

# To hell and back

HUGH TOYE

Stephen Brookes

## THROUGH THE JUNGLE OF DEATH

A boy's escape from wartime Burma  
253pp. John Murray. £16.99.

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0 7195 5445 4

Stephen Brookes was eleven years old when Maymyo, the delightful hill station where his family lived, came under threat from the Japanese in April 1942. His father, a retired Army surgeon aged sixty-nine, had rejoined and was now responsible for the Medical Supply Depot in Mandalay. The city, crowded with refugees, had been bombed and ruined. The Japanese were to occupy it on May 1, and Lashio, key to the route from Maymyo to China, on April 29. About ten days earlier, Major Brookes had arrived in Maymyo without warning, with medical supplies for Lashio. During the night he loaded his wife, the three children still at home and their most important effects on to a lorry, and left for Lashio, where Major Brookes worked until Japanese arrival was imminent. On April 26, the family reached friends in China.

They might well have gone on to Kunming and flown to India, but Brookes felt he still had work to do in Burma. His wife would not leave him, and so the family recrossed the frontier on April 28. With Lashio about to be occupied and the road behind them cut, they made for Bhamo, just ahead of the Japanese. Abandoning their lorry and jettisoning what they could not physically carry, they took a river boat to Katha and the train to Myitkyina, from which planes were still flying to India. They missed the last two refugee aircraft and saw them destroyed by Japanese fighters as the planes were about to take off fully loaded with wounded.

On May 8, the day the Japanese occupied Myitkyina, the family began a 293-mile trek through high mountainous jungle, and across the perilous Hukawng Valley. The monsoon was breaking, the jungle tracks were fast becoming streams of mud, the mountain paths barely negotiable. On June 19, reduced to rags, half-starved, ambushed, robbed and harassed by bandits and disorganized Chinese soldiers, they reached Shingbuiyang, an official refugee camp on the way to India. The 4,000-foot Pangso Pass, now impassable, still barred the way; the aid stations, set up largely by the tea planters of Assam, had just closed and refugees were ordered to halt at Shingbuiyang until the rains ended.

The fact that North, the Frontier Service

Officer in charge of the camp, had been entertained by the Brookes family in Maymyo and was considered a friend, counted for nothing. Major Brookes and his Anglo-Burmese family were simply five among the 40,000 refugees who reached the camp during that monsoon. They were accommodated like the rest in ruinous Naga longhouses, with never enough to eat and insufficient medicines to combat the diseases from which nearly half died:

We could smell our longhouse from a long way off. When we climbed the log stairs . . . we realised why – there was a dead body lying in it . . . . It was covered with flies and must have lain there for at least two days . . . . We inched past, stepping gingerly over fly-infested fluids. . . . It took a few moments for our eyes to adjust to the murky interior. Then we saw them – people, lots of them, crammed together . . . all lying down on squares of sacking made from discarded rice bags. And the place stank – of human excreta, of rotting bodies and infected sores, and of putrid food and waste.

Towards the end of July, Major Brookes died of blackwater fever, and Stephen Brookes, inspired by his mother, grew up. Conditions improved as new huts were built with air-dropped material, but it was October before the refugees were allowed to proceed. By then, Mrs

Brookes and Stephen's crippled older brother, Georgie, had to be carried by porters. Stephen and his sister Maisie, who had kept a diary, shepherded the family. But there were regular way stations, abundant porters, and the weather was delightful. In any other circumstances Stephen might have enjoyed the 128-day march which brought them to safety in India on October 24. There followed many weeks in refugee camps before the family found its remaining members. Major Brookes had had two families, three daughters by his first wife, four sons and four daughters by the beautiful and resourceful Burmese lady he had married after his first wife died. Brookes himself was gone, but his wife and eight of his children survived. His two eldest sons and a daughter were victims of war.

Mrs Brookes and the three who walked out with her were never able to recall those traumatic six months. A merciful curtain descended for each over their memories and it is only now, with the making of this book, that Stephen and Maisie, in their seventies, have been able to talk about them. Of the thousands who had similar experiences, few have been able to describe them so vividly; few have been able to describe them at all. *Through the Jungle of Death* is a book that needed to be written, hard as the writing must have been. It should be read, the more so as the war years fade beyond memory. Stephen Brookes is much to be congratulated on an important, well-written, historical contribution.

## Daughters on the stage

JUDITH FLANDERS

Ann Blainey

### FANNY AND ADELAIDE

The lives of the remarkable Kemble sisters  
339pp. Ivan R. Dee; distributed in the UK by  
Gardners. £19.  
TLS £18.  
1 56663 372 9

The Kembles were one of England's premier acting families in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The dynasty's founder, Roger, was a Hereford barber whose only disqualification for the stage was that he was entirely without talent. He therefore took the most obvious route to professional status and married the daughter of the manager of a troupe of strolling players. (The manager to his daughter: "Well, at least you haven't disobeyed me by marrying an actor; the devil himself couldn't make an actor out of your husband.")

Roger may not have been able to turn himself into an actor, but he certainly created others: his daughter Sarah (later Siddons), and his sons, Stephen, John Philip and Charles, with their wives, all became recognized personalities of the London stage, and Mrs Siddons one of its greatest stars. Charles's two daughters also became performers: Fanny in the theatre, Adelaide in the opera house.

