

## Reviews

### Over the Wall

**Nicholas J. Barnett, *Britain's Cold War: Culture, Modernity, and the Soviet Threat*, I.B. Tauris, 2018, 292 pages, hardback ISBN 9781784538057, £99**

Nine chapters, crisply written, frequently sardonic, book-ended by Introduction and Conclusion, fortified by 30 pages of terse supplementary end-notes, 7-part Bibliography (ignoring electronic sources), 8-page lacunose Index, 22 black-white illustrations, many Vicky cartoons — splendid to see these biting caricatures again. The book is accurately printed, apart from pages 227 and 241, which give discrepant dates (1964/1965) for Khrushchev's downfall.

'Innovative exciting new insights ...' Blurb by Joe Moran, Barnett's PhD supervisor — He Would Say That, Wouldn't He?

No mention of *Britain's Cold War* (2012), one of several books by archaeologist-historian Bob Clarke, with cognate attention to defensive nuclear architecture.

Barnett's termini are 1951-65, making little sense. Cold War had long been in full swing, down to Reagan's 'Tear Down that Wall!' and Mrs Thatcher 'doing business' with Gorbachev. Thanks to Putin and Trump, it is back with a vengeance.

1956 might have been focused as watershed: Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech'; Suez and Hungary; British visit by 'Bulge and Krush'. Barnett here mentions Nye Bevan clashing with Khrushchev, but not his spectacular ('I'd vote Conservative') slanging-match with the (as usual) 'tired and emotional' George Brown. He devotes five pages (92-97) to the farcical incident of hat-stealing discus thrower Nina Pomonareva, nary a word about the mysterious disappearance of frogman Buster Crabb (regarded by some as the model for Bond). Still, it hardly matters, in that Barnett leaps his own chronological boundaries in both directions, from the 1930s until today.

Barnett announces five major, recurrent themes. First, Eastern Europe as a monolithic detached entity, which he rightly challenges: consider the differences between (say) Albania, Yugoslavia, and East Germany. Second, the role of religion in the 'cultural conflict', stressing the Apocalyptic side, correctly traced back to early Church Schisms. Third, interplay between 'tradition and modernity', exemplified through nuclear

and space science.

So far, so good. The fourth and fifth propositions are dubious. Especially the former, harping on the 'role of masculinity in the cultural cold war'. Barnett is obsessed with this, the term (and cognates) recurrent beyond counting, frequently multiple times per page, adducing such absurd articles as Brian Baker's 'Masculinity and Food in the spy fiction of Len Deighton'. Not until the end (p.239) does Barnett remember Rosa Klebb and other unspecified — think *Modesty Blaise* — female agents.

The fifth involves the 'narrow range of publishable ideological positions', an idea adopted from some predecessors. Not everyone 'treated the *Daily Worker* with suspicion or disdain', the entire body of conflicting Trotskyist analyses (notably Tony Cliff) is ignored, and the notion violates Barnett's own correct signalling of humour as a weapon, from Vicky to the 'Red Dean of Canterbury' and John Osborne's silly 'Damn You, England', *Tribune* (August 18, 1961).

Hewlett-Johnson takes a pasting in chapters one and nine, ridiculing (p.117) his 'bizarre cult' (re Hungary), and branding his notorious pamphlet, *The Socialist Sixth of the World*, as 'bought for grim amusement'. I'd have contrasted him with Donald Soper, one of Harold Wilson's Methodists, albeit he offered qualified support for Soviet communism and when asked what he'd do if Russia invaded, replied 'welcome them with a cup of tea'.

Incidentally, when involved with Healy's Socialist Labour League, I recall Cliff Slaughter demanding that its monthly *Labour Review* cease giving books to 'that silly old fool Soper' — such was the Healyite notion of free speech.

Barnett maintains his promise to spotlight lesser-known novels by devoting chapters 1 and 9 to Paul Winterton's *Murder in Moscow* and *Ashes of Lada*, chapter 6 to Maurice Edelman's (Labour MP) *Call on Kuprin*, not nowadays household names.

Bigger ones naturally offset these. Orwell dominates. Rightly so; he coined the expression 'Cold War', *Tribune* October 19, 1945. At their different levels, Deighton, Fleming, Le Carré (should have quoted his 'There's a theory in the Service that Etonians are discreet'), Greene, though no mention of his forgotten *It's a Battlefield*, wherein the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) tries to manoeuvre a hanging to make a political martyr.

