble. Occasionally, nuggets of ideas break through — there’s a ghost of a jive in the Act 1 waltz, and in Act 3 Siegfried finally wakes up a bit with a decent solo. There seems to be a fear of focus.

The Swan Queen carries the show, with Scottish Ballet’s best ballerina Sophie Martin gorgeous and confident in a very cute white devoré playsuit, which suits her lean body but not the bigger bottoms made much too visible within her swan flock. Her choreography draws no lines of vulnerability between Odette and Odile, and it’s unclear why she should be seriously distressed by Siegfried’s limp actions.

Meanwhile, the dancing is the only lead in the pencil of the Royal Opera’s Tannhäuser, in Tim Albery’s staging. That’s deliberate, since the opening Venusberg ballet scene must define the depravity to which Wagner’s anti-hero has become addicted. From then on it’s all hairshirt remorse in terrible clothes (opera choruses must basically live in what they find in bin-bags these days).

Its choreographer Jasmin Vardimon was well chosen by Albery — she’s originally from Israel where they are not afraid of big, robust crowd movement (see her compatriot Hofesh Shechter). The tumbling shoals of girls and boys, doing a strip as they swirl acrobatically hither and thither, manage to indicate wild surges of primitivist sexuality, the impact enhanced by setting the Venusberg inside the Royal Opera House itself, behind those famous red curtains.

Storm over the City, 2015. Oil on canvas. 60 x 66 in. / 152.4 x 167.6 cm. Bill Jacklin. Paintings and Monotypes.
The previous weekend, in Sadler’s Wells’ cramped little Lilian Baylis studio, Vardi-
mon’s own creation, (in between), showed this mermaid imagery in a more quirky, curi-
ous way, with dancers upending themselves, wagging their legs in the air. Her question
seems to be about the ecstatic addictions of slavish physical discipline. This strikes me,
in retrospect, as a Wagnerian question.

But the highlight of the past few days was Life., an outstanding new double bill from
the Ballet Boyz’ increasingly charismatic all-
male company — one piece of Nordic som-
berness, the other of Latin amusement, both
about male insecurities.

Pontus Lidberg’s divertingly couched but bleak Rabbit gets a Kafkaesque tinge from the
Edwardian shirts, braces and breeches, as one man nervously joins a band of rab-
bit-headed men, perhaps dreaming of recap-
turing his childhood innocence. It is not at
all cosy — the rabbit heads are so realistic
that you imagine the rank, bloody smell. The
rabbit men jerk and slide in precise, menac-
ing synchronised formations. The satirical
rabbit men jerk and slide in precise, menac-
ing Beatlemania, is to stay calm: ‘If you
bolt and run they’ll tear you apart.’) But
what Norman’s book reveals is that the
effortless charm predates the fame, and
it’s the sort of charm that isn’t always
charming. As John’s famous Aunt Mimi
put it, ‘Oh, yes, he was well mannered
— too well mannered. He was what we
call in Liverpool “talking posh” and I
thought he was taking the mickey out of
me. I thought “He’s a snake-charmer all
right,” John’s little friend, Mr Charming.
I wasn’t falling for it.”

This sort of affability can be useful —
having forgotten his passport while
filming Magical Mystery Tour Macca
smooth-talked both British and French
customs officers into letting him pass
— but equally it can arouse suspicions.
One of McCartney’s first girlfriends was
Iris Caldwell, sister of Rory Storm (as
in the Hurricanes). ‘Wherever we went,
he always had to be the centre of atten-
tion,’ she says. One night in a coffee bar
‘Paul’s showing off got on my nerves so
much that I picked up the sugar bowl . . .
and emptied it over his head.’ Macca
would get Caldwell’s mother to comb his
hairy legs, because it relaxed him. ‘Oo, Vi,
give me legs a comb,’ would come the
request. It was always complied with
— but Violet Caldwell was never com-
pletely won over. Irritated by McCartney
always smoking other people’s cigarettes
rather than buying his own, she would
tell him: ‘You’ve got no heart, Paul.’
Relations remained good enough after
Iris and Macca split up for the star to
visit with his new girlfriend, Jane Asher.
But although Asher was allowed in the
house, Violet wouldn’t admit McCartney
until he’d been to the local shop to buy a
pack of fags.

You can see the quality to this day. It’s
there in the trademark V-sign, the man-
nered drawl that carefully retains a touch
of Liverpool but hovers somewhere
halfway over the Atlantic, the ‘man’ at
the end of every other sentence. Behind
those famous doe eyes there shines, as it
always has, a single thought: ‘What’s in
this for Paul McCartney?’

Still love your music, Macca. Just not
sure about the man, man.”

— Mark Mason
Television
That's entertainment
James Walton

The big returning show of the week began with servants laying out the silverware at a large country house in 1924. But rather than a shock comeback for Downton Abbey, this was — perhaps even more unexpectedly — Tommy Shelby’s new home in Peaky Blinders (BBC2, Thursday). Which explains why so many of the guests were carrying guns, and why the family matriarch was using the word ‘fuck’ a lot more than Lady Grantham ever did.

When we last saw gang-leader Tommy (Cillian Murphy), he was still based in the Birmingham backstreets. He was also having a fairly tough time — what with juggling two women, trying not to get murdered and being required by the government to start the Irish Civil War. Two years on, however, things are clearly looking up. Not only is he living in squirearchical splendour, but on Thursday we joined him on his wedding day.

After an extended tease of the audience, the bride was revealed to be Grace, the former police informer, whose husband had, it seems, conveniently committed suicide while we were away. The marriage service was performed by Jeremiah Jesus, the dreadlocked black street preacher who’d somehow metamorphosed into a Catholic priest for the occasion.

At first, it sounded as if the celebrations that followed wouldn’t be much fun, with Tommy insisting on a strict policy of no cocaine, gambling or fighting. Fortunately, these rules were soon broken, although, in Tommy’s defence, he did have other things on his mind. Despite his wealth, he’s still in thrall to the biggest gang of them all: the British establishment, led by the shadowy Mr Big otherwise known as Winston Churchill.

