



Memoirs

Michel Déon

YOUR FATHER'S ROOM

98pp. 978 1 910477 34 2

THE GREAT AND THE GOOD

288pp. 978 1 910477 28 1

Both translated by Julian Evans

Gallic. Paperback, £8.99 (US \$14.95 each).

Michel Déon, who died in 2016 aged ninety-seven, wrote some fifty novels, plays and essays which reflected his congenital anticonformism and cosmopolitan outlook. He first emerged as part of the small group of conservative “Hussards” who resisted the annexation of post-war French culture by left-wing ideology, existentialist philosophy and progressive literary tendencies. Like a cornered octopus, the group squirted black, obscuring ink in all directions. Déon thought himself more European than French and in his writings turned a clear, ironic, disillusioned eye on the human predicament, his own life and his times.

Your Father's Room (2004) is a memoir of a childhood spent in exotic Monaco, where his father was an adviser to Prince Louis. He was taken to tea with the wife of the Turkish ambassador, was taught injustice by a Catholic priest, and learned to see women, his cool mother Blanche not least, as unfathomable. On the other hand, he basked in the affection shown him by his father whose sudden death in 1933 left just one of the scars of childhood which, Déon said, never heal. Though his novel *The Great and the Good* was published earlier, in 1996, it is in some ways a continuation of this account of his childhood. Arthur Morgan was born in the year his father died and, aged twenty-two, is awarded a scholarship to an American university, just as Déon was given a year in New York by the Rockefeller Foundation in 1951. Arthur's mother, who dotes on him as Blanche never does, upgrades his berth on the *Queen Mary* to first class where he enters a puzzling world of idiosyncratic, exciting egoisms. He meets Professor Concannon, polymath and drinker, who introduces him to a young set who are precociously knowing. Elizabeth is rich, talented and strong-willed. Getulio, the glamorous son of Brazil's recently assassinated Finance Minister, is unpredictable and a gambler, while his luminously beautiful sister bewitches Arthur but remains beyond both his reach and comprehension.

The artfully told story of their relationships is a gaily painted *montgolfière*, buffeted by death, disillusionment and fierce joys, and punctured by aphorisms – “lying to oneself is easier than lying to others” – so sharp that they deflate Arthur's youthful optimism. Augusta proves as unattainable as the Spanish girl whom Déon once loved (and put in all



Holy Week, Moratalla, Murcia, 1980 by Cristina García Rodero; from *Magnum Manifesto* edited by Clément Chéroux with Clara Bouveresse (416pp. Thames and Hudson. £45. 978 0 500 54455 6)

his books) was unreachable. It is only in middle age that Arthur finds an accommodation with love but only by accepting that loving is like licking honey off a thorn. Readers, propelled by Julian Evans's silky-smooth translation, will find the ride in Déon's balloon exhilarating.

DAVID COWARD

Anthropology

John McPhee

THE CROFTER AND THE LAIRD

170pp. Daunt Books. Paperback, £9.99.

978 1 907970 91 7

As the story of an American's quest to recover his Scottish roots, this book could easily have descended into cliché. But as the poet Iain Crichton Smith pointed out in a review of the original edition in 1969, John McPhee manages to be “neither sentimental nor judgmental” in the portrayal of his ancestral highland home. Documenting a year on the Hebridean isle of Colonsay, *The Crofter and the Laird* reads like a well-executed piece of social anthropology.

McPhee – who is best known for his “fact” writing at the *New Yorker*, as well as the Pulitzer Prize-winning geological history of America, *Annals of a Former World* (1998) – studies a community of 138 people divided into “two castes”: the “crofters and farmers”

on one side and “the permanently unestablished establishment” on the other. When Crichton Smith said of McPhee that he avoids sentimentality, it has to do with his even-handed portrayal of both parties.

The book is as much taken up with Donald Gibbie, an industrious crofter with “a frown on his face, and a look of felt responsibility in his eyes”, as it is with the Toad of Toad Hall-like laird who owns the island. If the locals complain that this “absentee landlord . . . thinks he's the cat's pyjamas”, McPhee gently understands his “preoccupations with places other than Colonsay” as belying a genuine concern for his tenants' welfare. Rather than a tired contrast of Sassenach versus Scott, we are shown the difficulties of maintaining an outmoded system that aims at “protecting people from the terrors of the eighteenth century”, but ends up “isolating them from the twentieth”. Medieval feudalism, McPhee explains, has lived on in the Hebrides to ensure “no repetition of the Highland clearances should ever occur”.