Various transitions gleam. Greene would later controversially uphold Philby and Russia over America. Contrast Kingsley Amis, moving from CPGB membership to ardent Thatcherite, here manifest in his *Russian*

*Hide and Seek* (Mrs Thatcher chided him for ‘getting the wrong side’). Also High Tory Anthony Powell, who focused his satire equally on CPGB’s Gypsy Jones vending *Peace Now!* and middle-class Trotskyites.

Barnett casts a wide net across cinema, television, theatre, wireless. Might have noticed that *On the Beach* had been anticipated by Hollywood’s 1955 *The Day the World Ended*. Fun to see such boyhood heroes as Dan Dare (add *Journey into Space*) and Dick Barton exhumed. Also the preposterous *High Treason* (1951) with its CPGB saboteurs coaxed by female Soviet agent, plus its predecessor *Seven Days to Noon*, wherein a pacifist nuclear professor steals an atomic device and threatens to blow up London to back his demand for Disarmament. Also evokes Bond’s *obiter dictum*: ‘the most deadly saboteur in the world — the little man with the heavy suitcase’.

Chapters 2 and 7 focus the threat of nuclear annihilation and disarmament/peace movements; see now Peter Hennessy’s new book, *Winds of Change: Britain in the Early Sixties* (2019). Bertrand Russell’s role is strangely minimized, his speeches, writings, and arrest passed over. The rival ‘Balance of Terror’ argument was flirted with by Attlee and (reluctantly) Orwell, passionately espoused by Gaitskell (‘Fight, Fight, and Fight Again’) and Nye Bevan (‘Naked into the Conference Chamber’). For the CND mix of Christians and Communists and the CPGB’s ambivalence, see Jeremy Tranmer’s online essay. Much also on Civil Defence, focusing Coventry Labour council’s abandonment (defeatism or realism?) and *Beyond the Fringe’s* (oddly classified as a novel) hilarious sketch on its official brochure’s absurdities.

Chapters 5 and 8 cover the Space Race. British Sputnik coverage was inevitably dominated by sympathy for space-dog Laika. The mood changed for Yuri Gagarin’s visit (1961, one month before the Berlin Wall). What if ‘Little Lemon’ Laika had been sent? Alas. it was the dog that died, as would Gagarin in a mysterious aeroplane crash. Demands (eg by Marjorie Proops) for a female cosmonaut were answered by Russia’s Valentina Tereschkova (1963). Barnett beat me to it by suggesting British fears of deep space exploration were prompted by TV’s *The Quatermass Experiment*, watched by the whole country in 1953.

Two simple facts: America beat the Russians to the Moon. America is the only country to have used nuclear bombs.

Chapter 3 encompasses the post-Stalin ‘Thaw’ and friendlier Western perceptions, copiously illustrated by Henri Cartier-Bresson’s 1954 photographs. Probably a shock to professional anti-communists that Russia contained millions of ordinary people living ordinary lives. *Picture*

*Post's* serialization of *Animal Farm* was blatant counter-propaganda. Barnett (p. 84) goes easy on the plight of Russian homosexuals, criminalized by Stalin, repressed until 1993; see Rustam Alexander's online PhD thesis. We can also brighten his gloomy litany of British football defeats by recalling Wolves' victories over Moscow Spartak (4-0) and Budapest Honved (3-2).

Chapters 4 and 8 examine the black spots of Hungary (1956) and Berlin Wall (1961) — the 1953 East German uprising is elided, whilst on Suez I'll only say that Eden would have done better to help Russia build the Aswan Dam. Matyas Rakosi's sacking and the ill-fated Imre Nagy crop up, though not Janos Kadar, hailed in Western circles as a 'liberaliser', though I once met a Hungarian artist who judged him worse than Rakosi. The familiar Hungarian facts are (with Vicky's aid) expertly delineated. As to the discomfitures of the 'egregious' Red Dean and the CPGB, Barnett kindles an impressive bonfire of their inanities. I will intrude three personal memories:

1. Seeing the then Trotskyist John Daniels Senior confront CPGB member John Peck in Nottingham's Slab Square;
2. Listening to Peter Fryer retailing the eyewitness accounts the *Daily Worker* would not print (shades of *Homage to Catalonia's* fate).
3. My Stalinist father who claimed the 'soft' hands of Hungarian refugees on television proved they were not 'real workers'.

