

Reviews

Infrastructure of Dissent

Kimberley Kinder, *The Radical Bookstore: Counterspace for Social Movements*, University of Minnesota Press, 2021, 360 pages, paperback ISBN 9781517909185, £20.99

There are no current books on radical bookshops in the UK, and save for one academic book on feminist bookstores* in North America, this is the first book I have seen on this subject there generally. This is surprising given the radical booktrade's contribution to left-wing culture. On my shelves I have a book devoted to the Berkeley bookstore Cody's, a book on Melbourne's radical bookshops, and several old British texts, but we really should publish more about ourselves!

Unfortunately, *The Radical Bookstore* is too academic to reach beyond a specialist audience. That is not to say it is without value, The book, for example, discusses 'landscapes that shout' compared to 'landscapes that entice', contrasting the book displays and interior decor of different shops which have different approaches. This alone should be a subject of discussion on the shop floor (even if nobody is suggesting joining our Prime Minister and employing Lulu Lytle at £800 for a roll of wallpaper). What are we trying to say, and to whom? Who do we exclude if people find our spaces 'intimidating to walk into'? Do potential customers think we are shouting at them? Ironically, though that might not be the right word, most of the books available in the radicals could appear in any big mainstream bookstore but, as Minneapolis's Boneshaker Books suggests, it's 'like somebody has taken a big bookstore and put it through a sieve and only the very best stuff came out ... So hopefully there's not as much noise, and you just get all the signal that you've been looking for'.

Some traditions in radical bookselling in the United States have been uncommon here until recently; businesses owned by what Kinder calls 'activist entrepreneurs' — a neat phrase that accurately describes many of the more recent radical bookshops here, compared to the collective tradition once more common. And what might these activist entrepreneurs have to do to survive? They might have to compromise. Or, sometimes, close down rather than compromise, when only a more commercial approach will pay the workers or the rent. This happened over some shops going 'non-profit', the equivalent of obtaining charitable status here, which brings tax and other concessions but limits the campaign

possibilities of the spaces. They felt it was better to shut up shop than ‘sell out’.

The rent — one of the reasons radicals have struggled has been gentrification, though, astonishingly, Kinder writes about neighbourhoods where they have been part of that gentrification, where radical bookstores have anchored or even started to turn round a failing retail area. She remarks that not all the shops eschew capitalism — ‘in many feminist-, queer-, and Black orientated spaces, the goal is less about escaping capitalism and more about combating patriarchy, homophobia and white privilege by getting more minorities into leadership positions, including business ownership’.

Finance is often a problem, leading to volunteerism and ‘self-sacrifice’. About half the shops she spoke to relied on volunteer labour or private money. This is a major political issue, for who can afford to work for free or extremely low pay indefinitely? Red Emma’s, an anarchist set-up, moved from people working for free, usually with a job on the side, to full-time employment with living wages and benefits which, in their words, ‘keeps the space going’. Others don’t mind being shoved to the margins because they ‘associate the spatial fringes with a positive sense of transgression’. Sure, but economic displacement kills custom. Giovanni’s Room, City Lights, Quimby’s and others have only survived because they bought their premises in an act that was a hedge against gentrification.

The radical booktrade in the USA had its problems — 90% of feminist bookstores and Black bookstores closed within a few years. The high water mark of Black bookstores was between 1965 and 1979 when their number grew from around a dozen to between 75 and 100. But times change. Beyond the time frame of this book, in the United States so far this year 23 BIPOC (black, indigenous, and other people of colour) bookstores have opened. This must be due to the impact of Black Lives Matter. The earlier range of Black bookshops included places affiliated with the Black Panthers and other militant groups, whereas Mahogany Books in Washington (online since 2007, physical since 2017, and now with a second outlet in Maryland) had a surprise visitor to a recent meeting of their regular online book group ... one Barack Obama.

Most of the bookshop workers interviewed saw their premises as a shelter from the storm. Kinder describes these as ‘filtered offstage places [that] provided social support for processing and grieving not simply because likeminded people were present but also because opposition groups were absent’. This was in the era of Trump, though some of the women’s bookshops had a longer term caring role for those, sometimes

literally, escaping patriarchy.

And radical bookshops are often there for the long haul. In the two years Kimber took to write the book, several of the places she covered closed down, but their average lifespan was twenty-eight years. Wild Iris, Minnehaha, Rainbow, Modern Times, Boxcar, Calamus, Internationalist had served a generation. She writes that ‘closing is not failing’ as ‘these venues leave lasting, life-altering impressions’ which ‘encourage new generations of activists to find updated ways to get durable spaces back on the map as part of the infrastructure of dissent’.

So welcome City of Asylum, Violet Valley, *Café con Libros*, Black Feminist Library, Mahogany, Uncle Bobbie’s, Nuestra Palabra and the others that opened in the same two years. I look forward to reading how they fare in years to come.

The Radical Bookstore should be bought, of course, from your nearest radical bookshop or online from Five Leaves in Nottingham.

Ross Bradshaw

www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk

**The Feminist Bookstore Movement* by Kristen Hogan (Duke, 2016)

Tough gig

Patrick Magee, *Where Grieving Begins: Building Bridges after the Brighton Bomb – A Memoir*, Pluto Press, 2021, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9780745341774 £16.99

‘At 2.54 a.m. on Friday, 12 October 1984, a bomb exploded at the Grand Hotel, Brighton, killing four people and injuring thirty-four others. One of the injured died five weeks later. I planted the bomb. I did so as a volunteer in an IRA active service unit committed to the continuing, long-term strategy of taking the war to England.’

‘On 24 November 2000, sixteen years after the bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton and seventeen months after my release I sat down and talked with Joanna Berry, whose father, the Conservative MP Sir Anthony Berry, was one of the five people killed.’