McPhee offers interesting glosses both on the clearances and the clans they destroyed, but is critical and occasionally funny about highland nostalgia. “By the time of Walter Scott”, he reminds us, “all that was left up there was the scenery”, a fact that hasn't registered with the women in their “knitted caps and tweed coats and walking sticks” who come in search of “Hebridean lore and

legend”. There is some clever weaving of the laird into this scheme – a man “cheerfully resigned to being an exhibit of the Hebrides” to the island's tourists. On the serious subject of the clearances, McPhee reminds us that various nineteenth-century progressives, including Harriet Beecher Stowe, were tacitly supportive.

The Crofter and the Laird is an educational, warmly remembered but at times dry account of an isolated community. By his slow and reasoned documentary approach – itself an anachronism in our age of romantic, investigative travel literature – McPhee provides a clear-sighted portrait of a people frozen between ages.

GUY STEVENSON

Fiction

Elif Shafak

THREE DAUGHTERS OF EVE

384pp. Viking. £14.99.

978 0 241 28803 0

In *Three Daughters of Eve* Elif Shafak captures the anxious mood of the post-9/11 world. Following the fall of the Twin Towers, three students at Oxford University – Peri, Shirin and Mona – enter into a new reality in which their Muslim identity is regarded with suspicion and paranoia. Each must separately struggle with the clash between secularism and orthodoxy in their own lives.

Shafak centres her narrative on Peri, who has spent pretty much her entire life in Istanbul, except for a few years studying at Oxford in the early 2000s; the timeline shifts between the present day, the Oxford years and her childhood. The household of her youth is a miniature model of twentieth-century Turkey. Peri's mother is a devout Muslim and her father avowedly secular in the Atatürk tradition. The young Peri finds herself caught between their world views.

At Oxford she meets the Iranian Shirin and Egyptian-American Mona; the three women then take a life-changing class, simply entitled “God”, which is taught by a controversial professor. The headstrong Shirin is openly contemptuous of piety, whereas Mona is devoted to her faith. The vacillating Peri is once again trapped in the middle. The dialogue between the characters is extremely engaging, though Mona does feel underdeveloped. Her faith is never examined in any depth.

At a TED talk she gave in 2010, Shafak spoke of using her fiction to imagine the experience of the “other”, and this seems to be what she is exploring here. Throughout this novel, opposites both fascinate and repel one another. *The Three Daughters of Eve* is a perceptive depiction of social conflict as played out in the microcosm of a friendship – a novel for an age of mutual, even wilful, incomprehension between people, religions and cultures.

CANDICE HOLDSWORTH

Emily Fridlund

HISTORY OF WOLVES

320pp. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. £12.99.

978 1 474 60294 5

Emily Fridlund's Minnesota-set novel, *History of Wolves*, is haunted by a dead child. From the outset, readers know that

four-year-old Paul is dead; a trial is also mentioned, but it's not until halfway through the book that Madeline Furston divulges how he died under her care. This becomes a familiar narrative pattern: careful withholding of information followed by revelations that muddy the question of complicity.

Brought up by hippies in a now-defunct commune, Madeline spent her free time canoeing, gutting fish and hiking with her dogs. When she competed in the History Odyssey, she won the Originality Prize for doing a presentation on wolves instead of a predictable topic like the Vietnam War. At the age of fifteen (now more than two decades ago), she gets entangled with the Gardners, the neighbours across the lake. Introducing herself to the lonely housewife Patra as "Linda", Madeline agreed to watch their son Paul for \$10 a day and, while Patra's astronomer husband was away, became more of a governess than a babysitter, with an almost sexually possessive attitude towards Patra and a startling roughness towards the precocious Paul.

The novel's simplicity is deceptive; it's not merely a slow-building coming-of-age story with Paul's untimely death at its climax. For, after a first part entitled "Science", the second section ("Health") morphs into something more complicated and seemingly aimless, wherein the details of Paul's last days form just one of many painful memories, and a former teacher's paedophilia conviction serves as a parallel trajectory of guilt and sought-for absolution. "I know better than to be wistful", Madeline confesses; her past is a font of trauma rather than nostalgia.