It was an unusual decision for Ann Blainey to focus on these latter, rather than the family as a whole: for one thing, both had astonishingly short careers. Fanny's encompassed four years: at Covent Garden under Charles's management, then touring America, where she met her future husband, and retired into matrimony. Adelaide's was just as short. After a modest success in Venice, she established herself in Italian opera houses,

before returning to sing at Covent Garden for a year. Then she too married and left the stage.

Thus our focus is, for the most part, on the domestic. And the contrast between the two lives is great: Fanny was desperately unhappy in her short marriage. Her husband, though living in the North, owned slaves in the South, and Fanny's first encounter with slavery's realities made her a passionate abolitionist – not the most harmonious role for the wife of a plantation owner. Her marriage soon broke down irretrievably, and although she remained in America to be near her children, they were, as was the custom, removed from her care and passed to the custody of her husband, despite her many attempts to portray him (accurately) as both a gambler and an adulterer. Adelaide had a happier, but no less circumscribed life: she married into upper-middle-class society, and while her husband waited for his inheritance to materialize, she quietly brought up their children and quietly nursed her passion for a German aristocrat, who had not married her because her stage career had put her beyond the pale. She determined never to be in such a situation again, and despite the occasional musical evening, dwindled very much into a wife.

That women's lives were limited in the nineteenth century is not news, but by detailing the repetitive, restricted nature of the sisters' lives after their marriages, Blainey forcibly brings home the sheer tedium that millions of middle-class women regarded as the norm – indeed, that millions of women were taught was their ultimate aim and desire. Fanny rebelled against her husband, but not against her life; Adelaide was gently fond of both. The women's suffrage movement that was gathering force had no place in their thoughts. Even in Ann Blainey's sympathetic *Fanny and Adelaide*, they may seem less than sympathetic to the modern reader.

Incidentally, the book does not mention one of the oddest biographical conjunctions I know: Fanny's daughter married a man named Wister, and their son, Owen, wrote *The Virginian*, that ur-cowboy story. How splendid that one of the great tragic heroines of the stage should be so closely related to the man who wrote: "This town ain't big enough for both of us."

## Material girl material

SALLY CONNOLLY

J. Randy Taraborrelli

### MADONNA

An intimate biography  
448pp. Sidgwick and Jackson. £16.99.  
TLS £14.99.  
0 283 07289 X

This biography is, surprisingly, the first major examination of the life of Madonna Louise Veronica Ciccone. While earlier attempts have been little more than collections of newspaper cuttings, J. Randy Taraborrelli has conducted extensive interviews with the star and those close to her. However, though *Madonna: An intimate biography* makes for compelling reading, this has far more to do with its mercurial subject than Taraborrelli's skills as a biographer.

One of the greatest challenges facing anyone writing about Madonna is that there are no revelations left to uncover. Madonna has already told all. She has been photographed hitch-hiking naked on the Floridian freeway and filmed demonstrating her fellatio technique on a bottle. Consequently, Taraborrelli has very little new information about Madonna despite his access to her inner circle. It is also notable that all of his interviews with her took place before 1987. Original anecdotes are invariably attributed to anonymous "friends", as are private conversations reported to the author and reproduced practically verbatim. Particularly irritating is Taraborrelli's habit of suggesting what people may be thinking.

Madonna herself brazenly admits that she is better at being famous than she is talented. Her promise that she would not be happy until she was "as famous as God" makes John Lennon's assertion that the Beatles were "bigger than Jesus" seem modest. Madonna's entire career has been a love affair with fame, and she has continually reinvented herself by striking poses as

almost every iconic woman of the past century. This book might have been more engaging if Taraborrelli had examined Madonna's self-creations, rather than attempting to extract a version of the truth. Though he repeatedly refers to his subject's genius for self-publicity, he does little other than document her fantastically strong will to succeed. He explains away, rather than analyses, Madonna's raw ambition, in the first few pages, by attributing her drive to the early death of her mother. In so doing, he has missed the opportunity to explore the phenomenon of contemporary celebrity that Madonna personifies better than anyone else. Since Taraborrelli merely describes the course of her continual reinventions, the "real" Madonna remains elusive.

In his epilogue, Taraborrelli admits that this biography was started in 1990, then abandoned and only recently resumed. Those chapters dealing with her earlier years seem better written and researched than those dealing with more recent years, which are marred by typographical and factual errors. The singer Erykah Badu's forename is misspelled, as is the clothing designer Gianfranco Ferré's surname. One hundred and forty pounds is hardly "hefty" for a heavily pregnant woman. The toe that Madonna sucks on the back cover of her *Erotica* album belongs to the supermodel Naomi Campbell, not just a "somebody" (one can hardly imagine the fastidious Madonna putting a toe of lesser pedigree in her mouth). The book seems, particularly in later chapters, a rushed and sloppy job, possibly because Taraborrelli was aiming to get his biography on the bookshelves before Andrew Morton's version of Madonna's life (also unauthorized), to be published later this year.

Taraborrelli obviously admires Madonna and her accomplishments, and he is at his enthusiastic best when writing about her music. His tabloid style is undoubtedly well suited to many of Madonna's salacious escapades, and he has a deft anecdotal touch, but as the book progresses, the chatty tone falls somewhat flat. Perhaps the only person capable of doing justice to this fascinating life is Madonna herself.



Connolly, Sally. "Material girl material." The Times Literary Supplement, no. 5130, 27 July 2001, p. 27. The Times Literary Supplement Historical Archive, [link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200505116/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=4e653328](https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/EX1200505116/TLSH?u=txshracd2588&sid=bookmark-TLSH&xid=4e653328). Accessed 23 Aug. 2021.