The first of these stark quotes appears on page 115 of Patrick Magee’s book, the second on page 172. Before the first quote he describes his life

in Belfast and England in the time leading up to the bombing. His background was of poverty and discrimination – Magee’s father, for example, had to leave the local shipyard when it was discovered he was a Catholic. The family moved to and fro from Ireland for want of work, with Patrick becoming something of a tearaway teenager. Eventually he is drawn into the Republican movement. He describes the treatment of the Catholic population in the north, the pogroms, the shoot-to-kill policies of the Royal Ulster Constabulary and the British Army – everything that drove him to the Brighton bombing. The most striking incident was when he was picked up by the state forces and dumped in an area controlled by Loyalist paramilitaries as if some kind of present for them.

We then hear of his time in prison. Beatings had always been a regular part of being scooped up by the forces but, ironically, his spell in the most secure part of Leicester Prison (sentenced to eight life terms for the Brighton bomb) brought humane treatment and the start of his route through the Open University prison education system.

I do not, by this review, wish to skirt over what the active service units of the IRA did. Nor does he: ‘Terrible things had happened. We had killed innocent civilians. One thinks of Birmingham; of La Mon.’ And Magee ‘believed absolutely, as I still do to this day, that the armed struggle was our only option’. He still believes that the violence of the oppressed cannot be compared to that of the oppressor. And the oppressor was violent. I’m typing this on the day that it was announced in a coroner’s report that ten people killed by the British Army at Ballymurphy in August 1971 were murdered.

Where Grieving Begins is introduced by Joanna (Jo) Berry, whose father was among those killed at Brighton. Astonishingly, Jo is a cousin of Princess Diana. Jo and Patrick’s combined story forms the second half of the book. She wanted to meet him to understand his motives, and to explain to him what the killing had meant to her. She wanted to build bridges, and what a way to do it. The report of their first meeting merits re-reading. By now Magee had been released on licence under the Good Friday Agreement. The two talked for three hours, during which she made it clear she understood the role of the British in Ireland, but Magee also began to see her father in his full humanity. Magee expressed his regret he had killed her father. Berry said ‘I’m glad it was you’. This left Magee floundering, what could it mean?

You can read what this meant, but in due course, and not without difficulty, they sought reconciliation. They talked, were filmed, spoke at meetings, fell out, were reconciled, all on the difficult path towards a wider

reconciliation, understanding and respect. Not that any of it was easy. Magee and Berry found themselves traduced in the press. On one awful occasion he was invited to speak at an event for people who had lost family to the IRA. A tough gig when the organisers had not told the group he was coming. He has made sure since then it would never happen again.

The last part of the book, strangely, is the least interesting as they go on the road together, where they spoke and what the responses were. Perhaps this is because the tension, grimness and memories of the period of the shooting war, early on in the book, were so raw. It is a remarkable story and a remarkable book.

Ross Bradshaw

You can watch Patrick Magee at a Five Leaves online event on YouTube, in conversation with Deirdre O'Byrne from the Bookshop.

[www.fiveleavesbookshop.co.uk]

Mining memory

Ewan Gibbs, *Coal Country — The meaning and memory of de-industrialisation in post-war Scotland*, University of London Press, 2021, 312 pages, paperback ISBN 9781912702558, £25

This is a substantial and extremely well researched analysis of the programme of pit closures over a time period covering nationalisation and the end of World War Two to the present day. It has quite recently become timely since the Prime Minister made light of their impact for communities, hit by poverty and struggle, by suggesting that Margaret Thatcher embarked on the programme for environmental reasons.

Gibbs' Introduction explains the width and depth of his analysis, seeking to explore the 'pivotal questions of how societies choose to obtain their heat and light and how the rundown of colliery employment led to the wholesale reconstruction of Labour markets in the areas affected by incremental closures over several decades'. He looks at how 'manual workers' understanding of economic justice shaped assessments of colliery closures'. He uses Polanyi and E.P.Thompson's analyses of the morality issues raised by these changes and describes the ensuing development of working class consciousness. Indeed, the emphasis he puts on the morality of the programmes of deindustrialisation is important and welcome. He examines in some depth the sectarian theme that ran through the period covered; an aspect not experienced in the South Yorkshire area,

for example, which I have recently been looking at.

Interestingly, Gibbs suggests that the role of the Communist Party and Scottish focused trade union bodies ‘pioneered a deepening commitment to political devolution through a Scottish Parliament, that gained influence across the wider Scottish labour movement’. It is again a timely study as a devolution movement slowly gains traction amongst the Left in the region.

Coal Country comes alive through the wealth of oral and interview evidence the author has painstakingly put together, which gives a vibrant picture of numerous pit communities, detailing the many different ways in which they were affected from the notice of the possibility of a closure, to the fight to retain production, to the impact of job losses. Gibbs has researched not only the contemporary leading figures such as Mick McGahey, Alec Moffatt, and many others, mainly men, but he has also talked with and listened to women and men from each local community as well. Having recently written about this issue as it affected the South Yorkshire coalfield, I found it interesting to read the ‘gendered’ analysis Ewan Gibbs adopts. Whereas the adult education establishment of Northern College, located near Sheffield and easily accessible, was used to support many of those in communities affected, especially the women, this did not seem to be as apparent in the Glasgow area. New areas of work were taken up by women to ease the poverty, but I was left wondering how closely trade union, local authorities and education or training projects were able to work together to bring essential services in to support communities suffering job losses and poverty.

The role of European support for economic development and training through Coalfield Communities Campaign seemed to be more in evidence in South Yorkshire, whilst the combination of both steel production and coal closures ravaged the job opportunities, for men in particular. I thought the liberation experienced by some women in the South Yorkshire area, who became leaders of their communities through their campaigning and political activities, was given less examination in Gibbs’ detailed work in Scotland, than how women’s paid work in a changing labour market affected women more generally.

Ewan Gibbs’ book has set an extraordinarily high standard of scholarship for future studies of Scotland’s development potential within a wider European context. Devolution indeed becomes a major factor for Scotland’s future, at a time when its government appears to incorporate principles of equality and fair treatment in their decision-making with genuine passion.