Fridlund gets the cynical adolescent girl's psyche just right. Madeline is forthright yet inventive, even lyrical in her metaphors: "I was flat-chested, plain as a banister. I made people feel judged". The novel's atmosphere is powerful, too, with a harsh winter ("the trees against the orange sky looked like veins") ceding to an equally brutal summer. Marketing this as a psychological thriller in the vein of Gillian Flynn does it a disservice; Lauren Groff and Marilynne Robinson are the truer ancestors of Fridlund's melancholy picture of outsiders, whose skewed thinking leads them to transgress moral boundaries.

REBECCA FOSTER

Journalism

Brian Sewell

THE ORWELL ESSAYS

A selection of prize-winning journalism
216pp. Quartet. Paperback, £12.
978 0 70437 431 7

Brian Sewell, who died in 2015, was primarily known as an art historian. Opinionated, snooty and disdainful of popular culture, he became something of an ironic celebrity in his later years. Between 1996 and 2003, he was a columnist for the *Evening Standard* with a brief to "express opinion on any serious matter that interested me". *The Orwell Essays* presents a selection of these articles, on subjects as diverse as Zionism, fox hunting, pornography, bear baiting, homelessness and the Elgin Marbles.

Throughout these essays, Sewell challenges "political correctness". On spoken English, for example, he resents the "inverse snobbery" of the idea that "the ugly accents of

Liverpool and Birmingham are better than a received pronunciation that reflects the literary form and is intelligible worldwide". He describes the hypocrisy of "blinkered" MPs who ignore the cruelty of the poultry and livestock industries, but support a ban on hunting as a "politically correct absurdity". He defends Enoch Powell.

Sewell emerges as compassionate, and committed to improving the welfare of the poorest in society, as well as animals. He empathizes with London's beggars, and challenges the government line that young people on the street "should not have left home" as "unrealistic", given the complex domestic tragedies many of these adolescents face. He attacks Tony Blair for seeing "the homeless, the vandal and the mugger as a single problem". In several essays, Sewell abhors industrial animal farming. He laments the living conditions of battery hens: "reared in huge barrack sheds without windows, as many as 30,000 in each, the noise, stench and heat unbearable to any human being"; the birds are duly "slaughtered on the 42nd day of their wretched lives".

Sewell possesses foresight on issues such as housing and foreign policy. "To save our countryside", he writes, "we must first regenerate our cities." Urban planning should focus on building upwards, rather than outwards. Attractive high-rise buildings with "airy" apartments, he believes, would be more convenient for city-dwellers while protecting the countryside from the encroachment of "wasteful garden cities like Welwyn, Letchworth, Harlow and the execrable Milton Keynes". In a piece written in October 2001, he is sceptical of intervention in Afghanistan, asking whether any "replacement government" and "democratic elections" could work.

These articles are refreshingly honest, fearless, insightful and humane. Sewell was awarded the Orwell Prize for them in 2003.

HARRY JOHNSTONE

Religion

Suleiman Mourad

THE MOSAIC OF ISLAM

A conversation with Perry Anderson
176pp. Verso. Paperback, £9.99 (US \$19.95).
978 1 78663 212 8

If that which we understand least is that which we fear most, Islam and its adherents qualify as areas of alarm in the West, including Britain. This ignorance, which pervades the political establishment and the mainstream media, has helped engender near-paranoia among much of the population. Suleiman Mourad's lucid guide to Islam's origins and its imponderables is an instructive and non-polemical work that should be in the pocket of every Government minister, MP, journalist, editor and producer who might have to deal with Muslims, at home or overseas.

Mourad, a Lebanese Sunni educated at the American University of Beirut and Yale and now teaching religion at Smith College, Massachusetts, is interviewed by Perry Anderson, Professor of History and Philosophy at UCLA. They begin with the Qur'an, and the supplementary sayings and comments of the Prophet and his companions in the seventh century, these being the Hadith, the basis of the Sunna, and therefore

the Shari'a (the laws and customs by which observant Muslims live).

These, says Mourad, have always been subject to change, interpretation and rigorous debate. Attempts by the Salafists to take Islam back to its seventh-century basics, empowered by the pervasive and puritanical influences of the wealthy Wahhabi sect, will, he says, get Muslims nowhere. "The Qur'an legitimizes a lot of things that modern Muslims consider embarrassing: slavery, military jihad, control of women."

