

# Reviews

## Memories

**Sheila Rowbotham, *Daring to Hope: My Life in the 1970s*, Verso, 2021, hardback ISBN 9781839763892, £20**

If you remember the 1970s ... I do and I was there, in Glasgow, Aberdeen and Nottingham and I remember parts with great clarity, parts only vaguely, and some parts I regret remembering at all. Sheila, on the other hand, has the utmost clarity as she kept a diary and journal throughout that tumultuous decade when she was a prominent activist in the women's liberation movement and leading historian.

Being prominent – as the writer of seminal texts published in the period – she knew ‘everyone’, so I found myself nodding at the names, Audrey Wise MP, historians Edward and Dorothy Thompson, Marsha Rowe from *Spare Rib*, May Hobbs of the Night Cleaners’ Campaign, the libertarian Marxist doctor David Widgery among many; and the campaigns and organisations, the Institute for Workers’ Control, the Claimants’ Union, the campaign against Ted Heath’s Industrial Relations Act, the various campaigns against those who would restrict abortion rights, to name just a few. On one of the latter I can remember an overnight minibus trip to London from Aberdeen to attend a demonstration, returning the next night. What it was to be young.

Of course, the 1970s did not spring from nowhere and the rise of the women's movement grew from small groups or networks: ‘clusters of women's liberationists had also cohered in several towns and cities, and the Trotskyist-influenced *Socialist Woman* magazine based in Nottingham, had appeared’. Nottingham appears here and there in the text, not least as Paul Atkinson came from here, he being one of Sheila's long-term partners in the ‘duogamy’ she shared with David Widgery, both of whom had other partners. Not that Sheila was entirely into duogamy, at one time adding Bobby Campbell to the roster, Bea Campbell's former husband. What it was to be young ...

Sheila talks us through the rise and rise of the women's movement, and is honest about the crises it went through. These include its battles with ‘Wages for Housework’, the internal battles over hierarchy (some women thought that she should not have her name on her books as it created hierarchy), the move to recognise lesbians – which she approved of very much – and the later debates about whether, in short, men were the enemy.

This was not a position she held at any time, not least as she was teaching Workers' Educational Association (WEA) classes, which rooted her as well as giving her access to earlier generations of trade union activists (and in one case an elderly Jewish man who lived through the Russian Revolution). Astonishingly, men attended some of the early women's liberation conferences. The last time men attended saw the Maoist Harpal Brar drone on and on, refusing to leave the stage until he was dragged away by the University security. My women friends of that era talked over all these issues.

The 1970s was a period of industrial struggles: the great mining strikes of '72 and '74; Grunwick; the aforementioned Night Cleaners' Campaign among them. Night after night Rowbotham was out trying to unionise night cleaners. Ironically, over the last few years, the pop-up unions have had the success that eluded May Hobbs, Sheila and the big unions back then.

On the history front, Raphael Samuel's *History Workshop* was at its height and people went to great lengths to rediscover our political past, in Sheila's case this included Edward Carpenter and a 'pilgrimage' to Millthorpe in Derbyshire where he used to live and other sites associated with him. She remarks that she had to pinch herself on approaching Millthorpe to remember that Carpenter would not be there to meet her. I felt exactly the same on the first Edward Carpenter walk organised from Nottingham by the late Chris Richardson!

The national women's conferences fell away to be replaced by socialist feminist conferences, a description that fitted Sheila but caused her and others to struggle with the 'Leninist' model. She was still involved in campaigning but now, as a parent, this included organising with the Hackney Under-fives Campaign. At that time the word 'libertarian' had not yet been stolen by the right, and the left was in flux. The political group Big Flame was influential. There were debates on being 'in and against the state' — the important book of that title has recently been re-issued. But Sheila, Hilary Wainwright and Lynne Segal came together to publish — initially in a run of 100 copies — *Beyond the Fragments*, subtitled *Feminism and the Making of Socialism*. The 1970s ended with this title which is now in its third edition and, perhaps as much as anything, enabled Sheila to call her new book *Daring to Hope*.