Helen Jackson

Survival, one family's story

Maria Stepanova, translated by Sasha Dugdale, *In Memory of Memory*, Fitzcarraldo, 2021, 510 pages, ISBN 9781913097530, £14.99

Stepanova's newfound international prominence and receipt of the 2018 Big Book [Большая Книга] National Literary Award for *In Memory of Memory* raise interesting questions about the current role and independence of the Russian intelligentsia, questions the book itself – unlike her poetry, lectures, essays, which can be directly confrontational – places strategically to one side for much of its length but never loses sight of. One has the impression at the outset of a gentle laying out of cards, as if it might be better to follow the example of her Aunt Galya, whose death triggers the narrative, and ‘disappear ... entirely into the world she had built for herself: layered strata of possessions, objects and trinkets in the cave of her tiny apartment’. The exhaustive burrowing down that then ensues into these artefacts and into the documentary and material residues of four generations of Stepanova's Russian-Jewish ancestry, all the Gurevichs, Friedmans and Ginzburgs left, we are told, with remarkably few exceptions unmolested by the vicissitudes of history, seems headed in the same direction: towards a paradoxical affirmation of the past's inviolability, its right not to be tampered with or exploited in the name of any ideology. Nowhere perhaps is this more poignantly shown than by the Sterne-like gesture of disavowal of the ‘Not-A-Chapters’ threaded through the text, in which the unmediated voices of the family's letter- and postcard writers sing their songs of love and yearning, deaf to her entreaties, ‘silly billet doux’ Stepanova later reproaches herself for having appropriated in the name of an ‘internalised ... logic of ownership’ which has preoccupied her, she confesses, since childhood: the desire to grasp hold of her forebears' individual stories and organise them, for all their seeming innocuousness, into a pattern sufficiently responsive to their epoch. How, though, to reconcile the ‘swirly-patterned wallpaper and ... ugly old yellow butter dish’ with ‘the deaths of millions’? And what light could the one cast upon the other?

The architects of Russia's ‘new traditionalism’, with its emphasis on a subjectivising of the national past as opposed to any rigorous accountability, would seem to have fewer doubts about the value of such an undertaking: hence ‘most “new style” (pro-Putin) history textbooks of the mid- and late 2000s include assignments in which students are asked

to interview their grandparents on the events of Soviet history' [Nikolay Kuposov, *Memory Laws, Memory Wars*]. 'Events', in Stepanova's telling, emerge fitfully too, in the same way her first long foray into the ancestral hinterland – to dismal Pochinky, 'This one-horse dead end little town, over two hundred kilometres from Nizhny Novgorod' and the family's 19th century place of origin, now little more than an existential conundrum as in, she suggests, Nabokov's 'but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness' – evokes a landscape of scattered, disconnected signposts to the cultural past, a kind of rudimentary shorthand. Pushkin memorials at Borodino; Catherine the Great's horse breeding complex for the Imperial Guard ('a little island of Petersburgian refinement' long since dismembered); a tawdry Lenin statue; a bookshop which once sold Communist poems notable for their lyricism by Sologub; the one remaining Jew in the town: they line up like silent witnesses but where is the key that will unlock their narrative? At times, Stepanova's compellingly philosophical preoccupation with all that vanishes and its right to its own inconsequence, its incommensurability – 'the picture is most interesting when the light washes out the detail of the window frame and even eats away at the nurse and her patient' is one of twenty hymns to evanescence she visits upon the family photograph albums; Rembrandt's self-portraits record the stages of a movement towards death in which 'Each new face casts off and cancels the ones before' – seems inexorable. Like her beloved Joseph Cornell, the New York experimental artist whose display boxes of found objects, drenched in sentimentality, aim only to preserve 'life's pointless capriciousness' in all its 'inviolable holiness', or Tsvetaeva's son Mur carrying off his mother's curious little bag of forget-me-nots from the scene of her suicide – 'Battered little tins, their contents unknown, beads, a pen, locks of children's hair, some other nameless bits and bobs' – like any besotted souvenir hunter, her 'embarrassing obsession' with tracking down every last, dubious item on the archival shopping-list ('a sticky flypaper spotted with quivering, half-dead associations') runs the length of the book, and from Moscow to Bezhetsk, Kherson, Odessa, Vienna, Berlin, Paris.

That sounds like a post-Soviet freedom *par excellence*, to which Stepanova gives due credit early on – 'everything began rising up to the surface ... our accumulated and preserved past became once again what it was to begin with' – except for the corollary, that a freedom in which all the objects return ostensibly to their places can so easily come to resemble an undifferentiated free-for-all, theme park, 'managed democracy'. *Never Remember*, Masha Gessen and Misha Friedman's photographic essay on

the abandoned, wilfully neglected sites of the Gulag – Sandarmokh, Perm-36, Butugychag (Kolyma) – begins and ends in the Sculpture Garden in Gorky Park, a heterotopic space increasingly given over to incongruous juxtapositions of Stalin and Dzerzhinsky with statues representing other world historical luminaries, contemporary artworks and, close by, Ferris wheels and skating rinks: ‘diluted with Adam and Eve and a variety of other white plaster figures, the monuments became a neutral presence, markers of space and nothing more’. *Memory’s* insatiable, beady-eyed foraging and essayistic capaciousness, its easy converse with the lives and works of an array of seminal literary and artistic figures such as W. G. Sebald, Mandelstam, Francesca Woodman, Charlotte Salomon, could so easily have resulted in a similar spectacle of disempowerment were it not for Stepanova’s acute awareness that these ‘phantasmagoria’, like Tiepolo’s on the ceiling of the Würzburg Residence, enjoy at best a precarious existence at the behest of the status quo. ‘... parrots, monkeys, dwarves and indigenous peoples, serving girls ... Despite its teeming, multi-coloured crowds – This rainbow apparition was nearly destroyed in the air raids during the Second World War, when over 900 tonnes of TNT were dropped on the town’. With a commensurate, brutal shock of recognition, as in a game of Russian roulette, photograph 8 from the Ginzburg archive abruptly gives notice of all the century’s horrors clamouring to enter the text in the person of Yakov Sverdlov, administrator of the Red Terror and of the ‘turning of the Soviet Republic into a single military camp’ – the same Sverdlov found elbow to elbow with a noseless Stalin in the *Muzeon*.