This time, Tommy’s job is to supply arms to the White Russians. As a result, he had to break off from partying to receive a huge bundle of cash from a glamorous Georgian duchess and to order the killing of a Bolshevik spy disguised as one of the guests. ‘It wasn’t the day I was expecting,’ his new wife told him when they finally retired for the night.

Now, you may think none of this sounds terrifically believable — but, as well as being true, that would surely be beside the point. Peaky Blinders has never been a work of stark realism. Nor (although I’m less confident about this bit) was it ever intended to be. Like The Night Manager, the show mightn’t be as classy as it thinks, lacking as it does such qualities as psychological depth and narrative plausibility. Yet, like The Night Manager, too, it’s hard for even the sternest Leavisite critic to resist: a highly efficient piece of entertainment, full of inventive storytelling and heroically unafraid to go over the top when necessary — which is apparently quite often. In short, it’s good to have the old gang back together again.

Last week, Grayson Perry caused some handy outrage in advance of his new series by attacking blokes in general and poor old Bear Grylls in particular for hanging on to an outdated model of manhood. Once the programme itself began, though, Grayson Perry: All Man (Channel 4, Thursday) gradually proved much more nuanced than that.

Admittedly, Perry’s basic thesis won’t have startled many viewers: that, with the disappearance of heavy industry, the old ideals of masculinity need to be changed; and that, instead of being strong and stoical providers, men should — you guessed it — talk about their feelings more. (Presumably, that is, as long as those feelings are deemed acceptable.) But while Perry did his best to keep this idea going, it was regularly undermined by his obvious soft spot for strong and stoical providers; and above all by his winning tendency to be properly interested in — and to really like — the people he meets.

On the grounds that extreme examples of masculinity are the best way of exploring the subject (as opposed to, say, the best way of ensuring some newsworthy telly), Perry began on Thursday with cage fighters in the north-east. To the great benefit of the programme — if not of his thesis — they turned out to be rather a thoughtful bunch, happy to acknowledge that their machismo contained strong elements of impersonation and wish fulfilment.

Of course, there are logical reasons why Perry didn’t speak to many buttoned-up types: they’re probably too buttoned-up, for a start. Nonetheless, it did seem odd that so much of the programme should consist of men articulatedly expressing their feelings about men’s failure to express their feelings articulately.

Still, if the programme ended up undeniably confused, that might be no bad thing. After all, as male responses to the conflicting demands made on them go, confusion feels like a pretty sensible one to me — and ultimately far more illuminating than the banal certainties that we looked to be in for when Perry began.
Clumber spaniels
By Allan Massie

For the first time in more than 30 years we have no Clumber spaniel. We have had five: Henry, Judith, Laurie, Persephone and Wattie. The last of them, Wattie the gentlest and sweetest of dogs, died a few months ago. We feel bereft. Clumbers are special: beautiful, affectionate, wilful, sometimes difficult, never dull.

They take their name from Clumber Park in Nottinghamshire, once the seat of the Dukes of Newcastle. Different in appearance from other English spaniels — heavier, low-slung, with large sagacious heads — their origin is uncertain. According to one story, they came from France, being a gift from a French friend, the Duc de Noailles, to his fellow duke. In a pleasingly romantic version of the tale, the French duke sent his kennel of spaniels to England for safe keeping at the time of the Revolution. This is a charming idea — so much so that I have often happily repeated the story, proclaiming its authenticity — but even setting aside the unlikelihood of a French aristocrat having more regard for his spaniels than his own neck during the Terror, it seems to be a myth, unsupported by evidence. It is more likely that Clumbers emerged from selective breeding of other spaniel types, with perhaps an admixture of some short-legged hound. Certainly the Clumber’s head is quite hound-like, sometimes as melancholy-seeming as a bloodhound’s. In 18th and early 19th century paintings, the Clumber’s head is more like a springer’s than it is now.

Be that as it may, these white spaniels with lemon or orange markings were worked at Clumber Park and other estates in the Midlands, their build and determination making them adept at pushing through undergrowth. Later George V had a kennel of Clumbers at Sandringham. It was said that the King’s ‘predilection’ for the breed was ‘largely attributable to their special suitability for the covert shooting in which His Majesty delights and to the fact the Clumber, almost alone of shooting dogs, can be worked in packs’. Indeed Clumbers were prized for their ability to work in concert as a team, and this has always puzzled me, because each of our Clumbers has been markedly individual, and by no means notable for team spirit.

So absent was it that if we gave Laurie, Persephone and Wattie each a hide-chew, it wouldn’t be ten minutes before Persephone had acquired all three. Her passion was digging, though we never knew what she hoped to unearth. I think she dug simply for the joy of digging; art for art’s sake. Laurie’s favourite game was to pounce on an open dishwasher and remove a piece of cutlery. He was, sometimes, a difficult dog, with a will of iron; I adored him. He loved seizing things, once attempting to remove the cloth from a table set for Christmas dinner, on another occasion grabbing the rug that covered a sofa on which my wife was sitting and dragging the sofa, my wife still on it, across the room. Clumbers indeed are not dogs for everyone, certainly not for anyone who is house-proud, for they shed their hair freely. They require careful handling, but you lose your heart easily to them; as puppies they look like bear cubs. The adult Clumber is the king of spaniels; ours is a sad house without one.
FRANCE

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'The first seeds of the financial crisis were sown when bankers stopped spending their afternoons in pubs'  
— Rory Sutherland, p61

High life
Taki

I went downtown to Katz’s the other day and had a pastrami sandwich that made me want to shout. God, it’s good to be bad and eat bad, but not necessarily act bad. That’s the trouble nowadays. People take care of their health, eat properly, exercise obsessively, do mental gymnastics such as crossword puzzles, and then go out and act like slobs, use the F-word non-stop and talk with their mouths full. If I hear one more time that 60 is the new 40, I will punch the first octogenarian, male or female, who crosses my path. Some bufoon who recently took up tennis has written a book about how this might stop him from getting cancer. I said might, because the poor man doesn’t guarantee anything, especially being able to get down and scoop up a drop-shot. The drop-shot, incidentally, is the stroke most employed in veteran tennis. I gave up the game about five years ago because of arthritic ankles and back. Judo and karate I can practise without too much pain, but not tennis. Mind you, after reading about this man’s quest to become Federer in his mid-sixties, I think I might pick up a racket again.