This is an exciting read. I read it over a weekend. It's not just for oldsters who were there at the time. And there are moments of fun ... the chic Greek feminists who were not impressed with, shall we say, the downbeat style of living of the Hackney and Brixton Left, and the American feminists who

were surprised at Sheila turning up for a lecture tour in the United States with a single dowdy dress (normally, of course, she wore dungarees). And there are moments of sadness – a long drive with Ruth First, talking non-stop on the last time they met: ‘It was the last time I saw Ruth, who was about to leave Durham for a post as director of research at the Centre of African Studies in Mozambique. In 1982 she was assassinated by a parcel bomb ...’ It was a salutary reminder that those days of hope were not welcomed by all.

*Ross Bradshaw*

## Stalin the Bookworm

**Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Library: A Dictator and His Books*, Yale University Press, 2022, 272 pages, hardback ISBN 9780300179040, £25**

Geoffrey Roberts is Emeritus Professor of History, University of Cork, and author of 11 other Stalin-related books. This one, lucid and jargon-free, comprises seven graphically-titled chapters, bookended by Introduction and Conclusion, buttressed by 70 pages of end notes often supplementing his text, Further Reading tips plus twenty formal titles, serviceable Index, thirteen black-white plates (no. 11 shows Stalin doodling marginalia on Alexei Tolstoy's 1942 play *Ivan Grozny* (*Ivan the Terrible*). Frequently here, as elsewhere, Stalin appends the word ‘Teacher’. This has fortified the myth (expounded by Maureen Perry's *The Cult of Ivan the Terrible in Stalin's Russia*, 2000) that Ivan was Stalin's ‘Teacher’. In fact, as Roberts shows, ‘Teacher’ was, unsurprisingly, Lenin (p. 62).

Roberts wastes no time denouncing Stalin as ‘monster’ and the like. He wants the complete man, downplaying ‘moral revulsion’. As reported by Molotov, Stalin's dictum was ‘if you want to know the people around you, find out what they read’. For Roberts, Stalin's annotations (‘Pomenski’) are ‘the closest we shall ever get to the spontaneous Stalin’ (p.4).

Roberts goes far beyond his title, providing a concise Soviet history from Stalin's birth to death and down to contemporary matters. This is familiar stuff, though useful for contexts, and will not be discussed here. My themes are his library and select passages where Roberts argues, usually convincingly, against other biographers, named or unspecified.

One pleasant surprise to many may be that Stalin wrote poetry in his youth. Five poems were published, a sixth suppressed. No reason why an

evil person should not also try their hand at verse. Roman Emperor Nero is a prime example. Surviving fragments at least show a mastery of metrical smoothness. Having no Georgian, I rely on Roberts (p.40) for this translated extract from ‘To The Moon’:

*Know well, those who once  
Fell to the oppressor  
Will rise again with hope  
Above the holy mountain.*

Remember that Stalin was often relying on translated texts as he knew only Georgian and Russian. Stalin’s claim of fluency in German is doubted by Roberts. His efforts to learn English and French came to nothing. Putin, by contrast, is fluent in German, as Angela Merkel confirms, but shaky in English, though (surprisingly?) he knows basic Swedish. Like Stalin, he takes trouble to encourage his children to read. An online list of Putin’s ten favourite authors includes Ernest Hemingway; his favourite Russian poet is Mikhail Lermontov.

Of the ancillary books recommended by Roberts, A. Kemp-Welch’s *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia 1925-1939* is the most useful, and one should add Vitaly Shentalinsky’s *The KGB’s Literary Archive*.