The horrors enter and take up residence, and with them the moral imperative of ‘looking at the world as if through a film of ash’ as she says of Sebald’s comradeship with the congealed mass of the dead. The task ahead is conveyed by two of *Memory’s* most distressing images: that of a Dantesque attentiveness that must, in its own way, be as ruthlessly selective as the genocides it addresses – ‘as my little boat makes its way across the black surface of the water, pale faces rise from the depths ... I had to pull those closest to me with a heavy boathook ... none of *mine* were amongst them’; and, on a TV screen in a Berlin hotel room, the digitalised, threatening simulacrum of a fire forever rekindling itself, ‘the forewarning of a future martyrdom’ – of countless martyrdoms past and to come – a re-enactment of the tribal identification of ‘*we are Jews*’ and inherited fear of the ‘violence that can destroy a person’ first devolved upon her, by her mother, at the age of ten. Proximity to atrocity stalks the pages of the family chronicle, now reworked and expanded into a fully-

formed narrative, from an all-pervasive anti-Semitism to the indiscriminate savagery of state power. The individual stories multiply – incarceration in the Peter and Paul Fortress in 1907 for revolutionary agitation; participation, ‘warmed by the sun of the new regime’, in the Red Army’s lethal anti-peasant brigades of the 1920s, only to narrowly escape arrest during the Terror, on a spurious charge, as an Enemy of the People; pogrom upon pogrom in Odessa and the Ukraine, from which one Gurevich miraculously emerges as a prosperous factory owner, beset over time by revolutionary enemies and fate unknown; a grandfather’s cousin fast-tracked like thousands of others, with minimal training, to officer status and almost certain death in wartime Leningrad – first in the line of fire – by a flick of Stalin’s pen. Stepanova has had to dig far but she finds what she wanted at last: a wholesale representativeness. Junior Lieutenant Lyodik’s preposterously unassuming letters in the midst of the mounting carnage contain, however, something more. Like Salomon’s 1326 gouaches prior to Auschwitz – ‘What a wonderful thing is life! I believe in it!’ – they belong irrevocably to their own personal world and historical present, to which *Memory* ends by returning them, its eyes turned to another reality and set of possibilities: ‘All the past is carried off into oblivion, and it leaves a clear space for the future. The fillyjonk is left playing in the shallows with her carpet, finally happy, “Never in her life had she had such fun”.’

Stephen Winfield

Listen to teachers

Pat Thomson, *School Scandals – Blowing the whistle on the corruption of our education system*, Policy Press, 2020, 314 pages, paperback ISBN 9781447338550, £12.99

Pat Thomson is a Professor of Education at the University of Nottingham. She was previously a headteacher and senior public servant in the Australian school system. In this book she exposes the corruptions and irregularities in England’s privatised education system. For those of us who currently work in education we see this acted out every day in the settings and system that we work in.

Each chapter starts with a list of newspaper/media headlines and the opening chapter, ‘A book about corruption in schools’, sets the scene with a shocking set of comments:

‘Academy boss ordered school to cheat on SATs tests’

‘Disgraced superhead cannot appeal over £1.4 million in unlawful bonuses’

‘Banned: Head who gave contract to his mother’s firm’

The author sets out clearly the basis for what is happening in our education system:

‘This book provides additional evidence to show that an apparent political commitment to equal opportunity masks a policy regime which, in best Orwellian fashion, produces the very antithesis of what it claims to promote. I document the ways in which systemic and systematic changes in the cultures and structures of schools, and the education bureaucracy, have led to an ongoing series of ‘unpublic’ practices which produce and reproduce a highly uneven socioeconomic playing field.’

The English education system has been through radical change – when Mrs Thatcher was elected in 1979, she introduced the idea of choice and competition. The 1988 Education Act introduced school self-management by grant maintained or local authority governing bodies – this was the beginning of the rot. The National Curriculum was introduced in the late 1980s, and the break-up of local education authorities began. This was at the start of my teaching career and I have seen the gradual deterioration of the system over the years I have been teaching. Statutory assessments and key stage tests were introduced between 1991 and 1995 and these punitive mechanisms, which do nothing to support children and young people, have been used to hold schools to account since.

Chapter 2 of the book highlights the muddle and chaos caused by this fragmentation of the system. In 1997 New Labour was elected and introduced initiatives such as the ‘literacy hour’ and the National College for School Leadership. Then in 2000 they launched the first academies. The aim at this point was allegedly to target ‘underperforming’ schools. However, the academies programme has been a can of worms from its inception. Academies grew into chains and multi-academy trusts, and more and more local authority services were privatised as we were told that choice and opening education to the market would improve efficiency and raise standards.

The notion of an education system being a public good has become contested not overnight but gradually over years. The 1979 Thatcher

Government wanted the state to become more businesslike – the private sector, which they saw as sleek and competitive, was to be given a role in changing public services, opening them up to competition. I remember the rhetoric of the day – public services, education, health etc were badly run, they were wasteful, and the trade unions had too much power.

School Scandals highlights the costs associated with this fragmented and wasteful system. I have always known this, but Chapter 4 reminded me just how shocking it is. The chapter starts with some troubling headlines:

‘GMB Scotland reveals Ayrshire Councils pay staggering £32 million a year to private companies for just a dozen schools.’

‘PFI firms to get £4.8 billion from schools by 2020, study shows.’

I remember when PFI (private finance initiative) first arrived in the education system. I was a local union officer at the time and negotiating with the local authority on a regular basis. I remember raising alongside other trade unions our significant concerns about the scheme – the local authority officers at the time told us it was ‘the only game in town’. Several years down the line it was scrapped, but the ongoing payments for the new buildings will continue to take money out of the public purse for many years to come. The new buildings were leaking within weeks and on one site the outdoor floodlights, heating and various other items were on 24 hours a day for the first year as the fuel bills charged for the rest of the contract were based on the first year’s running costs.