The trouble with tennis is that it’s a difficult game. If it’s windy it becomes really hard to enjoy. If one’s opponent has a clumsy sort of game, ditto. Veteran tennis is cagey and I always had trouble getting into the groove because oldies don’t provide the pace that is a prerequisite for a counter puncher like myself. The game at the highest level is now a bore: bang, bang, bang — and more bang. Unless they speed up the courts, which will encourage players to start crowding the net, the game has lost one veteran viewer, yours truly.

Along with the EU and the UN, the most useless body of well-paid sycophants is the Tennis Integrity Unit, the anti-corruption body that has come under increased scrutiny this year on account of its ineffectiveness and obfuscation. Well, like the farmer’s naughty daughter, perhaps it can’t help it. There is no way a player can be caught throwing a match unless he admits to it. One can miss the easiest of set-ups — as the Swiss ace Wawrinka did recently when it cost him the match — and it can happen non-stop, and still the player must be judged innocent. I’ve seen Lew Hoad, a double Wimbledon champ, miss something like ten set-ups in a row — he was in love at the time — and, as everyone knows, Lew Hoad would rather fry in hell than throw a point.

In the old shamateur days, lots of players threw matches in order to get to the next tournament and collect twice. No longer. It’s the results that count now. According to the TIU, fixed matches take place every day, and the way it figured that out was by following the betting. But the burden of proof is impossible: even if an unranked player beats a highly ranked one, and there are thousands of dollars wagered on him, the loser has to be given the benefit of the doubt. There is no other game, apart from golf, that can drive a top player to make as many elementary mistakes as tennis can. Just imagine if the book were to be thrown at a loser who had simply had a bad day at the office.

The integrity unit is useless as long as betting on tennis is allowed. Heavy, lopsided betting draws suspicions, but doesn’t constitute proof. In my not so humble opinion, the unit should turn to doping and weed out the Sharapovas of this world, whose lawyers constitute proof. In my not so humble opinion, the unit should turn to doping and weed out the Sharapovas of this world, whose lawyers and sponsors I predict will get her the minimum of suspension time. So, here we are: if you want to be cancer-free, take up tennis. According to this American, who also announced that his backhand volley had improved. (The backhand volley is the most fluid of strokes, incidentally; hitting away from one’s body makes it as easy as looking at Keira Knightley.)

I don’t know why reading about lung capacity being in steady decline gets on my nerves so much. Or heart capacity ebbing. Or eyesight getting worse. All three are happening to me, yet my karate, I am told, has never been better. What worries me most is my recent inability to remember names, even those of girls I have pursued and failed to land. (One never forgets those.) As for the prefrontal cortex: fuggedaboutit.

But back to the pastrami sandwich that was so good it made me want to shout. Katz is a New York institution that has resisted selling out to the highest and greediest bidder, so when I have time I always take a taxi downtown and order the Katz speciality, the pastrami sandwich. It’s a family-owned deli that sold two neighbouring properties and its air rights, but has retained its soul and its grubby and lovely interior. New York City, as we old-timers knew it, is rapidly disappearing. Katz opened in 1888, and is now a symbol of Jewish culinary history. As the man told my Italian friend Roffredo when he was asked if the pastrami was good, ‘If you like pussy, you will love pastrami.’ Very bad manners but very good pastrami.

Low life
Jeremy Clarke

The tourist information office of the small French country town looked closed. Peering between the posters on the window glass, I couldn’t see a light on inside or furniture or people. I tried the door anyway and it gave way. The office was open. In the corner of a large expanse of tiled floor was an office desk. Seated at the desk was a woman aged about 20 absorbed in a fat paperback called Think and Grow Rich.

My appearance on her office tiles seemed to astonish her. She leapt out of her chair and almost ran to welcome me. Did she speak English? I said. Yes, of course. How could she help? I said that I had read somewhere that the town boasted an Olympic-sized outdoor
swimming-pool and I was wondering where I could find it. She said yes, I was quite right, the town had a magnificent municipal outdoor pool. Unfortunately, it closed at the end of last summer owing to a lack of public funds and it is staying closed for the foreseeable future. I like a nice swim. In fact, one of the reasons I had chosen to come here was the Olympic-sized public pool. ‘Shit and bugger,’ I said. She couldn’t agree more. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It is very shitty.’

My question was definitely answered, but she didn’t want to let me go without a bit of a natter. She seemed desperate for human contact. ‘Where are you from?’ she said. ‘England,’ I said. ‘Where?’ she said. ‘South-west,’ I said. ‘Sheep, cows, badgers. Many badgers. More badgers than cows even. In places, more badgers than humans. Do you have badgers here in France?’ ‘Yes, there are badgers,’ she said. ‘But not so many. Why are there so many in Britain?’ I found this not an easy question to answer. I had a think. Finally I said, ‘Because in Britain the badger is a political animal.’ She screwed her eyes shut tightly, as if this insight into the compass of political debate in Britain had made her go temporarily blind. ‘One side,’ I continued, ‘thinks a badger is an avuncular figure who sits by the fire of an evening wearing a waistcoat and slippers, smoking a pipe and reading the paper. The other side thinks a badger is a sort of huge rat with no conscience at all. But I must leave you to think and grow rich.’

She flapped a deprecatory hand at the book. ‘The writer says that in order to be rich I must desire money until it becomes a bad obsession. I desire it on the level of a bad obsession already, so that is no problem for me; I am halfway to being rich already. He also says I must cherish my dreams because they are the children of my soul — mysterious things like that.’

I observed that her job appeared to allow her time enough to engender a very large family of dream children. There seem to be thousands, perhaps millions of people in France with jobs like that. They have a word for it — cupboardisation. French labour laws make it difficult for companies to lay off workers when production falters so they are consigned to the cupboard of idleness until things start moving again. The other day a French worker was so bored at work he sued his employers for a third of a million euros. Boredom at work first sent him into a depression — ‘You go on the internet at first, and then you shut yourself in an office and you cry,’ he said — then it triggered epilepsy. Or so he claimed. ‘Yesterday one person came in all day,’ she said. ‘An American guy wondering where he could buy a copy of the New York Times. The day before that nobody. You are the first person today. I have another question,’ I said suddenly, for it had just occurred to me. I don’t know which of us was more pleased. ‘Go ahead,’ she said. ‘This is a small country town in the middle of nowhere with no industry that I can see, yet there are many more self-identifying Muslims visible in the street than local French people, of whom there seem to be hardly any. Why so many immigrants here particularly?’