There is one glaring oddity. Roberts makes the standard academic boast of a ‘unique’ approach. Now, Kindle users will find another item with the identical title, *Stalin’s Library*. This is by Cambridge-based Svetlana Likhova, a distinguished Sovietologist. It is actually a reproduction of her chapter ten in (ed.) Helen Fry’s *Routledge International Handbook of Universities: Security and Intelligence Studies* (2019), providing a succinct description of Stalin’s holdings, which some readers might prefer to Roberts’ full-scale book. For all that I can see, Roberts never mentions this item, published three years before his own.

Nor does Roberts acknowledge (though he takes frequent pot-shots at him) the brief but lucid account in Simon Sebag Montefiore’s superlative *Stalin: the Court of the Red Czar* (2004, pages 99-102), drawing heavily on Molotov as source, the latter crediting Stalin with a library of 20,000 volumes (other estimates range from 14 to 25,000 volumes). Molotov also commended Stalin’s ‘exceptional’ knowledge of antiquity and mythology.

Roberts subjoins that Stalin’s favourite marginal criticism was his ‘mirthless’ HA HA HA! — the ultimate term of abuse being ‘Oh, Mama!’ What would Freudians make of that?

Roberts provides examples of Stalin’s commendations and criticisms.

The former include 'YES YES', 'GOOD', 'SPOT ON', 'AGREED'. The latter are often crude: 'NONSENSE', 'RUBBISH', 'FOOL', 'SCUMBAG'. Despite such vulgarities, the quality of some of Stalin's personal abuse is paralleled in the marginalia of classicist-poet A. E. Housman.

Lenin is predictably a major influence on Stalin's judgements. For easy instance, both detested Dostoevsky and the cult around him, dismissing him as a 'repulsive reactionary' and so on. Sometimes, we get a surprise. Stalin's fervent approval of agronomist Trofim Lysenko's false theories about crop rearing was notorious. Yet, one marginal comment on Lysenko is the lethal 'HA HA HA', embellished with a battery of sarcasms.

Such annotations have further value in that Stalin did not keep a diary or journal, much less did he contemplate an autobiography. He would put off would-be biographers, realizing they would simply churn out hagiographies, one of several indications that he did not hanker for a cult of personality. What he really wanted was official publication of his collected works. As the years passed, apart from his love of, and interference in, Russian films, he took on more and more editing, becoming Russia's leader in this field. Obviously, plenty of scope here for rewriting and 'updating' of history in Big Brother style, but Roberts does not go in for unremitting suspicions that he never did an honest job. Roberts also acquits Stalin of plagiarism in his own published works.

A supreme and ironic example is the case of Annabelle Bucar who, after working for the American Embassy in Moscow, defected to the Soviet Union and eventually wrote a 'tell-all' book about American diplomats. Stalin thought this would be an effective counter against American post-war 'spy mania'. A Russian publisher had asked Stalin's permission to issue a Russian translation. Stalin not only approved but edited the entire book himself. Talking of which, it's amusing to recall that in Tallin in 1999 there appeared a 'secret document' from the 1950s purportedly proving that Patriarch Alexy II was a KGB agent. American Intelligence suspected it was ghost written by the Soviet Ministry of State Security.

Stalin was fascinated by American know-how in science and technology, and standards of living, its social injustices being exposed by his admiration for the works of Jack London. For a time, as did Orwell in the 1930s, Stalin looked to America as a likely standard-bearer of proletarian revolution. He attributed its failure to the weakness and corruption of American trade union leaders. Stalin had been deeply upset by the sudden death of Roosevelt. For his part, an impressionable Harry Truman proclaimed 'Stalin is Russia', a detail whose omission by other

historians is deplored by Svetlana Lokhova. She also takes biographers to task for omitting Stalin's deep interest in intelligence gathering methods and techniques of code-breaking, special credit here going to the British.

Stalin acquired his first volume in 1925, not long after Lenin's death. A desire to emulate his 'Teacher' is obvious enough. It is also to be seen in the context of Bolshevik plans to make the masses literate book-lovers. To this end, a network of libraries was established, supervised by Krupskaya, Lenin's widow, who increasingly transformed editorship into censorship.