School Scandals highlights numerous other stories of waste and, at times, corruption. For example, a PFI school with an annual PFI bill of £132,478. They had been paying £88 a year for the installation of a new sink. By the end of the PFI contract the sink will have cost £2,024. And at one Bristol academy a single blind for a room will end up costing £8,154 under PFI. These charges are not unusual. The head at a school in Wiltshire said: ‘We had some benching put in the canteen, just along one wall, about 20 yards. We have to pay about £40 a month for the facilities management cost of the bench, on top of the cost of putting that bench in and all the materials.’ The secondary school will be charged £6,240 for the management of the bench.

Chapter 5, ‘Market mentalities and malpractices’, highlights the lack of oversight and accountability in this fragmented system. The scandal of academy bosses’ salaries has been in the news for some time now. In

March 2019 *Schools Week* reported that 23 academy ‘chiefs’ still earned more than £200,000. The highest paid has a salary package of £550,000. Despite some attempts by the government to monitor and restrict these salaries, as the chapter highlights, their powers are limited, and even getting some academies to report their annual financial spending is not easy.

School Scandals recognises that these excessive payments, the mismanagement of funds and the lack of accountability does not happen in all academies, but ultimately the marketisation and fragmentation of the system has created a climate where it can and does.

Successive governments have promoted and expanded the academies programme on the basis that they are more effective, more efficient, and that they raise standards. Chapters 6 and 7 show how this is not evidenced in practice and how the system cannot be assessed as a level playing field, because it is not. Effectiveness is measured through test and examination results and monitored by Ofsted. When accountability measures are high stake, they lead to pressure on educators to teach to the test. This can skew not only the curriculum but also the way that education is delivered. Borderline children become the target of extra intervention; children who are not going to provide the necessary grades are pushed out either through exclusion or off-rolling. In April 2019, a *Guardian* headline stated that ‘more than 49,000 pupils “disappeared” from English schools’. High stakes accountability has created a super competitive system where schools have to ‘game’ the system if they want to stay at the top of the league tables.

The final chapter of *School Scandals* starts to look at how we can change the system. Thomson works from the basis of education as a public good. The public good is incompatible with a marketised, punitive, competitive education system and practices of exclusion and selection. She states that there needs to be much discussion and debate about what is needed. I would certainly agree with that, and I would also say that any discussion must have at the heart of it those people who work in classrooms every day. For too long, educators’ voices have not been heard, their views and experience not valued, and their work and commitment not respected.

School Scandals highlights the failings in our fragmented education system. Our education system is broken. It wasn’t broken by educators, by students or by our communities – it was broken by successive governments and their actions.

Louise Regan

Miners' Voice

Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson, *The Shadow of the Mine: Coal and the End of Industrial Britain*, Verso, 2021, 416 pages, hardback ISBN 9781839761553, £20

When Boris Johnson praised Margaret Thatcher's pit closures as an early step towards environmentalism this was condemned as 'unbelievably crass'¹ by people across the political spectrum. While mining was, without doubt, hard, dirty, and dangerous, the motives for the closures had not been carbon neutrality but were a blatant attack on mining communities and the miners' union. The miners had been the backbone of the Labour Movement. Without the attack on the miners, Thatcher's neo-liberal plans might be challenged. Coal had been the fuel which drove the industrial revolution and the expansion of empire. While previously protected by the State for precisely these reasons, withdrawal led to devastating collapse.

The Shadow of the Mine, and especially its subtitle 'coal and the end of industrial Britain', might suggest a eulogy to an industry once the driving force of the economy, an industry which developed a political significance equalled by no other. Its authors, Huw Beynon and Ray Hudson, offer far more in their story of the decline and fall of the coal mining industry and the pit communities, 'an ending that had far deeper meaning than the loss of coal production' (page 200). This story does not end with the strike of 1984-5, or the closure of the last deep mines in the decades following. The authors examine what has happened to the mining communities, particularly around their homes in Durham and South Wales. The book is a counter to any 'unbelievably crass' generalisations about mining and mining communities, as well as some contemporary wisdoms about the Brexit referendum, the collapse of the 'Red Wall' and political allegiances and, perhaps, the general collapse in the traditional working class.

'What is at issue is the erosion of the historical identities of people living in these so-called backwaters, and ways in which their day-to-day experiences and sense of self have been diminished over recent decades by wrenching economic changes and the centralisation and hollowing out of the political parties.' (p 338)

While there is consideration of the general mining industry, this is always qualified by the differences between different regions. The coalfields of

South Wales and Durham provide focuses, drawing on the roots and long-term research of the authors. Whilst experiencing the same general political and economic context for the mining industry, Beynon and Hudson stress the differences between the regions, for example in the type of coal mined and in the local union organisation, which impact and mediate how the decline is experienced and navigated by the different communities. This focus on the South Wales and Durham coalfields does mean that limited consideration is given to Nottinghamshire with its wider and more productive seams, and its tradition of breakaway unionism. While ‘Spencerism’ of the 1930s is discussed, there is slight discussion of the breakaway Union of Democratic Mineworkers (UDM) in the 1980s.

As in *Working for Ford*, Beynon’s classic study of shop stewards at the Halewood plant in the 1960s and 1970s, the account of mining deploys the experience and voice of the community. The story is framed by the move from private ownership of the mines to nationalisation, back to privatisation, and finally to the end of the industry. The National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), while highly regional, is seen as central to the communities themselves through the very institutions that create ‘mutual aid’. Boundaries between union and management are clearly demarcated, with no love lost for the management regimes of the National Coal Board (NCB) or British Coal, despite long-term support for nationalisation. Pit disasters are fore-grounded in the slower tragedy of pit closures. Strong communities, rooted in mutual aid, are presented as the very condition for surviving with the dangers of the mining industry.