Barnett's detailed treatment of the Berlin Wall and receptions to it is echoed in the last sentence of his Conclusion, after a general wrap-up, final return to Orwell, a spotlight on Apocalypticism, and plea for more study of John (misspelled 'Jon') Bryan's novel *The Man Who Came Back* (1958, stressing female Cold War activities):

'When Britons looked through the Iron Curtain they saw Big Brother, but they also saw a population who were quite like them.'

Overall, Barnett's book is a well-documented, perceptive, highly readable narrative, comports vivid memories for those of us who were there and rich enlightenment for those who were not.

Barry Baldwin

## Common European Home

**Eckart Conze, Martin Klimke and Jeremy Varon, *Nuclear Threats, Nuclear Fear and the Cold War of the 1980s*, Cambridge University Press, 2017, 370 pages, hardback ISBN 9781107136281, £99.99**

‘END’ means different things to different people. The idea and political project that became European Nuclear Disarmament emerged in discussions between Ralph Miliband, Ken Coates, Stuart Holland, Mary Kaldor, Edward Thompson and others. In late 1979, according to Ken Coates in *Listening for Peace* (Spokesman, 1987), Edward had written to Tony Benn MP seeking his help in mobilizing ‘civil disobedience against the projected new nuclear bases’ for US cruise and Pershing missiles in six European NATO member states including the UK. Edward sent Ken copies of his letters. ‘But Benn did not at the time believe that he could meet Edward’s precise request,’ wrote Ken. ‘It was at this point that I rang Edward to propose, instead of a purely national response, we should seek to create a European answer. The formula which had escaped us hitherto was absolutely simple: we should seek to create a nuclear-free zone in all of Europe.’

But the context for this ‘European answer’ lay deeper. Ken Coates wrote that the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation ‘had been seeking a basis upon which to associate a European peace movement ever since 1974, when we convened a seminar at Bradford under the title *The Just Society*’, which addressed the divisions between communism and social democracy in Europe, taking a paper by the Russian historian, Roy Medvedev, as its starting point. Eduard Goldstücker, the exiled Czech writer and 1968 Prague Spring activist, suggested that the

‘impasse in relations between East and West Europe, and the adverse conditions of work suffered by independent socialist thinkers in the East, were intricately related and that only a new and comprehensive European peace movement could open any possibility for a real change for the better.’

This idea took hold, but it was some years before it surfaced in the guise of END. Edward Thompson had also participated in the Bradford seminar.

Further back, the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation was formed in 1963, in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis, in which Khrushchev used Russell’s letters to conduct something of a public campaign in

relation to Kennedy to dial down from nuclear confrontation. During the 1960s, the US war on Vietnam was a major priority for the Foundation, including the International War Crimes Tribunal, launched in 1966. There were sustained campaigns on Africa, Palestine, and for the release of Soviet Jews who wished to live in Israel. 'Transnational' work was the Foundation's daily occupation, with Russell's active participation until his death in 1970. Sustained campaigns to uphold human rights were central. For example, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, there was a long campaign addressed to the international postal authorities to uphold Alexander Dubcek's right to engage in international correspondence. Years later, in 1989, as Chair of its Human Rights Committee, Ken Coates welcomed Mr Dubcek to the European Parliament to receive the Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought.

Back in 1980, Edward Thompson rightly commented that the Russell Foundation had an extensive European address book. In fact, there were also many addresses beyond Europe, in Asia, the Americas and elsewhere. When Edward first drafted what became the END Appeal, the return address was Gamble Street, Nottingham, which was inundated with mail from far and wide. These were the Russell Foundation's offices, shared with the Russell Press, which printed *Protest and Survive*, Edward's counterblast to the Thatcher Government's 'protect and survive' civil defence 'codology' against nuclear attack. The movement grew rapidly, and I was recruited to help Ken Fleet, secretary of the Foundation and, later with Ken Coates, joint secretary of the END Liaison Committee, which organised the END Conventions, beginning in Brussels in 1982. Earlier, in summer 1981, we marched from Copenhagen to Paris (or, at least, part of the way) with the Nordic Women for Peace, for a nuclear-weapons-free Europe. Edward joined us.