Stalin classified his books not by their authors but by their subject matter, leaving hand-written lists on how to sub-divide the manifold variations. Apart from Party documents, there were special sections reserved for Lenin (of course), Trotsky (no attempt here to airbrush him from history), Bukharin and fellow functionaries, Rosa Luxemburg and, naturally, his favourite, Maxim Gorky. As Lenin did, so Stalin organized and categorised favourite foreign classics (Shakespeare and company) — again, he relied on Russian translations. When he edited a 'secret' document known as the *Red Army Guide to the Battle for Moscow*, Stalin expunged all mentions of himself.

Even during his busiest moments, not excluding the war, Stalin claimed to read 500 pages a day, including 'mind-numbing' (Roberts) technical reports — something I would find hard to credit even in the case of Mrs Thatcher.

After Khrushchev's famous 'secret' denunciatory speech of Stalin in 1956, if not before, Stalin's library was broken up. Some 14,000 volumes were dispersed among various libraries, leaving a residue of approximately 5,000, including 400 with annotations in blue or red pencil.

Taken together, Roberts and Lokhova provide an invaluable guide to these most fascinating documents. As said, Roberts, in addition to his considerable other merits, is courteous but sharp in his criticisms of other biographers for various sins of commission and omission. For example, he shows at length that Stalin did *not* poison his second wife, Nadia, and probably did *not* organize the assassination of Kirov.

Pending discovery of new materials, Roberts (again, not forgetting Lokhova) can — unlike most authors and most subjects — be said to have given us the last word on Stalin as man rather than monster. Allan Bullock may have the final say: 'Hitler and Stalin were not monsters. They were men, and that's the horror of it.'

*Barry Baldwin*

## Atomic Classic

**Togzhan Kassenova, *Atomic Steppe: How Kazakhstan Gave Up the Bomb*, Stanford University Press, 2022, 384 pages, paperback ISBN 9781503632431, £22.99**

Kazakhstan became a Soviet atomic heartland by providing the ideal field laboratory for nuclear war. For forty years, blasts echoed across the steppes in an uncanny soundtrack for the surrounding indigenous communities. The bombs were unstoppable, and the barbarism of Russian destruction knew no bounds. Kazakh ancestral homelands were polluted by ionising radiation, prominent artists and intellectuals were displaced, and those who presented resistance against military action were imprisoned. Exactly four hundred and fifty-six nuclear weapons were tested across Semipalatinsk Nuclear Test Site — the Polygon — between 1949 and 1989. Yet by 1993, the site had been jettisoned by the Russian Ministry of Defence and left to fester. So how did a post-Soviet nuclear state unshackle itself from the nuclear imperialist harms of Russia to become nuclear-free?

*Atomic Steppe* provides an account of this hidden history that is both agonising and elegant by turn. To understand the lives of Kazakh nuclear-affected communities, Kassenova undertook extensive archival research and conducted interviews with the people who live in the villages that surround the Polygon. She travelled to Karaul and Sarzhal, to Dolon, Chagan and beyond, to collect the narratives that are shared within *Atomic Steppe*. Her book paints a vivid and stark picture. It describes both the cultural heritage and natural beauty of Kazakhstan, and the aftermath of the atrocities that have been committed against Kazakh people, with precision and deep compassion. It also tells a story of ancestry, as Kassenova's deep connection to her own Kazakh heritage and homeland is made apparent. Small details of her own childhood spent in the Soviet Union add further humanity to this complex and compelling text.

*Atomic Steppe* is a book of two halves that have been fused together to create a perfect whole. The first half describes the legacy of Kazakhstan's Soviet nuclear weapon tests. Conversely, the second part explores Kazakhstan's subsequent independence and the rugged pathway towards its emergence as a nuclear-free state in the early 1990s. Kassenova provides nuance and insight as she describes the complex and sometimes messy process of denuclearisation. Her extensive research provides

hitherto unwritten insights into how Kazakhstan became nuclear-free. For example, the diplomatic context and processes behind the removal of nuclear weapons and the destruction of missile silos are described meticulously. It is this attention to detail that makes *Atomic Steppe* brilliant as it draws together the threads of a multifaceted nuclear story. It is completely unique, an absolute must-read, and it will become an atomic classic of our time.