The first half of *The Shadow of the Mine* maps the rundown of the industry, starting with Wilson’s Labour Government of the 1960s. Disillusion with Labour is deep, traceable to the 1960s, with broken promises about the future of the industry. There are also particular grievances, such as the Labour Government demand that the Aberfan Disaster Fund pay for the removal of the coal tip. ‘The combination of widespread colliery closures, chronic ill health and tragic accidents ... affected the ways in which miners were coming to see the future, and with it the role of their trade union and commitment to the Labour Party.’ (page 68)

The NUM avoided contesting pit closures, an issue smouldering by the time of Heath’s Conservative election victory in 1970. The Union highlighted concerns about pay, the central issue prompting the two national strikes of the early 1970s. These strikes showed a ‘lack of patience with status quo’, and a more militant leadership emerged within the NUM ready to challenge pit closures and the decline of mining

communities. Lawrence Daly from the Scottish NUM coordinated the flying pickets in the 1971-2 strike. This included the mass picket of Saltley coke depot in Birmingham, the incident which brought Arthur Scargill, then Secretary of the Yorkshire NUM, to national prominence. It was Scargill who took up the issue of pit closures in the year-long strike of 1984-5.

While the strike gets consideration, discussion of its aftermath is the main power of this account. It shows the impact of the steady decimation of the 'umbrella of support', of the closure of the Miners' Welfare Centres, the closing of the chapel, the decline of the union, as well as neglect of infrastructure that came with pit closures and unemployment in mining. Much of the housing was previously owned by the NCB, if not by the local council, leading to spiralling neglect. Twenty years after the strike, and ten after closure of last pit, the authors note the 'deep feeling of loss, of established way of life and of community'.

When the ex-miners sought alternative work after pit closure, they were shocked by what was on offer despite promises of industrial investment. The majority faced unemployment, many taking the option, initially encouraged, of sickness benefit based on the disabilities resulting from the physical toll mining had put on their bodies. This made them targets for demonisation as 'welfare scroungers' in subsequent moral panics. For those getting work, it was often in what the authors cite as 'nomad capitalism'. Companies capitalising on the available grants, but only offering short-term employment before moving off in a spiralling downwards of pay and conditions in the international labour market. Stories are told of work at call centres, which is then lost as companies relocated to attract cheaper labour in India and elsewhere. There are accounts of jobs no one else wanted, such as the abattoir where local labour was replaced by Portuguese then Polish workers. The 'teamwork' that employers were asking for was not the solidarity they were used to in the pit, and it was 'solidarity in work (they) missed the most' (page 178). For the next generation, growing up after the pit closures, there was not even that.

The heritage of the women's support groups and soup kitchens was now channelled into the food banks. The NUM remained active in community welfare. Instead of pay and working conditions, they increasingly fought over compensation and benefits. Government pillage of their pension scheme followed privatisation; money taken by the Treasury went to miners' compensation. The complaint was that the miners were the only group who were required to pay for their own compensation. Battles were

fought over the devastating impact on miners' health; over pneumoconiosis effecting their lungs or vibration white finger. More generally, one GP described his patients suffering from 'SLS', from 'shit life syndrome'.

Beynon and Hudson do offer some heritage of the 'collective spirit' of the mining communities in two rather different examples. One is the revitalised Durham Miners Gala, now open to banners from the whole Labour Movement. The other is the workers' co-operative established at Tower Colliery in Wales, which continued coal production for 14 years when miners pooled their redundancy pay after British Coal announced closure plans. While the authors are looking for some positive glimmer, these appear rather desperate.

Some former pit villages, especially on the coast or within commuting distance of a large town or city, have experienced gentrification through new house-building. Others fall into destitution with the young moving away and only benefits or low paid precarious work for those who remain. Long-term commitment to Labour and the labour movement disappears in broken promises, disillusion, and the collapse of community. The authors indicate that there might have been some hope and initial reversal of a declining vote in the election of Blair in 1997, at least a local MP in Sedgefield, but this perpetuated the taken-for-granted support New Labour thought they had from archetypical working class communities. The trend away from Labour seemed to be stalled by Corbyn's leadership of Labour, although the implications of the voting figures presented are not explored. What becomes inevitable, in this tale of decline and disillusion, is support for Brexit in the referendum.

Beynon and Hudson, while telling a depressing tale of betrayal and decline, show deep commitment to the communities. The story could not have been told without this long commitment of research, interviews, and analysis over many decades, and of being part of these very communities. It is the work of two outstanding 'organic intellectuals' of the very communities they are giving voice to. It is a story which challenges not only the 'unbelievably crass' but also the many supposed truths canvassed by Conservative and Labour about class and politics in Britain. Anyone who wants to go beyond the 'Red Wall' platitudes of British politics ought to start with *The Shadow of the Mine*.

Alan Tuckman

1. Libby Brooks and Jessica Elgot, 'Johnson Makes "Unbelievably Crass" Joke about Thatcher Closing Coal Mines', The Guardian Online, 5 August 2021, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/aug/05/johnson-makes-unbelievably-crass-joke-about-thatcher-closing-coal-mines>.

Ireland's Revolution

Owen O'Shea, *Ballymacandy: The Story of a Kerry Ambush*, Merrion Press, 2021, 240 pages, paperback ISBN 9781785373879, €14.95

It's a short drive from Castlemaine to Milltown in County Kerry in the Republic of Ireland. A century ago, 12 cyclists were pedalling along this stretch of country road when they were ambushed by an IRA flying column. The dozen cyclists comprised three members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and nine auxiliaries or 'tans', who were paramilitaries drafted by the British government in an attempt to enforce martial law in revolutionary Ireland. They were returning from Tralee, the county town where they had collected their wages, to the barracks in the town of Killorglin, where most of them were billeted. Five didn't complete the journey, dead or dying in the road on 1 June 1921. Some weeks later, a truce with the British was announced. The horrors of the Irish Civil War of 1922 lay ahead.