I rehearse this history as a counterweight to Patrick Burke's account in 'END Transnational Peace Campaigning in the 1980s'. Patrick's starting point is the END office in London, which eventually gave rise to a membership organisation in Britain. As he says in a footnote, 'the British group END was not referred to at the time as British END; I do so here in order to distinguish it from the END Convention and the END Convention Liaison Committee'.

Meanwhile, the END idea or process spread. Looking back, the split between the Russell Foundation and 'British END' probably proved rather productive. Why the split happened is another story, but much emotional energy and writing paper were saved for more constructive purposes. The Russell Foundation focused on the END Conventions, which met annually,

while 'British END' developed its own priorities, particularly contacts with individuals and groups in what were then still member states of the Warsaw Pact. Patrick describes these in some detail.

The Berlin END Convention in 1983 represented something of a high-water mark, from the perspective of a 'real change for the better' sought at Bradford in 1974. The Soviet Peace Committee had launched a public broadside against the planned Convention, after meeting with the German organisers. Reunification of divided Germany figured in the emerging agenda for the Berlin Convention, and this was, for some, a step too far. Whilst in Berlin, I phoned Roy Medvedev in Moscow to record his supportive message to the Convention. Petra Kelly of the German Greens participated, as did Oskar Lafontaine of the SPD. We joined hands around the vast International Congress Centre, where the Convention met. At the end, Ken Coates had to return early to England as Mrs Thatcher had announced a General Election in which he was to be an unsuccessful candidate.

In 1984, Ken again stood unsuccessfully for election, this time to the European Parliament. Eventually, in 1989, he was elected and, along with activists Peter Crampton and Michael McGowan, END went to the European Parliament in Brussels and Strasbourg. Gorbachev was General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, and had paid attention to the mass peace movements of the 1980s, as he had the Russell-Einstein Manifesto of 1955, urging scientists to alert the world to nuclear dangers, which he had heard as a student in Prague. Lawrence Wittner refers to this in his contribution to the book under review. In 1986, Gorbachev had negotiated the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty with President Reagan. Subsequently, 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' became common parlance.

To encourage constructive, democratic change, Ken Coates with others urged a joint meeting between the European Parliament and the Supreme Soviet, and active preparations were under way for what would have been a groundbreaking meeting. Ken understood such a project as very much within the spirit of END. But Gorbachev's fall in 1991 put paid to such audacious plans to safeguard our common European home from the nuclear threat.

*Tony Simpson*

## Plucking the orchid

**Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*, Jonathan Cape 2019, 242 pages, ISBN 9781787331501, £12.99**

For a moment, in the primal scene that inaugurates Ocean Vuong's debut collection *Night Sky with Exit Wounds*, identity slips its cultural moorings and pulls us in to the glistening voyeurism of body confronting body, enraptured son and imaginary father, or lover, or lyre-bearing Orpheus: *the man showering, ... the rain falling through him: guitar strings snapping / over his globed shoulders ... I didn't know / the cost of entering a song – was to lose / your way back*. Similarly, Statovci's first novel *My Cat Yugoslavia* [2014] begins with its Kosovar Albanian protagonist trawling the internet for a homosexual hook-up which, in night time Helsinki, follows on almost instantaneously and is celebrated in the most ardent, rawly evocative terms. A single poem or chapter later, however, the magnetic pull of what Joseph Brodsky disparagingly calls the 'retrospective and retroactive' mechanism of the writer in exile, or Edward Said more sympathetically a 'contrapuntalism' attendant on 'terminal loss', has in both cases asserted itself. Vuong's pages rehearse, through images of bombed cathedrals, bullet holes and burning cities (the fall of Saigon), all the psychological detritus of a war zone his family carries with it to the America of *Briefly Gorgeous*; Statovci documents with a dogged realism, lugubrious and censorious, the patriarchal mores, arranged weddings and domestic slavery of the rural world near Priština as Yugoslavia disintegrates into ethnic conflict and genocide. Disclaimers apart, and Statovci – assimilated into Finnish society from the age of two — has explicitly rejected the classification, the essential dichotomy running through immigrant or exilic literature couldn't be more starkly evidenced, between personal acts of transcendence, here eroticised but also, perhaps more profoundly, imaginative or *literary*, and the scale and anonymity of the mass phenomenon itself.