*Becky Alexis-Martin*

### History, which will not go away

**Colm Tóibín, *The Magician*, Viking 2021, 438 pages, £18.99, ISBN 9780241004616**

**Colm Tóibín, *Vinegar Hill*, Carcanet 2022, 144 pages, £12.99, ISBN 9781800171619**

Inner lives have always been at the forefront of Colm Tóibín's writing: the world impinges as it will, but it's a fictional character's, or a fellow novelist's growth into selfhood in all its 'complexity and ambiguity and secrecy', as he says of Henry James, against which he tests all the resources of his art. James in *The Master* (2004), in this regard, was relatively easy prey given the perfect laboratory conditions of 1895-9, Tóibín's chosen focus, and of his withdrawal, after the failed premiere of *Guy Domville*, from the social whirl of the capital – from contemporary history as such – to the closeted remoteness of Lamb House in Rye. *The Master* grants James one geopolitically compromised outing as a hanger-on at the court of the Brits in Ireland, navigating a nervous passage between Dublin Castle and the Royal Hospital at Kilmainham, and reigniting memories of the countrywide 'squalor both abject and omnipresent ... hostile stares and dark accusing eyes' of a previous visit to Cork, the 'sullenness of the Irish' which now pursues him 'right up to the castle gates'. The remainder of the novel takes up residence among the griefs, nostalgias, dreams and sexual yearnings of James' belated reckoning with his own stalled creativity, or what Tóibín calls the imponderable forces at work in the 'great white blankness of the unconscious mind'. The homoerotic subplot has James' retreat into the 'defiantly miniscule and unportentous' reach its apogee in an artistic stand-off between his increasingly baroque, introverted texts and the leaping ambition of Hendrick Andersen's World City of international harmony:

tragedy repeated as farce. He departs the novel looking more than ever like Marcher in ‘The Beast in the Jungle’, ‘a man of his time, *the* man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened’ — Tóibín’s point about this resemblance, made elsewhere, reads ‘nothing’ in exclusively sexual terms, but ‘of his time’ and ‘on earth’ connote an even larger absence, however distantly.

As if picking up where *The Master* and *Love in a Dark Time*’s selected encounters with the ‘secret dotted line that runs right through Western literature’ left off, *The Magician* makes relatively short work of Thomas Mann’s unconsummated fantasy life transferred to his fictions, as it suggests the author himself did. Mann’s exit from Europe in 1939 on the last flight from Malmö and the *SS Washington* finds him momentarily preoccupied:

‘As he lifted his head and looked out at the vast expanse of water, names came to him, and then faces – Armin Martens blushing, Willri Tempe standing naked, Paul Ehrenberg leaning towards him earnestly, Klaus Heuser’s soft lips ... Katia and Erika approached; Katia asked him what he was thinking about. “The book,” he said [*Lotte in Weimar*, where Goethe’s arousal on waking derives, in part, from the ‘glowing vigorous arm’ of a ‘handsome huntsman’]. “If I could get this section right.”

What Tóibín, and Mann, are after is a comprehensive *erkenntnis*, knowledge, psychological understanding, realisation – as far as that were possible — of the social and intellectual experiences informing every stage of the German writer’s profoundly serious and world-conscious art, in a narrative that runs seamlessly from his roots in Hanseatic Lübeck’s cultural conservatism and patrician civic duty all the way to the novel’s neatly symmetrical ending: the return from exile to his father’s graveside in that city and to the music of Buxtehude in the reconstructed *Dom*, a tentative but irreducible affirmation of the German values (‘The secret is called Beauty’) he’s spent his whole life defending.