Mourad also examines the extreme sun-dering of the Shi'i and Sunni. Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, wanted the unity of all Muslims to fight his twin evils of capitalism and communism. Iran's strength and regional influence, however, proved too threatening for the Sunni Arabs of the Gulf in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, all possessed of significant Shi'i communities. The Saudis' funding of the Wahhabi movement and its well-armed and motivated evangelical supporters – such as Islamic State in the Levant but reaching far beyond – is the counterforce in a confrontation that could end (and almost has ended) in a Middle East war involving the superpowers.

TIM LLEWELLYN

Literary Criticism

Mark Calderbank

'FOR ONLY THOSE DESERVE THE NAME'

T. E. Lawrence and 'Seven Pillars of Wisdom'
396pp. Sussex Academic Press. £40.
978 1 84519 808 4

Winston Churchill claimed that "it ranks with the greatest books ever written in the English language". George Bernard Shaw called it "one of the Cheops pyramids of literature and history" (he hadn't yet read it). T. E. Lawrence himself aspired in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – his account of his part in the Arab revolt of 1916–18 – to write "an English fourth" to stand alongside *The Brothers Karamazov*, Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* and *Moby-Dick*; his sense of failure in this endeavour matched his sense of failure in the revolt itself.

There have been surprisingly few critical studies of this literary masterwork. Jeffrey Meyers's *The Wounded Spirit* (1973) and *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: An introduction and notes* (1998) by the French academics René and André Guillaume, are the only previous full-length works. So this insightful study is overdue.

In the first part, Mark Calderbank recounts the book's genesis: from the earliest drafts written at the Treaty of Versailles and in a Handley Page flying to Egypt, through the alleged loss of the first draft at Reading station, then the heroic rewriting in a Barton Street attic, the so-called "Oxford" text (eight copies printed by the *Oxford Times* in 1922 and circulated for peer review among such mentors as Shaw, Edward Garnett and E. M. Forster), and finally to the subscribers' edition of 1926, with its obsessive printing protocols, bespoke bindings and gallery of modernist illustrations.

Next, Calderbank compares Lawrence's record of events with those of other participants in the revolt – Ronald Storrs, Alec Kirkbride, and – a source new to me – Subhi

al-Umari (who gives a very different account of the battle of Tafileh). These chapters reveal Lawrence spinning the narrative to his own retrospective benefit. How and why Lawrence "demonises" certain figures – General Barrow, Nesib al-Bakri, Abd el Kader – is also considered.

Calderbank's most important contribution, however, is to analyse *Seven Pillars* in terms of Lawrence's masochism. Not all will agree with his opinion that the Deraa incident – when Lawrence was supposedly captured and raped by the Turks – is masochistic fantasy, let alone that certain other dramatic incidents – the execution of Hamed, the shooting of Farraj, the nihilistic sermon to the Serahin – may also be invented; but he presents a stimulatingly fresh interpretation of this important book.

GRAHAM CHAINEY

Diaries

Cyrus Console

ROMANIAN NOTEBOOK
176pp. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
Paperback, \$14.
978 0 86547 830 5

Romanian Notebook by the American poet Cyrus Console is a meandering collection of short fragments that read like poems, or shards of poems, or repurposed prose conveying a jumble of memories. Console explains nothing. He lays it all out before us and lets us construct a kaleidoscopic image from our preferred angle.

Early on, Console establishes the possible arc of a journey, taking us across the world from Kansas to Roman, Romania, where he and his wife Paula are to spend the summer. The text moves from a chronological narration of events to random recollections, dreams and other colourful splashes of remembrance. At times, the language is taxonomic, technical – memories from a past life as an undergraduate student in biology. "Song" here is a technical term, writes Console about a moth, "since the song embodies no structure complex enough to be called melody and is not even audible." At other points the author gets deliberately lost in sentence structure, as if to return to a less censored representation of his experiences. In between, we are treated to short scenes from what seems like a film of famous chess games; descriptions of several sumptuous meals in Romania, delightfully rich in detail; and musings on religion, the shifting colour of a glass one-hitter pipe, a pet mouse, break-ups in college.

Just before Console and his wife leave for Romania, they learn that the baby they are expecting may have Down's syndrome. Console's unvarnished self-characterization in this section is shocking; what it seems to convey above all is his inability to care deeply about, or even give much thought to, his wife's experience of this news. But it is that honesty that readers will come to value more than anything else; and when Console writes that "I am nothing if not a worker in language, yet I am not now nor I ever really been a writer, not a real writer," he undersells himself. The anxiety we sense in that sentence lies below the surface of the book from beginning to end, charging it with an electricity that keeps us reading.

MARIA BUCUR