Thus Brodsky's and Said's classic 1980s reflections assemble an illustrious high cultural pedigree that stretches from Ovid to Dante, Conrad, Joyce and ultimately, one supposes, themselves, but whose relationship to the wider anguish, for both, engenders serious moral unease. 'As we gather here, in this attractive and well-lit room [Getty-Wiedenfeld-sponsored Wheatland Conference, Vienna], on this cold December evening, to discuss the plight of the writer in exile, let us pause

for a minute and think of some of those who, quite naturally, didn't make it', Brodsky taunts his fellow illuminati. Then, more confrontationally, 'whether he likes it or not, *Gastarbeiters* and refugees of any stripe effectively pluck the orchid out of an exiled writer's lapel'. *We are now witnessing the highest levels of displacement on record ... 70.8 million people around the world have been forced from home. Among them are nearly 25.9 million refugees* [UNHCR UK 2019]: how can the isolated consciousness justify its wrestle with the conventions of literary discourse in the face of *that*? Gazmend Kapllani's *Short Border Handbook* [2006], a product of the Albanian generation immediately preceding Statovci's, acts out the conundrum by dividing each of its chapters into two irreconcilable halves – a gruelling linear odyssey of the demonization and exploitation of large numbers of impoverished male refugees at the hands of their Greek neighbours post-Hoxha; and a series of Kundera-style miniature essays that analyse, with pointed irony and philosophical sophistication, the migrant experience as a whole. The stand-off is broken at two points only: first as farce, when the émigré-narrator's visit to a bookstore selling Marquez and Borges, at a very late stage in the text, suddenly alerts the reader to his true personal trajectory – and coincides with the onset of a truncheon-wielding police action that thrusts him back into the throng at their most abject and dehumanised. Later, a passing Greek film maker who knows Kadare and senses an intellectual affinity whisks him off to Athens and journalistic-media stardom ['being an immigrant means ... exposing yourself to the extreme games of fate'], but not before the separate worlds of the drowned and the saved have been placed before us, one last time, in all their intractable alterity:

'From the window, I caught sight of a human caravan – my fellow countrymen ... like weary shadows walking without direction, like ghosts roaming around in the night ... I felt a river of tears rushing down my throat and I broke into sobs'.

*Crossing*, like its gentler predecessor, pursues the chimeras of sexual transcendence and geographical relocation but with an almost pathological (indeed, murderous) intensity. Zelig-like in the slippage between multiple identities, the central character, Bujar, who calls himself a 'compulsive liar', is ready to adopt as alternatives to the only other option refugee isolation and introversion offer him, attempted suicide. As the exquisite, rhapsodically physical, always evanescent intimacies pile up, the visceral rejection of Kosovo's 'cavemen' mentality now transfers to Tirana, Durrës

and by implication the entire homeland, its comprehensive derilection and bloated nationalist fantasies, and Finnish xenophobia is replaced by Rome's sunlit complacency and New York's 'stony heart', endemic racism and economic ruthlessness (one balks at the stereotypes, unsure whether one is supposed to). Said warns against a

'kind of narcissistic masochism that resists all efforts at amelioration, acculturation, and community ... To live as if everything around you were temporary and perhaps trivial is to fall prey to petulant cynicism as well as querulous lovelessness ...'

But Bujar, force-fed as a child the mythic origins and folklore of Albanian heroism, exploited by traffickers, sexual predators and reality TV producers, is also the quintessential victim of a systemic atrocity whose return from exile, empty-handed, to the unchanging beggarmdom of his origins – 'a tattered mattress on the floor wrapped in a white sheet and black curtains pulled across the windows'- has a universalising pathos. Meanwhile Bujar's queerness, and that of the boyhood companions, drag queens and trans women who form his emotional and psychological lifeline, represents a further step in the dismantling of the regional homophobia begun, for some commentators, with *My Cat Yugoslavia* and a necessary corrective to the bloody machismo embodied, at the end of this novel, by Skanderbeg.

For Vuong victimhood is never a given, nor is it the predetermined outcome. Yes, the impossible weight of numbers of those eternally on the move means that

'some monarchs, on their way south, simply stop flying, their wings all of a sudden too heavy – and fall away, deleting themselves from the story ...'