Tóibín has spoken of his trepidation at the prospect of all the ‘epic material’, political and philosophical, inseparable from any meaningful engagement with a protagonist more wedded to the public sphere than any in his fictions to date. But his understated, fluid, scene-shifting prose – ‘The reader has a right to say, Get on with a story’ – emerges as the perfect foil to Mann’s portentousness: the next sentence after the Buxtehude – ‘He asked the driver to wait for him while he had hot chocolate and a marzipan tart in one of the nearby cafes’ – reminds one of the constant rebuffs

administered in the course of the novel to their disciplinarian, intellectually self-aggrandizing father by hedonistic, transgressive Klaus and Erika; or of Klaus's inability, in *The Children's Story* (1925), to free up his version of an idealised, precocious childhood without first killing off the head of the family and placing his death mask, 'mounted on black velvet', on the wall above Mama's bed, 'with his severe but serene smile ... dreaming into the early hours of the morning his deadly earnest dreams'.

*The Magician* draws freely upon the contents of Mann's novels and stories, their resounding achievement, masterpiece piled on masterpiece, never in doubt – Tóibín has never displayed any anxiety of influence in relation to his literary forebears. The final work, *Felix Krull*, finds Mann meditating as Tóibín recounts it on aspects of the human condition – 'not ever [to] be trusted ... they could reverse their own story as the wind changed ... their lives – a continuous, enervating and amusing effort to appear plausible' – that pertain more to his tortuous career as a polemicist: the virulent warmongering of *Reflections of a Non-Political Man*, wrong-footed in 1918 by Germany's ignominious defeat and given, one suspects, a wide berth by Tóibín (who can read such a thing?); his grudging endorsement of the Republic's fledgling democracy, naïve optimism (wrong-footed again) and protracted reluctance, until 1933, to denounce Hitler; the scramble to exile and extensive lecture tours and radio broadcasts cementing his commitment to a universal humanism; the flirtations with American power – tea with Mrs Roosevelt during the siege of Stalingrad – and the Cold War status quo in both camps, vying to purchase his acquiescence. Mann as a creature of the calamitous zeitgeist, flailing in all directions, for the most part ensconced in the trappings of a refined and privileged lifestyle, could easily seem a disconsolate, shambolic figure, were it not for the moral imperative the novel shows driving him on at every turn. *This* seriousness, one feels, has something urgent to say about the role of the intellectual and of literature we had arguably lost sight of in a corner of the world that imagined itself – until the war in Ukraine, and countless indicators of a resurgent fascism to the contrary – set on a happier course. The convulsion identified by the *Reflections* – 'the agitation of everything calm ... the shaking of all cultural foundations' – and its outcome half a century later, as Mann takes in the reality of Buchenwald's transformation into a Soviet internment camp – 'No poems about love, or nature, or man, would ever serve to rescue this place from the curse that had descended on it' – speak directly to some of our innermost fears.

One turns with relief to the poems of *Vinegar Hill*, products of the blithe

interim when the ancient and modern horrors had receded and one could convert the massacre of the Wexford United Irishmen in 1798, *pace* Heaney, into a multi-layered canter through the painterly qualities of the landscape, like Cezanne approaching Mont Sainte-Victoire from different angles, the clouds conducting a balletic, ‘dreamy’ re-enactment of what, on the fateful day, took place. In similar fashion, ‘Tiepolo’ draws our attention away from a crucifixion scene rendered by the artist’s son to the way ‘Clouds breeze in / And stay put, as though / Summoned by the painter / Who did not want any more / Turbulence than was / Necessary’. There’s a winning, unforced playfulness on every page, an undertow certainly of loss, lengthening shadows and personal mortality (‘Dripping water and the smell of darkness ... Don’t follow me further. Move away. / Don’t follow me further’), but never at the expense of the ‘I will steer / Tomorrow on a different course’ which is Tóibín’s quintessential restlessness and productivity, each poem a momentary bystander caught on the point of disappearing. Or it’s history that, repeatedly, occupies that position, tweaked aside even as it comes within hailing distance, like the ‘Troops gathering’ three months before the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War in perhaps the lightest squib of the collection, ‘Anton Webern in Barcelona’, or ‘Arafat in Tunis’, less worthy of memory’s wandering attention than the sexual allure of his entourage, ‘a dozen young men in leather jackets / And tight jeans ... I wondered what they did when darkness fell ... Was one of them a favourite, or two?’ The tweaking, of course, works both ways: a visit to the White House for St Patrick’s Day is curtailed by the ‘soft power, soft coercion’ of a line of waiters emptying the room of its occupants by ‘push[ing] us firmly / Into timeless night’; a poem that celebrates Emily Kngwarreye’s powerful art remapping the aboriginal homeland in contrast to Enniscorthy’s muted identity and the ‘Tentative, unbrave, reticent’ Dublin sky, reaches much the same conclusion – ‘The world lives in history / While we, poor lost ones, / Wither in time’.