‘Yes, it’s a shame for them. I think every town in France has to give a portion of its social housing to immigrants or pay a fine,’ she said. ‘Exactly what proportion I don’t know. Here we are a population of about 5,000 and there are about 500 immigrants. They don’t look happy and I feel sorry for them.’ ‘Well, now I really must leave you to bring up the dream children of your soul,’ I said. ‘If you have any other questions while you are here, please come in,’ she said. She saw me to the door, where we shook hands.

A Doe Replaces Iphigenia on the Sacrificial Altar

There was a need to be weak and I met it. I appeared in the confusion between strength and surrender, as if out of nowhere, that’s the illusion. I was reared ruminating in a thicket of sorrow with a beautiful string of drool hanging out the side of my mouth like a loose phosphorescent tether. How will I know what to do, I wondered. No one does, my mother said. And then, as the drawing back of the ocean before a tsunami suddenly exposes outrageous fish on the sea bed, gasping, a great inhalation placed me here panting on the sacred grass. I feel like a girl in heaven, but I am a beast in a clearing. I came to as the wind picked up and in the bay as the tide came in, what a blow to mankind, an animal crude wind to war, toward war, untoward toward war took my breath away with it.

— Robyn Schiff
Real life
Melissa Kite

Buffy Sainte-Marie said it best. ‘The lights of town are at my back, my heart is full of stars. And I’m gonna be a country girl again.’ At least, I hope I am. But if I do manage to pull off this long-awaited move to the country, it will all be thanks to a Spectator reader.

It was years ago now, I had a very nice letter from a gentleman who lived in the Surrey village of Ripley, about ten minutes from Cobham, who recommended that I move there. That must have been stored away in the annals of my brain, but deep in the annals, because, after scouring Cobham and finding nothing I could afford, it still didn’t occur to me.

I went way down the A3 and looked for land around Farnham and found a cottage with no central heating and one acre for £720,000. But the agents wouldn’t give me the time of day, because they were so confident they would get that price or more.

And then I popped down the road to Ripley to go to the small supermarket there, as I often do. I’ve been there a hundred times and never seen anything up for sale. It’s a one-street village with a vast green behind the main drag, hidden from view. But this time, I parked my car round the back of the shops and saw a cottage for sale right on the green.

I made an appointment to look round, and as soon as I walked in I felt it. Unfortunately, I had taken the ex-builder boyfriend with me, because the agent had told me it needed ‘a bit of work’. And the builder boyfriend didn’t feel it at all.

As I walked round going ‘Ah! I can put the piano here!’ and ‘Oh! A kitchen up some steps! I lived in a cottage with a kitchen up some steps when I was a student!’; the builder grumped and groaned, opening doors to rooms then shutting them again declaring, ‘Don’t even go in there!’ He pronounced the bathroom a natural-history project and recommended we alert David Attenborough to the things that were growing between the tiles.

He said the walls would need stripping back until we were taking the place virtually apart. It would need rewiring. It would need a new kitchen, a new bathroom. It couldn’t be extended because the neighbour had stuck a lump on the back of their kitchen, giving them right to light. You couldn’t go up into the loft because the roof space was ‘all wrong’.

‘It needs a gut!’ he proclaimed, uttering the four words that he thought would frighten me most.

But they didn’t, because I liked the feel of it. Outside, we thanked the agent, got in the car, and before I could say ‘I’m going to put in an offer,’ the builder said, ‘They’ll never sell that in a million years!’

But he always says that about houses. And they always do sell. So I decided not to listen to him. I asked for a second viewing and went round again on my own. Without the backing track of the world’s most disgruntled ex-builder boyfriend, it was wonderful.

Yes, it needed the carpets ripping up and the walls replastering and a new kitchen and bathroom. But it had the original wide oak floorboards. Nothing had been chaved up. No fake-flame logburner slash TV. No jack and jill sinks. No bifold doors! This might be the only house left in the south-east of England without bifold doors!

And best of all, out of the front window was a sea of green. And not green that I would have to maintain. Green that someone else looked after, that I got to enjoy free of worry, with my horses in livery ten minutes up the road.

Fine, it’s hardly the Plains Cree First Nation Reserve in the Qu’Appelle Valley, Saskatchewan, Canada, birthplace of Buffy. But then again, Buffy did end up living in Hawaii, after marrying and divorcing a surfer.

I put in an offer and, after being pushed up a little, had my offer accepted. A ‘Sold’ sign is outside the door. My London flat is up a little, had my offer accepted. A ‘Sold’ sign is outside the door. My London flat is a one-street village with a vast green behind the main drag, hidden from view. But this time, I parked my car round the back of the shops and saw a cottage for sale right on the green.

With an old brown dog and a big front porch and rabbits in the pen.

All the lights on Tooting Broadway don’t amount to an acre of green (Ripley green, obviously).

That’s why I’m going to be a country girl again.

Bridge
Susanna Gross

I’ve been practising bidding online with my friend Guy Hart in preparation for the Spring Fours in Stratford (we’ll know our fate by the time you read this). We’ve not played together much before, and frankly the field is so strong — a roll-call of the greats — that our team has about a zero chance of getting to the final. Still, we can only do our best — and I must do better than I did during our practice game last week. Towards the end of the evening, I played a hand sloppily and went down. I asked Guy how I might have made the contract. ‘You’d have made it if you were a Republican, and not a Monarchist,’ he replied. ‘What?’ I spluttered. He explained that two of my honour cards, a queen and a jack, were of no use to me — but I’d gone about the hand as though they had an important role to play. And he was absolutely right; my deference to their royalty had temporarily blinded me to the obvious line of play:

**Dealer South**

| ♠ | J | 9 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| ♦ | 7 |
| ♣ | 7 | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| ♥ | A | Q |

| ♠ | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 |

**E/W vulnerable**

| ♠ | K | O |
| ♥ | 9 | 8 | 7 | 6 | 5 | 2 |
| ♦ | K | J | 9 |
| ♣ | 10 | 9 | 8 | 7 |
| ♥ | A | 8 | 5 | 4 | 2 |
| ♦ | A | Q | J |
| ♣ | A | Q | 10 |
| ♠ | 6 | 3 |

**West**

| Pass | 2♥ |
| Pass | 4♠ |

**North**

| pass | pass |
| all pass |

**East**

| INT |

(“Transfer”). West led the ♥10. I rose with the ♠A, crossed to the ♥A and played the ♥Q. My plan, if West covered, was to ruff, cross back with the ♠A and discard my losing club on the ♥J. But West played low, I discarded the ♥Q. East won and returned a diamond; I played the ♥10 to West’s ♥J. He returned a club. I ruffed, and played ♠A and another spade. East won and played a second diamond: one down. If only I’d pretended that my queen and jack were two small hearts, I’d have known what to do: win the club lead, play a heart to the ace, ruff a heart — so what if I was ruffing royalty! — play a trump to the ace, ruff another heart and exit with a club. When East switches to a diamond, West wins but is end-played.
Chess
Out of the book
Raymond Keene

Last week we saw the reigning world champion Magnus Carlsen taking a leaf from Alekhine’s book to destroy eccentric opening play by the Swedish grandmaster Nils Grandelius. This week we see Alekhine himself in action, launching a sacrificial maelstrom which destroys his hapless opponent.

Alekhine once wrote, ‘It is especially with respect to the original opening of this game that people often speak of a “hypermodern technique”, a “neo-romantic school” etc. The question is in reality much simpler. Black has given himself over to several eccentricities in the opening which, without the reaction of his opponent, would in the end give him a good game.’ He was actually referring to the opening moves of his game against Rubinstein from the Hague 1921. But his note could equally well apply to the attack he launches in the following game against the Finnish master Böök.

In the 70th anniversary year of Alekhine’s death as world champion, Everyman Chess has published Alekhine: Move by Move by Steve Giddins, upon which I have based the comments to this game.

Alekhine-Böök: Margate 1938; Queen’s Gambit Accepted

1 d4 d5 2 c4 dxc4 3 Nf3 Nf6 4 e3 e6 5 Bxc4 c5 6 0-0 Nc6 7 Qe2 a6

8 Nc3 b5 9 Bb3 b4

This quiet recapture is a remarkable move. 16 ... exd5 17 e4 Nf6 18 Bg5 Qc7 19 Bf4 Qb6 20 Bxh6 Qg8 21 Bg5+ Kf8 22 Bh6+ Ke7 23Bg5+ Kf8 etc. 16 ... Ke7 This is the critical point of the game. This move, trying to escape the pin on the d7-knight, is bad. The obvious and natural move is 16 ... g6 with unclear play. 17 e4 Threatening 18 Bxd7 Rxd7 19 Bg5+. 17 ... Nf6 18 Bg5 Qc7 19 Bf4 Qb6 20 Rdl g6 This stops a subsequent Qh5 and also attempts to develop the kingside, but now the weakness of the f6-knight is fatal. 21 Bg5 Bg7 22 Nd7 Rxd7 Or 22 ... Qc7 23 e5, winning easily. 23 Rxd7+ Kf8 24 Bxf6 Bxf6 25 e5 Black resigns If the bishop moves, there is a deadly check on f3.

PUZZLE NO. 407

White to play. This is from Pacher-Radnai, Budapest 2016. How did White exploit a tactical opportunity to make a decisive material gain? Answers to me at The Spectator by Tuesday 10 May or via email to victoria@spectator.co.uk or by fax on 020 7681 3773. There is a prize of £20 for the first correct answer out of a hat. Please include a postal address and allow six weeks for prize delivery.

Last week’s solution 1 Bxg7

Last week’s winner John Samson, Edinburgh

Competition
Post mortem
Lucy Vickery

In Competition No. 2946 you were invited to supply a verse obituary of a well-known person who has died in the past year.

There’s certainly no shortage of candidates. Whether more famous people than usual are dying or whether it just seems that way I don’t know, but hardly a day goes by without one of the stars of light entertainment who provided the cultural backdrop to my formative years — Ronnie Corbett, Victoria Wood, Paul Daniels, Anne Kirkbride, Terry Wogan, Cilla Black, Keith Harris — checking into the horizontal Hilton.

Alanna Blake and Max Ross were clever and touching on Ronnie Corbett; Chris O’Carroll, Martin Parker, D.A. Prince and Brian Murdoch also deserve honourable mentions. The entries printed below net their authors £25 apiece and Max Gutmann pockets the bonus fiver.

Ms Harper Lee, a scribe of note, as her first published novel wrote To Kill a Mocking Bird — a pip. Her follow-up was nearly zip.

A public life was troublesome. Ms Lee stayed hale. Ms Lee stayed mum. She gave us nothing from her pen for more than fifty years! But then she, casting reticence aside, released a book — and quickly died. If we’d be well and live, perhaps we all should learn to shut our traps.

Max Gutmann

Topped The Beatles, toppled Kylie, About as trendy as a Pooh-stick: Always he was highly smiley, Picking at the old acoustic —

Once he’d been a fruit-crate maker, Banging in the one-inch nails; More than twenty-one years later, Proof persistence never fails —

From Waterford and crystal-cool, With Irish brogue and roguish goat, In his Aran as a rule, Rocking all the pension-dreamers

He never rocked the Sixties boat: He never rocked the teeny screamers Until they too wore slumberwear — Rocking all the pension-dreamers In his sturdy rocking-chair.

Bill Greenwell

One finds in all the better soaps A cemetery of early hopes, As disillusion eats the soul, And drink and madness take their toll, And marriages and flings redouble A woman’s lot is toil and trouble. Praise, then, the sterling fortitude Of those shamed by a crooked brood.
Who have a plonker for a mate
Yet dignify a trying fate.
Anne played for more than forty years
A stoic in a vale of tears,
A lighthouse in a stormy ocean
Of burning, volatile emotion.
Desired and tricked by many men,
Deirdre's at last beyond our Ken.