Yes, at its most delusory the refugee's hopeful freedom in the interim between countries may be little more than

'the [veal] calf's wide pupils as the latch is opened, and it charges from its prison toward the man with a harness ready to loop around its neck ...'

There's no shortage of such bleak estimates, presented, it has to be said, as incontrovertible fact rather than phenomena one might explain or ameliorate, and the threats from within and without to the precarious protective nucleus of the Vietnamese family's three generations, whose

tale/memoir/imaginative reconstruction *Briefly Gorgeous* is, verge consistently, in their horror and virtual omnipresence, on the insurmountable: the grandmother's encounter with an American soldier whose power over her is juxtaposed with a scene of other soldiers consuming the brain, for its aphrodisiac qualities, of a still living macaque monkey; the mother's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and violent mental disorders; wife beatings; omnipresent, casual and daily racism in the US; the abysmal working conditions, 'aching, toxic, and underpaid', of immigrant labour in nail salons and tobacco plantations. For Little Dog, the narrator, there are the additional travails of white male homophobia and the sense that he owes his very existence to imperialism: '*It wasn't me, the boy thinks, who was inside my mother's womb, but this bullet, this seed I bloomed around*'. Overwhelmingly, however, the effect of the novel is to move, unlike Statovci's, cumulatively beyond the self into the 'chance' and 'privilege' of a shared future. Instead of corralling people into tribes viewed contemptuously from a distance, Little Dog builds on the loving nurturing of his upbringing to face outwards towards and make common cause with other underclasses cheated by the fraudulence of the American Dream, the copy of Morrison's *Sula* he carries with him a dog-eared emblem of resistance, the soul and rap of Etta James and 50 Cent's *Many men wish death upon me* superimposed on the memory of his grandmother's Vietnamese lullaby and drag queens singing at a wake, their sexual identities utilised by the community, in a Saigon street. Even white trailer trash, whose squalid and limited circumstances Vuong turns to as a mirror in which Little Dog can view his own, play an essential part in the journey to assimilation and reconciliation: sexual union with his lover Trevor – 'we were two people mining one body, and in doing so, merged, until no corner was left saying I' – is seen not so much as a discrete act of self-pleasuring or fulfilment but as one in a series of epiphanies that lead up to arguably the novel's key pronouncement:

'All this time I told myself we were born from war – but I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty.'

The ringing affirmation speaks both to a sense of social responsibility and to Vuong's astonishing literary craftsmanship, his insistence on the aesthetic object, its poetic shimmer and multi-facetedness, like something *Briefly Gorgeous* one could turn slowly in one's hands. Perhaps Said and Brodsky would have approved.

*Stephen Winfield*

## Vincent

**Edited by Carol Jacobi, *Van Gogh and Britain*, Tate Publishing, 2019, 240 pages, many colour illustrations, hardback ISBN 9781849766012 £40, paperback ISBN 9781849766029 £25**

‘Van Gogh Tree’, written in blue ink in Bertrand Russell’s clear hand, is marked with the letter ‘C’ on his map of Richmond Park. Above it in Bertie’s legend, ‘B’ marks ‘Our wood’, while immediately below, ‘D’ marks ‘Our Beech tree’. Evidently, Van Gogh Tree was not Russell property. Edith, Bertie’s wife, marked B, C, D and 32 more locations on their map of Richmond Park. ‘Sites known to BR in childhood’, she wrote on the map’s cover, adding ‘Marked by ER and verified by BR’.

On the map, Van Gogh Tree appears a solitary specimen on the boundary of Hill Farme, between Humfrey Bennett and Little Heathe, near the Bog Gate in Mortlake Parish. Google Earth shows trees continuing to thrive in the area.

Bertie moved to Pembroke Lodge in Richmond Park in 1876. He had lost both parents before his fourth birthday, and came to live with his paternal grandparents in the park. He spent his formative years there, tutored at home, leaving to go to Cambridge University when he was 18. For him, the park provided ‘all kinds of secret places in which it was possible to hide from grown-up people so successfully that there was not the slightest fear of discovery’. ‘There were many fine trees,’ he wrote in his *Autobiography*, ‘oaks, beeches, horse- and Spanish chestnuts, and lime trees, a very beautiful cedar tree, cryptomerias and deodaras presented by Indian princes.’ What species was/is the Van Gogh Tree?

