Travel

Hugo Williams
NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO
In search of rock & roll America
210pp. Gibson Square Books, 51 Gibson Square, London N1 ORD. Paperback, £7.99.
1 903933 15 3

Hugo Williams has always been scrupulous in his construction of the throwaway remark, and he doesn't disappoint in *No Particular Place To Go*. When a psychobabbling girlfriend attacks him with "You're so full of pain it's pathetic", he drily observes: "That was before I became full of anger, and, finally, full of shit." He describes being perfectly drunk as feeling as though "the whole world is like water off a duck's back", and old age as "after a lifetime of trying . . . end[ing] up an inaccurate model of yourself". Yet the subtitle points to a central problem with this republished tale of a poetry reading tour he made in 1975. America was long past rock'n'roll (as Williams acknowledges in the afterword), and the great Fifties rockers and Sixties soul acts that he goes to see have been reduced to family entertainers. The closest Williams gets to 1970s America is seeing Lou Reed asleep at a loft party (the punks were about to go international from CBGBs in New York) and failing to impress a girl with "the complicated doodle-step I do to more or less everything" because she wants to dance the hustle (disco was close to its peak). Williams's untimely focus on rock'n'roll is explained early in the book: he discovered the music as a schoolboy during half-holidays spent in a second-hand record store, from which epiphany he constructed an America.

When Williams arrives in the United States, it is with a suitcase full of pre-emptive nostalgia. This book is about the strange, lonely condition of self-inflicted travel and the often hilarious vicissitudes of the poetry circuit. Asked at one reading if he considers himself to be a craftsman, Williams replies that writing a poem is "more like gambling than carpentry. You keep thinking you're just about to hit on the winning system, the right system of mistakes." For our hero, unfortunately, only mischance can properly individuate the experience of travel and make an adventure of a journey. In communicating his belief that poetry, travel and love might be miraculous, Williams is left with a quest that can have no end: "Travel is really a test of the imagination. Homesickness its failure."

SIMON COPPOCK

Gianni Guadalupi and Antony Shugaar
LATITUDE ZERO
Tales of the Equator
372pp. Robinson. Paperback, £7.99.
1 84119 609 6

Most history has been written from a perspective "around forty-five degrees north latitude". To redress the balance, the historian Gianni Guadalupi and his co-author Antony Shugaar offer a history of conquest and misadventure within a few degrees of the Equator.

The book takes the line of the Equator as the unifying element of a narrative starting in ancient Egypt, but mostly focused on the European conquests of the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries in South America, Africa and the South Pacific. Conceding that the line of the Equator is "a man-made construct", the authors take pains to stress the figurative significance of the Line and its extreme conditions: it was in these flea-bitten places that European adventurers were most prone to disaster.

This does not pretend to be a highly wrought work of scholarship, but an entertaining compilation of tales, loosely bound together. It features some lesser-known figures, and covers much ground, none of it new. Even the opening premiss is not taken too seriously: affecting to eschew the record of Northern hemisphere-centric history, this collection is nevertheless based entirely on Western European sources. Magellan, Ralegh, Livingstone and Stanley are all here, as is Sir James Brooke, the charismatic "White Raja" of Sarawak. Other characters include Bernard O'Brien, the Irishman who obtained an audience with an Amazon Queen, and Elisa von Wagner, the Austrian Baroness who founded a short-lived colony practising free love on the Galapagos Islands. Evident in all this is Guadalupi's enthusiasm for semi-mythical adventures (he wrote, with Alberto Manguel, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places*, 1981). Shugaar's translation is quite readable, though the tone of the more fanciful parts occasionally sounds contrived: an African king's obese wives are "Pantagruelian ladies in that paradise of pinguidity". Each section features a superfluous chapter summing up the stories in advance, but this, too, is typical of the book's style. The authors simply enjoy relating the adventures, even when the reality of some of them is exceptionally grim.

ROLAND LLOYD PARRY

History

William Doyle
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION
A very short introduction
135pp. Oxford University Press.
Paperback, £5.99.
1 842750 31 3

More than most historical subjects, the French Revolution conjures up clichés – guillotines, aristocrats, unpopular queens and the eating of cake. This dramatic, but superficial, view is largely a result of the Revolution's sheer complexity; historians even disagree about when it began and ended. It is even more difficult to explain to the general reader how this tangled web of events gave birth to such immense forces as democracy, nationalism, liberalism and Communism. Because of this, William Doyle's *The French Revolution: A very short introduction* is very welcome. It is also much more than just a précis of his 1989 *Oxford History of the French Revolution*.

The excellent first chapter, "Echoes", drives home just how widespread and relevant the Revolution's legacy remains today. Versions of the tricolour as national flags are ubiquitous, while the "Marseillaise" was sung as a revolutionary anthem as recently as 1989 by the student demonstrators in Tiananmen Square. The last two chapters, "What It Started" and "Where It Stands", offer a thought-provoking analysis of the Revolution's impact on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In particular, they emphasize just how profoundly it influenced the Russian Revolution, and the way in which perceptions of it have since been shaped by the collapse of Communism.