*Basil Ransome-Davies*

Self-uprooted from his native isle
He took from there his talent to beguile:
A soft-edged voice and easy rhythmic flow,
Were gifts an Irish accent may bestow.
They made him radiogenic so to speak
Which drew more listeners to him week on week.
Translated to the television screen,
His skills and charm worked equally when seen.
A man not witty but of nimble wit,
His tone and audience proved a perfect fit:
Show business went entirely with his grain
To find amusement and to entertain.
It gave him wealth that from success accrues
For which he paid full charitable dues.
Good-hearted, then, if lucky, truth to tell,
He made his blessings count and lived life well.

*W.J. Webster*

Valé Howard Marks, or, 'Donald Nice'
(one of your several aliases). Twice
Married, each time ending in divorce —
It seems you just let Nature take its course…
Physics at Oxford: Balliol, alma mater.
Offered stability but you thought smarter.
Sooner than sink to academe's abyss
You found your métier in cannabis:
It seems you just let Nature take its course…
Twice
During the seven-year spell in Terre Haute
You endeared yourself to inmates — taught them
grammar!
Your 'nick'-name, Narco Polo, added flair
And kudos; a beguiling nom de guerre.
Your 'nick'-name, Narco Polo, added flair
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*30 May 2016 | www.spectator.co.uk*

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**Crossword 2259: Eco**

by Doc

The unclued lights (one of two words) can be preceded by the same word which is hidden in the completed grid. Solvers must highlight this word appropriately. All resulting phrases are verifiable in Brewer. Elsewhere, ignore one accent.

**Across**

1. Ought to be quiet when dreadfully loud (6)
2. Tax blow for fish (4)
3. Cromarty’s actor’s forename (4)
4. This could provide Mum with pie or stew (8)
5. Military Cross received by hard-line, versatile unit? (8, two words)
6. Rebuilt home good inside? Initially met a lot of resistance (6)
7. Elusive, elusive (6)
8. Measure reflected in the valleys (3)
9. Criminal is in late for prayers (8)
10. Mysterious Edwin died on cross (5)
11. Current way to produce greater efficiency (10)
12. Board for one in mental hospital? (9)
13. The unclued lights (one of two words) can be preceded by the same word which is hidden in the completed grid. Solvers must highlight this word appropriately. All resulting phrases are verifiable in Brewer. Elsewhere, ignore one accent.
14. Parliamentary essentials (9, two words)
15. Governor’s gun brought back by a hill (9)
16. War god with worker bully (6)
17. Noble youth’s beginning to change one who lost head (6)
18. Their real changes to ‘Less Like Other Worlds’ (9)
19. Model bust, so face darkens (10)
20. Porridge making good man throw up (7)
21. Could be guaranteed this is treeless country? (6)
22. Film stand-in is a dwarfish chap, it seems (8)
23. Paratrooper from Slovakia moving recital (5)
24. Noble youth’s beginning to change one who lost head (6)
25. Army by a hill (9)
26. Box office in Bangkok (4)
27. Measure reflected in the valleys (3)
28. Blue Shady Club (7)
29. John returns after duck at Test Match venue (4)
30. Army by a hill (9)
31. Army by a hill (9)
32. Jerk’s singular cry? (5)
33. Strive for praise. That’s greater efficiency (10)
34. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)
35. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)
36. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)
37. Sporting go down the Blue Shady Club (7)
38. Material that’s a little upsetting (4)
39. Lash out moving recital (5)
40. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)
41. Duck appears headless, ascending (4)

**Down**

1. Tax blow for fish (4)
2. The Vatican is, we hear, completely swell (7, two words)
3. Applause as one king left (6)
4. Alternatively (6)
5. This could provide Mum with pie or stew (8)
6. Rebuilt home good inside? Initially met a lot of resistance (6)
7. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)
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46. It gave him wealth that from success accrues (8)

**SOLUTION TO 2256: 11 X 11**

The unclued lights reveal ELEVEN (five English and six Scottish) league football teams (3/38, 4/1D, 10, 14, 18, 18/28, 19, 26, 27/1D, 28, 36 [City]). 1 Down has to become ROVER.

**First prize** Margaret Shields, Edinburgh

**Runners-up** Sandra Speak, Dursley, Gloucestershire; Roderick Rhodes, Goldsborough, N. Yorkshire

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**NO. 2949: DRINKING PARTNER**

You are invited to submit a poem about sharing a drink with a famous writer (16 lines maximum). Please email entries, wherever possible, to lucy@spectator.co.uk by 18 May.
T
uesday’s protest against Key Stage 1 Sats was moronic on so many levels that it’s hard to know where to start. For one thing, it wasn’t a ‘kids’ strike’. Did a national committee of six- and seven-year-olds get together and decide on a day of action? Even in Brighton, the centre of the boycott, that seems a bit far-fetched. The grown-up organisers of the protest clearly believed that was a cute way of packaging it for media consumption, but the thought of such young children engaging in political activism is actually a bit sinister. It’s like something out of a dystopian satire — a cross between Brave New World and Nineteen Eighty-Four.

Then there’s the sheer selfishness of the whole thing. Thousands of parents get to indulge in a day of virtue-signalling while schools are left to pick up the pieces. Are the organisers aware that if unauthorised absences at a school exceed a certain threshold, that school is ineligible for an Ofsted ‘Outstanding’ grade? Not only that, it could be plunged into special measures if its pass rate in the KS1 Sats falls below the floor standard. Schools live or die by their Ofsted rankings, particularly in middle-class cities like Brighton, so this protest could end up doing serious damage.

The organisers claim that children find taking an exam at this age ‘stressful’ and worry about being branded ‘failures’, but that wasn’t true of my four kids. If only! Then they might have done some revision. This time last year, I asked seven-year-old Charlie how he thought he’d done and he looked baffled. He didn’t know he’d done an exam, and when I explained that he had, he exhibited no curiosity about the results.

That’s anecdotal, of course, but I’ve seen no evidence linking the KS1 Sats to elevated stress levels. And if they really do cause psychological harm, why protest now and not when they were first rolled out 25 years ago? The main difference this year is that the results are being externally moderated rather than relying on teacher assessment — which is a good idea, since numerous research studies show that teachers assess children from low-income families as being on average less bright than those from richer families. Not because teachers are snobs, but because they’re prone to unconscious bias, like most people.