During his early teens, Bertie had ‘an intense interest in religion and philosophy’. He was taken ‘on alternate Sundays to the (Episcopalian) Parish Church at Petersham and to the Presbyterian Church at Richmond’.

So what of Vincent? Van Gogh had moved from The Hague to work in London in May 1873, when he had just turned 20. That month, Bertie had his first birthday. Vincent was to spend much of the next three years in and around London, before returning to the Continent. He was not yet working as an artist, but these years in London were hugely influential in his artistic and social formation. *Van Gogh in Britain*, the book of the recent Tate Britain exhibition, tells the story. Tate Britain Director, Alex Farquharson, sums up *Van Gogh and Britain* as ‘the first exhibition to examine both the influence of British art and culture on Van Gogh and his subsequent

influence on British art’.

In June 1876, Van Gogh came to live in Isleworth, close to Richmond Park. He was hoping to become an urban preacher: ‘should I find anything it will probably be a situation somewhere between minister and missionary, in the suburbs of London among working folk’, he wrote. Vincent attended the Richmond Wesleyan Methodist church, where he became a lay preacher, giving his first sermon in October 1876, based on a painting, *God Speed! Pilgrims Setting out for Canterbury* by George Henry Boughton. On 19 November he preached at Petersham, sketching the Methodist chapel in a letter to his brother, Theo. In December that year, Vincent returned to The Netherlands for the Christmas holidays in the company of his sister, Anna, who was also working in England. Vincent never came back to Britain, but he left an enduring legacy, including in Richmond Park.

Van Gogh Tree has many counterparts in Vincent’s paintings. He loved to paint trees, as *Van Gogh in Britain* testifies. *Starry Night* sparkles in the memory, however.

Tony Simpson

## Stamping ground

**Robert Macfarlane, *Underland: A Deep Time Journey*, Hamish Hamilton, 2019, 488 pages, hardback ISBN 9780241143803, £20**

Robert Macfarlane returned to Nottingham in May 2019. He had grown up in a Nottinghamshire village, ‘not a pit village’, and attended Nottingham High School as a teenager. He recalled the headstocks visible across the Old Coalfield, totems of Notts’ own extensive underland and those who inhabited it. But Nottingham doesn’t figure in an obvious way in this ‘deep time journey’.

Robert seemed surprised that he was only now returning to his old stamping ground where, 30 years earlier, he had secreted a jam-jar time capsule in the Nottinghamshire house his family were soon to leave, telling of his ‘biggest fear, nuclear war’, written in pencil on a notebook page. For he was a child of the 1980s, when fears of ‘theatre’ nuclear war stalked Europe, giving rise to a massive wave of popular resistance which ultimately led to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty signed by Presidents Gorbachev and Reagan in 1987. This European Nuclear Disarmament campaign was co-ordinated, to some degree, from an old

hosiery factory along Forest Road, a hop and a skip from Nottingham High School.

There is an acute sense of conflict in *Underland*. The chapter entitled 'Hollow Land', inspired by treks in and over the Slovenian Highlands, recalls the 'White War', 'a series of battles at the border of Austria-Hungary and Italy' that took place between 1915 and 1918. Ernst Friedrich, in his landmark photographic record *War Against War*, recorded the systemic cruelty visited on the peoples of the Balkans following the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria-Este in 1914. The killing fields returned during the Second World War, when Yugoslavia was the only occupied country to liberate itself from the Nazis. Remains of the dead, many of them summarily executed, continue to be recovered from sink holes in the karst mountains. Basil Davidson's *Partisan Picture* does not figure in Macfarlane's Select Bibliography, but it is a riveting account of what was at stake as Tito rallied the partisans to harry and, ultimately, to defeat the Nazis and their local collaborators amidst the mountains of Yugoslavia, with some help from the British and others. Old conflicts fester anew in these contested territories.

Robert's return to Nottingham was to give the UNESCO City of Literature Lecture at the Council House. 'Building peace in the minds of men and women' is UNESCO's motto. In its own distinctive way, *Underland* contributes to that never-ending work.

*Anthony Lane*