Owen O'Shea is from Milltown. He has written a highly readable and well researched account of the violent events of that summer day a century ago. As well as recounting in meticulous detail the events and participation in the ambush, the author situates what happened in its wider context of centuries of British colonial rule in Ireland. The 'story' recounts the personal circumstances of key figures such as James Collery, the dead RIC policeman who lived in Milltown with his wife and children. Young Daniel Mulvihill, trained Marconi wireless operator turned farmer, led the ambush. This Kerry flying column received sustained support in terms of accommodation and sustenance from local members of the women's organization, Cumann na mBan. It's apparent that many members of the local communities were fully engaged in Ireland's War of Independence. In August 1920, the Restoration of Order in Ireland Act was passed at Westminster. Thereafter, the increasingly violent suppression on the part of the auxiliaries and Black and Tans (so-called because of their uniforms) met with attacks and ambushes on the part of the Irish Republican Army (IRA). Hundreds were killed. O'Shea recounts the structure and some of the membership of the local IRA companies of the Kerry Brigades. These rural areas were home to many men and women who took up arms against the British and those who worked with them.

Careful research, particularly amongst pension applications held in Ireland's Military Archives and witness statements in the Bureau of

Military History, grounds *Ballymacandy*. Publication was timed to coincide with the centenary of the ambush. Descendants of the ambushers and the ambushed together marked the occasion. In so doing, a violent history, scrupulously told, helps buttress enduring peace and reconciliation.

Anthony Lane

Book of kings

John Curtis, Ina Sarikhani Sandmann and Tim Stanley, *Epic Iran: 5000 Years of Culture*, V&A Publishing 2021, 336 pages, 270 illustrations, hardback ISBN 9781851779291, £40

To the layman this catalogue, like the landmark exhibition it accompanies, has been nothing short of revelatory: five millennia of Iranian cultural production – artworks, artefacts and architecture – gathered, with remarkable clarity and accessibility, into a unified whole. Its nearest rival, perhaps, evincing a similar fascination with the ‘Intersection of Past and Present in Iranian Art’ but, inevitably, on a more modest scale and with a primary emphasis on the contemporary diaspora, is the Los Angeles County Museum’s *In the Fields of Empty Days* (2018). Like the V&A’s curators, Linda Komaroff and her contributors distil essential continuities in the iconography of power — as represented in Safavid manuscript illustrations such as Mirza Ali’s ‘Parable of the Ship of Shi’ism’ or, extraordinarily, the use of Ferdowsi’s ‘Shahnameh’ for Allied propaganda purposes in World War Two – but their stance in relation to anything before the 19th century Qajars is at best summative and always highly selective, deft backward glances in a manner one might liken to the ‘Parthian shot’.

The single most significant precursor to *Epic Iran* in the UK, at the Royal Academy in 1931, may have been vaster in scale – a regular feature, arguably, of Pahlavi self-aggrandizement – but it came decades before the ongoing Elamite finds at Shahdad, Jiroft, Jubaji and elsewhere that so startlingly enrich the V&A’s antiquity narrative. Nor could it have had an inkling, of course, of the outpourings of modern artistic experimentation, wave upon wave, both under the last Shah and, embattled but unrepentant, in the ideological minefield of the Islamic Republic that constitute, as represented here, such an urgent and provocative rejoinder to absolutism in all its guises: Jonathan Jones writes of being suddenly ‘like Coleridge, disturbed in his reveries of Kubla Khan, punched awake by reality’.

From the third millennium to the advent of the Achaemenids one seems



Bottle and bowl with poetry in Persian, 1180-1220

© The Victoria and Albert Museum, London. *Epic Iran* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London 29 May - 12 September 2021.

to breathe a freer air, with the exception of two delicately characterised, unidentified figures in attire sufficiently sumptuous to suggest royalty but not confirm it, and a wall inscription and plaque honouring the Middle Elamite king Untash-Napirisha. Animal shapes and designs, worshippers, wrestlers, a woman spinning, votive offerings, a board game shaped like a ferocious bird of prey, a shamanistic half-man half-bird, and bare-breasted figurines powerfully evocative of fertility: perhaps the closest we come to a full-on encounter with monarchy or its entourage is the modelled head, verging on portraiture, of a clay statue from the Bronze Age graveyard at Shahdad, but its anonymity is strangely consoling.

With the arrival of Cyrus the Great, the gloves are off – if indeed they were ever really on – and you only have to look at the self-exalting cuneiform on the famous cylinder (‘My numerous troops walked around Babylon in peace, I did not allow anyone to terrorize any place of the country of Sumer and Akkad’) or at the reliefs from Persepolis, courtiers,

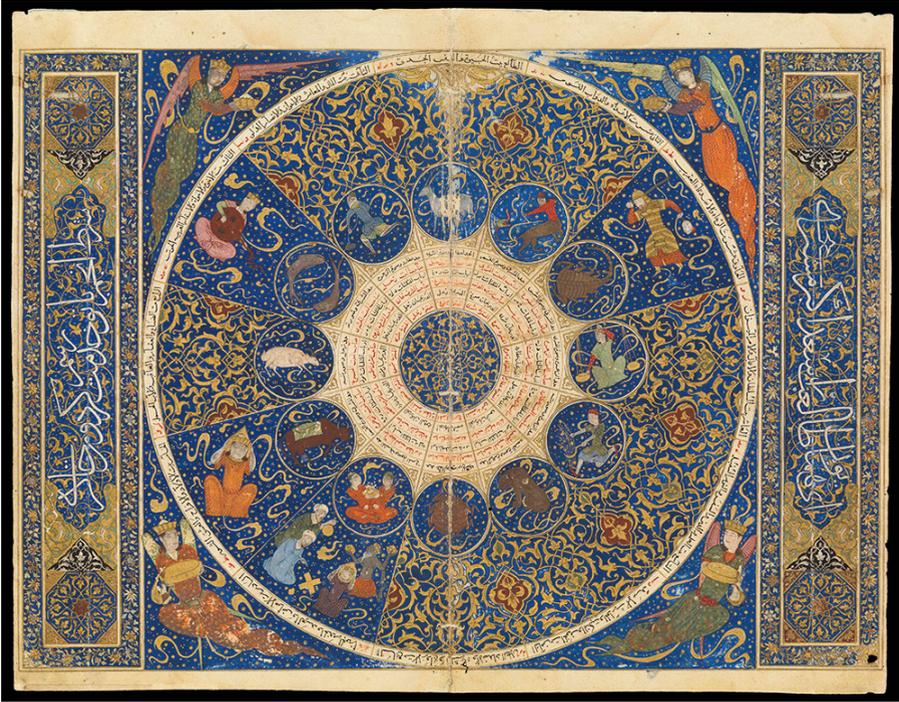
servants, subject peoples, to appreciate the steely grip required to run a multi-cultural empire. Henceforth, and with precious few respites – Ferdowsi invokes a two hundred year kingless interregnum after the death of Alexander when ‘the face of the earth rested awhile’ – the dynasties come and go with relentless inexorability (rise and fall, rise and fall as theorised by Ibn Khaldun a little before the Timurid invasion), ‘absolute monarchy ... the only viable political system’ with its impact, as the exhibition resoundingly confirms, never ‘limited to the occasional motif. It determined the very nature of artistic production’ (Tim Stanley).