If you accept that it makes sense to teach children to read, write and add up in primary school, the case for testing them is unanswerable. How are teachers supposed to know how much of the curriculum their pupils have mastered, and to differentiate between them, if they don’t have any test results to go on? Just as importantly, how will parents and Ofsted hold schools to account in the absence of this data? It’s no good just testing children once, at the end of their primary school careers, since how children perform in exams is linked to factors schools have no control over, such as IQ and parental socio-economic status. Much fairer from the schools’ point of view to test them at the end of KS1 and then again at the end of KS2, so you can measure how much progress pupils make, regardless of their different starting points. That also produces more useful data when it comes to assessing how effective different teaching methods are.

But listening to the protestors on the BBC news, it was clear that they don’t think primary schools should be teaching the three Rs. They’re rallying cry was ‘Let our kids be kids’, by which they mean that children shouldn’t be taught anything at that age, just encouraged to express themselves and engage in ‘creative’ play. As far as they’re concerned, lessons should be fun, not difficult. The purpose of primary education is to produce emotionally well-adjusted, happy children, and anything which detracts from that, such as asking them to learn grammar and then testing them on it, should be verboten.

Trouble is, it’s kids from disadvantaged backgrounds who are penalised by this therapeutic approach. The children of the middle-class protestors will be fine if they spend all day finger-painting because they’ll pick up the basics at home; it’s their less affluent peers who will suffer. The point of the new, more rigorous primary curriculum is to reduce the yawning chasm between rich and poor children when they start secondary school. The anti-Sats brigade think of themselves as ‘progressive’, but if they succeed they will end up entrenching class divisions.

Toby Young is associate editor of The Spectator.
W

We recently moved offices from Canary Wharf to Blackfriars bridge. When you move after a long time in one place, you notice the surprising ways in which your behaviour is subliminally affected by your surroundings.

On my second day in the new office, someone came from Victoria to meet me. After about 25 minutes of useful conversation, I thanked them and they left. Something about the encounter seemed strange; I suddenly realised that, back in the old office, I’d never had such brief meetings. Instinctively it felt discourteous to give anyone who had made the longer trip to Canary Wharf any less than 45 minutes of your time.

This sense of obligation was unconscious. In some ways, something similar seems to apply to phone calls. If someone telephones from the US, you would feel rude not chatting for 15 minutes; with a call from a few miles away you can make do with a minute or two. It’s one of many possible examples where an instinct or cultural practice (in this case, the sensible principle that hospitality should rise in proportion to distance travelled) makes sense in one setting but doesn’t adapt to technology — just as people kept on tapping the end of a new cigarette on the table long after the introduction of the filter.

Perhaps that is why the adoption of video-conferencing is so slow? If you fly to meet someone, the expense and effort incurred both prove your devotion and create an assumed obligation in the mind of the person you are travelling to see — the 21st-century equivalent of making a pilgrimage on your knees to honour a saint. Is video-conferencing so easy and inexpensive that it’s seen as cheating? Somehow we can’t help but assume the importance of a message is proportional to the cost of delivering it.

There is a huge amount of this kind of hair-shirted bias in modern business. Since it is harder and harder to know whether what you are doing has any value, people tend to assume that painful, gruelling activity must be worthwhile whereas pleasant activities are self-indulgent. Occasionally I am told, ‘I am afraid we can’t offer you tea or coffee — it’s part of a cost-saving drive.’ No doubt large organisations — or governments — might save a million pounds a year or so by banning PG Tips and digestives. Rationally I understand this. Viscerally, however, you can’t help but resent it a little when basic principles of hospitality are violated to save the cost of a new cigarette on the table or the faceless owner of account number 567842/06b. By heightening sensitivity to shame, social interaction fosters trust more effectively than financial regulation can. The first seeds of the financial crisis were probably sown when bankers stopped spending their afternoons in pubs and started staring at screens instead.

Small acts of personal generosity can improve behaviour on both sides. This may explain a known psychological anomaly called the Franklin effect: we like and trust people more not only after they have done small favours for us, but also when we have done favours for them. This makes sense once you realise that you risk greater shame and moral outrage for cheating a benefactor than a stranger. Seen in those terms, perhaps those pink wafers are a bit of a bargain.

Rory Sutherland is vice-chairman of Ogilvy Group UK.

DEAR MARY YOUR PROBLEMS SOLVED

Q. I know it’s a gaffe to ask a doctor for medical advice at a party, but what is the etiquette when the roles are reversed? Recently my own doctor has been bearding me for advice on selling furniture. Sometimes he telephones for more than half an hour. As an expert in the field, I’m happy to help him out, but when he is the one giving the advice he charges me £200 for a 30-minute consultation. It’s not about money. I would just like to tease him about this unequal playing field or at least have the satisfaction of knowing that he recognises the irony. Any advice, Mary?

— Name and address withheld

A. Next time he thanks you for your advice, say emphatically: ‘It’s a pleasure. You are never boring.’ Stay silent as he modestly chortles that he is sure he must be boring. Then say: ‘How interesting you feel that. I thought I was the one who felt guilty because of forcing you to listen to my ineradicably boring health questions.’ Pause, then cry out as though you have just thought of it: ‘We should have a deal that neither of us charges the other for advice and then both of our consciences will be clear!’

Q. We recently arranged a large Sunday luncheon in Wiltshire for a mixture of friends and neighbours including an older retired couple — let’s call them ‘Yvonne and Bertie’ — who have recently moved into a nearby village house rather grandly called the Manor House. When my old friend G went up to greet Yvonne, to everyone’s astonishment she raised her arms as if to fend off the unassuming chap, and snarled, ‘Don’t come a step nearer.’ Her husband came over to me and said ‘Don’t put us next to them. We are not speaking to them.’ How should I have dealt with this grotesque display of bad manners?

— Name and address withheld

A. You might have manipulated Yvonne and Bertie by saying, ‘I’m so sorry to have put you in this difficult position by inviting you at the same time as someone you obviously dislike, but I’m sure you will have the good manners to behave in a civilised way.’ Glaring meaningfully, you would have added: ‘And in exchange I will undertake that you never meet them again under my roof.’