It is immensely difficult to compress the actual course of the Revolution into a short text; the sheer press of events always threatens to overwhelm both author and reader. Doyle avoids this pitfall with aplomb, but sometimes not without controversy. He concludes, for instance, that by taking up arms in July 1789, the Parisians defeated a counter-revolution. This may have been the Parisians' view at the time, but with hindsight can one really talk of a counter-revolution before the Revolution itself had triumphed?

MUNRO PRICE

John Field
THE STORY OF PARLIAMENT IN THE PALACE OF WESTMINSTER
308pp. Politico's. £25.
1 842750 31 3

John Field taught at Westminster School for thirty years and must daily have walked into or past the Abbey and Palace of Westminster. His *Story of Parliament in the Palace of Westminster* has a strong sense of place, both of the modern palace built after the catastrophic fire of 1834 and of its predecessor. And he writes pleasantly, fluently, economically about a cross-section of the great events that unfolded there: the Gunpowder Plot and its grim aftermath; the trial and execution of Charles I, the coronation banquet of George IV that degenerated into an orgy, the great fire of 1834 itself. Curiously, he eschews the opportunity both to tell the notable medieval tales, in which kings were deposed, dynasties established and the order of succession changed, and to relate in the same vivid way modern tales of small explosive dramas in confined spaces. But if this is good holiday reading, it is not a history of Parliament. It is shockingly out of date in its reading for almost every period. It is inconsistent in its coverage and rather random and uneven – the story of the making of the Reformation in ten Parliaments after 1529 taking up less space than the inconsequential story of the Short Parliament of 1640 for example. The book is most disappointing in its failure to explain the evolution of the rules and conventions that shape legislative and judicial activity. Even its attempts at humour often fall flat: "Cromwell's 1st Protectorate Parliament appointed commissioners to eject 'scandalous, ignorant and insufficient ministers and school masters' (an embryonic OFSTED)." I only hope that in contradicting the bold claims for the volume made by the Lord Chancellor and Speaker in the foreword, I have not made myself and the *TLS* liable to be called to the Bar of House.

JOHN MORRILL

Biography

Ed Sikov
MR STRANGELOVE
A biography of Peter Sellers
428pp. Sidgwick and Jackson. £18.99.
0 283 07297 0

Since his death in 1980 Peter Sellers has been the subject of a slew of biographies of varying degrees of tastefulness. *Mr Strangelove* is the first to be worthy of him. Sellers repeatedly claimed to be devoid of personality, a blank canvas upon which he could project such classic comic creations as the *Goon Show*'s Bluebottle, Dr Strangelove and the clueless Inspector Clouseau. However, in private, Sellers was a chameleon rather than a cipher, a troubled and mercurial man whose nebulous sense of self compelled him to mimic others. Many of Sellers's previous biographers have failed to capture his brilliant yet warped comic genius because they attempt to reconcile the wildly disparate facets of his character, by turns charming, anarchic, insecure, spoilt, silly and inspired. Ed Sikov succeeds where others have failed by celebrating Sellers's infinite variety. *Mr Strangelove* never underestimates its complex subject and respectfully suggests possibilities rather than setting out certainties. In the process Sikov creates a well-rounded biography of a man who was anything but.

Unlike Alexander Walker's lacklustre authorized biography (1981), *Mr Srangelove* is solidly researched, and unlike Roger Lewis's account of the actor's life (1990), Sikov is never dutiful or plodding. Instead, he achieves his stated aim of a "sympathetic black comedy", handling his material with a comic touch that one suspects Sellers would have approved of ("The declaration of war on Germany in August 1914 is said to have sparked the stoning of hapless dachshunds in the streets"). Particularly enlightening are the parallels that Sikov draws between Lewis Carroll's looking-glass world and Sellers's philosophy of the absurd, which reaches its bleakly comic apotheosis in Stanley Kubrick's *Dr Strangelove*. Though an aficionado of the funny – he has previously written on Billy Wilder and screwball comedy – Sikov is evenhanded and unblinking when he turns to the darker side of Sellers's character. He is never salacious or sensational. He simply lays out the sad facts, and despite the admiration he obviously feels for his subject, takes care never to mitigate Sellers's failings as a father and husband. Ultimately, however, Sikov gives Sellers back his dignity, and reveals him to be a man who was loveable in spite of himself.

SALLY CONNOLLY

Memoirs

Nicholas Bagnall
A LITTLE OVERMATTER
234pp. Southover Press, 2 Cockshut Road, Southover, Lewes, East Sussex BN7 1JH. £13.99.
1 870962 18 4

Early on in this volume of reminiscences, Nicholas Bagnall reveals the source of his puzzling self-confidence. He was brought up to believe in family character: "We were Bagnalls and Bagnalls were the best. Had not our ancestors fought in at least one, perhaps two, of the Crusades? Pride and modesty were curiously combined in us."

His account of his years at the *Telegraph* (a paper he tells us where no one was ever sacked) demonstrates that in the old days a modest success in journalism could be achieved without too much effort. He dwells fondly on his mistakes and inadequacies, recalling accidental career moves and disappointing jobs, and keeping in the background any positive progress or success. Like the picture of 1950s London with which he opens *A Little Overmatter* – you could park where you liked, the trams were frequent and reliable, you could

Connolly, Sally. "In Brief." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5194, 18 Oct. 2002, p. 34. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200511180/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=3574b814. Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.