Archaemenid power tends to the monumental, but its all-encompassing reach is nowhere better demonstrated than by an exquisite *cloisonné* earring still bearing traces of its polychrome decoration and, at its centre, the tiny, winged personification of kingly glory, or *khararenah*, surrounded by acolytes dutifully raising their hands in supplication. The glitter-fantasy night-sky calligraphy of the catalogue’s frontispiece, Farhad Moshiri’s 2007 ‘Eshge’ (‘Love’), like Shirin Aliabadi’s ‘Miss Hybrid #3’ with her nose job and mix-n-match at (almost) its very end, evokes another



Cyrus Cylinder, 539-538 BC

Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum. *Epic Iran* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London 29 May - 12 September 2021.



Horoscope of Iskander Sultan, 1411

Courtesy Wellcome Collection. *Epic Iran* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London 29 May - 12 September 2021.

entrapping hegemony, economic, cultural and insatiably expansionist, to which too we are often told there are no alternatives.

If visibility and continuity, intensively cultivated, are the twin pillars of kingship's legitimising from the Sasanians onwards, photographs of the astonishing triumphalist reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam, carved into the cliff face beneath the tombs of their Achaemenid precursors, set the tone for much that follows. Warrior and hunters – kings, princes, imams and their champions – proliferate, armed to the teeth with spears, swords, bows and arrows, on coins, dishes, the pages of illuminated *Shahnamehs* and other Safavid manuscripts or, like dark brothers of the miniaturists' scrupulously idealised heroes, parade invisibly before us, eerily menacing, in the fearsome iron and steel of the helmets and body armour they once wore to battle. The consummate horsemanship and easy slaughter of animals, ibexes, stags, leopards and the rest, insistently reiterated, bears an uncanny resemblance to the stage-managed antics of modern leaders, Brezhnev or



Aba, woven silk and metal-wrapped thread, before 1877

© Victoria and Albert Museum. *Epic Iran* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London 29 May - 12 September 2021.

Yeltsin with the bears lined up so they can shoot them, Putin riding shirtless in Siberia: aptly enough, three of the artefacts in question come from Perm and Ufa by way of the Hermitage. Particularly unsettling is the playful carnage of the watercolour 'Bahram Gur Hunts with Azadeh', not least because of the terrorised vulnerability of the buck and does that fall foul of the immature prince's masculine bravado, but also because of the aesthetic charm, spontaneity and liveliness of the whole composition. Ferdowsi's take on this popular tale ends with the punishment meted out to Azadeh – 'What do you mean by setting me such a task? If I had missed, I'd have brought shame on my lineage' – trampled underfoot by her master's camel as if a Roman slave-girl were just another expendable item to add to the slaughter. Youthful hot-headedness – wild oats – *en route* to

a generally beneficent reign? Critique or endorsement? Part of the abiding fascination of the ‘Shahnameh’, as Dick Davis’s *Epic and Sedition* makes clear, is that far from rubber-stamping authoritarian rule – especially when it behaves irresponsibly, ineffectively or, indeed, unethically – the great arch of the narrative addresses monarchy as a matter of urgent and sustained complexity, and of individual character. Miniatures don’t do psychology, but the way the soldiers turn their heads away as ‘Rustam Slays Isfandyar’ is a visual analogue of the hero’s inner turmoil – ‘the world before him became like a thicket’ says Ferdowsi – ensnared by a malevolent statecraft that pitches Iranian against Iranian.

‘God must’ve wanted the art of illumination to be ecstasy so he could demonstrate how the world itself is ecstasy to those who see’, comments an Ottoman practitioner in Pamuk’s *My Name is Red*. And certainly, regardless of the historical developments the catalogue’s further sections engagingly summarise – Islamic invasion, Shi’ism, Safavid empire-building, the opening up to other world cultures, Europeanisation, *coup d’état*, revolution – it’s the visual glories of the full range of artworks that, beautifully presented, hold the attention, as they should. As at the exhibition, Isfahan bulks large, but for this reader it’s the Salting carpet’s riotous proximity to a late ghazal by Hafiz, the sumptuous *muhaqqaq* clarity of the Korans, the decorated Sa’di and tender scenes from Persian romance that make the deepest impression, the places where, tantalisingly, one glimpses a vast, imposing and deeply expressive literature, yet to be explored – ecstatic indeed. The last sections are a case apart: they break the silence of women, starting with the flag-wielding figure on a 1932 political banner reminiscent of Delacroix’s ‘Liberty Leading the People’ a century earlier, but in the fabulous rush of creativity that follows – markedly female-dominated – and with the notable exception of Parviz Tanavoli’s wittily priapic Farhad and Shirin, the literary as inherited barely features. Unless, as in Shirin Neshat’s ‘Turbulent’, it’s a force to be resisted – with a searing wordlessness, or new words for the old, unending struggle, like Forugh Farrokhzad’s *It’s the flowers’ bloodstained history that has committed me to life, / the flowers’ bloodstained history, you hear?* [‘Only Voice Remains’].

Stephen Winfield