Q. May I suggest that you may be overlooking reasons as to why a man in his nineties stops using his hearing aids (23 April). He may not have seen his audiologist for some time and his hearing might have deteriorated, requiring the aids to be retuned. Fitting new batteries is a fiddly operation which an elderly gentleman could find very difficult. My own aid has a wax-filter in the earpiece which is even harder to change, but if it is blocked the sound is very poor. Many of your solutions are ingenious and often amusing. This one is neither.

— P.F., London N1

A. Thank you for this helpful reprinmaid.
Drink
White mischief
Bruce Anderson

I promised a return to Burgundy and the 2014 vintage, which becomes no less impressive when recollected in tranquility. We started at Marc Morey, where Sabine Mollard presented her Bourgogne Blanc. How did it compare with Pierre Boure’s similar wine, often praised in this column? (We had sampled his ‘15 the previous evening.) There is a simple answer: I would prefer the one I had tasted most recently. We are dealing with village wines, along the foothills of greatness. But in their delightful harmonies of butter, lemon, hay and spring flowers, there are hints of the grandeurs of Montrachet.

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day? Not quite, but a charming spring day, certainly. If you drink no lesser wine in the course of this summer, you will have spent a delightful season. The Marc Morey wine was already drinkable, though another year or even two would do no harm. The Frogs will be guzzling the stuff already, but they are a hasty race, except when it comes to defending their country.

We moved on to Fontaine-Gagnard, a great producer. Richard Fontaine, our host, is a former test pilot, with the scars to prove it. No one would insult his military brio. There was a hint of the long-haired boys in silk scarves who flew Spitfires in the Battle of Britain. Though I would hate to accuse him of being a Bordelais, he had a Gascon swagger. Any husband would find him enchanting company, but might wish to ensure that the wife was under lock and key.

In most Burgundian domains there are no plots of white. There, we still used the gravel underneath the barrels. ‘Cracher’ is so much more expressive than ‘spit’; a hint of onomatopoeia.

Richard’s village Chassagne-Montrachet tasted like a Premier Cru; his Premier Crus like Grand Crus. Anything with the Fontaine Gagnard imprint will be excellent in its class. None of it will be cheap. That, alas, is especially true of his Batard-Montrachet. If the Premier Crus were falcons, this was a mighty eagle. It had presence, power and panache. In Burgundy, and among those who love white Burgundy, there is a terror; oxidation. As a result, a lot of outstanding wine is being drunk too early. No one can bear the thought of bottles that cost at least £100 turning to vinegar. Throughout our trip, we found no hint of this modern Black Death. But everyone would be relieved if someone worked out what had gone wrong.

We finished our visit to Richard with a Chassagne Caillerets 1990. Although it was a good year, that is a long time for white Burgundy to last. Discussing it, we wondered whether it was time to reassess conventional wisdom. This was a delicious wine, and there seemed to be no hurry to drink it up. It made some of us wince for the ‘96s. That was supposed to be one of the finest vintages or recent decades. Those who had filled their cellars with the stuff were convivially complacent — until they tried the first bottle. Oxidation was rampant. Treasured — and expensive — bottles had turned to vinegar. That has scarred a generation of Burgundy lovers. Even so, it is clear that non-oxidised white Burgundy can last a lot longer than has often been supposed.

Further proof of this was to come. Edmond Delagrange, a Burgundian patriarch, had also made a Chassagne Caillerets. After a delightful visit to their related domaine, his daughter proposed that we finish with something special. Her grandson, Marc-Antonin Blain, was dispatched to the cellar. He returned — with a 1980 Caillerets (not a special year). He opened it and poured. It was alarmingly yellow. Oh Lord, what were we to say if it had gone over the hill? There was no reason to fear. It was superb: against much competition, the wine of the trip. We toasted the generations, the wines, the esprit of eternal Burgundy. There are worse ways to spend an afternoon.

Sir John Harington told a story in 1596 about a lady at court asking her gentlewoman to inquire which Mr Wingfield was asking to see her. On being told that it was Mr Jaques Wingfield, the gentlewoman blushed and came back with the genteel answer that it was Mr Privie Wingfield.

The story depended on Jaques being pronounced in those days like jakes, meaning ‘lavatory’ or ‘privy’. Harington took the joke to extremes, writing a whole book on lavatories called the Metamorphosis of Ajax, a punning title. Shakespeare might have been making the same joke as Harington’s when, in As You Like

It, he had Touchstone referring in front of Audrey to Jaques as ‘Master What-ye-call-it’.

A whole linguistic world is anatomised by David Crystal in his new 600-page Oxford Dictionary of Original Shakespearean Pronunciation. It comes with a password to an online audio pronunciation dictionary, Jakes/Jaques sounds something like a Bristolian saying jerks in a Morningside accent.

There’s a movement to put on productions of Shakespeare in Original Pronunciation (OP), such as the Romeo and Juliet at the Globe in 2004 that Professor Crystal worked on. It is a bit like authentic instruments among early music fans. They get used to the sound and return to modern versions dissatisfied. How different from the predictions of the pioneer of OP, Alexander Ellis, in 1871: ‘It is not, of course to be thought of that Shakespeare’s plays should now be publicly read or performed in this pronunciation. How do we know the way in which Shakespeare’s contemporaries spoke? By spelling, rhymes, puns and comments at the time. So, in Romeo and Juliet, Queen Mab is said to have a whip with a ‘lash of film’, which in the quarto and collected folio is spelt phllome, indicating two syllables.

English has changed enough since Shakespeare’s day to make only a third of his sonnets rhyme perfectly. I think that before you try reading the sonnets in OP, you should get your ear in.

The British Library publishes a CD of speeches and scenes called Shakespeare’s Original Pronunciation. At least it cuts through the modern false friend of class. — Dot Wordsworth
Since 1828, *The Spectator* has been serving up the finest writing. We’re now serving the finest gin. Our new brew, with a label designed by Michael Heath, sings with persistent hints of orange and botanicals including angelica, lime and milk thistle — well-known for cleansing the liver, so you can detox as you tox.

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