*Stephen Winfield*

## Momentum

**Monica McWilliams, *Stand Up, Speak Out: My life working for women's rights, peace and equality in Northern Ireland and beyond*, Blackstaff Press, 2021, 368 pages, hardback ISBN 9781780733227, £19.99**

This thorough, informative and insightful autobiography is compulsive reading for anyone interested in how 'the Peace Process' in Northern Ireland led to an international agreement signed by the leaders of the British and Irish governments, Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern, on Good Friday, 1998.

Monica's is a woman's story of the violent years of the 'Troubles'. It is punctuated by personal descriptions of her childhood, a bright Catholic girl in Kilrea; at school; bearing two sons; juggling childcare, university research, and campaigning. With other community activists she worked for better recognition of domestic violence, whilst recognising how mothers struggled to steer older children away from paramilitary groups where they were in danger from kneecapping, serious injury or sudden death. She describes how her close friend Avila Kilmurray's reflections on vicious events would often turn not into thoughts of revenge but into moving poetry. I was struck by the effort she put into developing friendships and supportive women's networks amongst all communities.

Most descriptions of these years are written by men. The focus is on atrocities committed in the name of the IRA or loyalist groups; the continual tit-for-tat violence across the divided communities in the name of retribution. McWilliams tells the same stories, but with a woman's eye and ear, which makes it different. The message that a stop to killings requires an equally strong development of cross community decision making comes through far more strongly as a result,

It takes someone who was born and brought up in Northern Ireland to describe the strength of the cultural labelling that was part of their daily life from the day they were born and then went to school. A simple home address or previous school could rule a youngster in or out of a job. Monica was a young woman as she 'joined the thousands who walked to Belfast City Hall on 2nd February 1992 to demand the "right to live free from intimidation and violence",' yearning for a non-sectarian future life for her young children.

Monica saw clearly that a focus on violent atrocities alone led to

pressure indeed for decommissioning of all firearms but left out the need for an equally essential creation of constitutional politics to promote general diversity, inclusivity and equality. *Stand Up, Speak Out* emphasises how official talks started between the two governments behind the scenes much earlier and accelerated when John Major took over from Thatcher, and Patrick Mayhew became Secretary of State. He made a ceasefire the requirement that only parties which had complied could be at the talks. Monica describes how,

*‘she felt a cloud lifting as the IRA declared the “complete cessation of military operations in order to enhance the democratic process” as TV news showed a cavalcade of cars draped in Irish tricolours blasting their horns as they drove about West Belfast, whereas leaders on the unionist side were the opposite of joyful, with dire warnings of impending turmoil, with Jim Molineaux, the leader of the UUP [Ulster Unionist Party], describing the ceasefire as “destabilising” for unionism.’*

She felt ‘baffled’ and was very relieved when, two months later, the leading paramilitaries from the more working class loyalist areas ‘David Irvine, Plum (William) Smith, Gary McMichael and Gusty Spence sat together under the umbrella of the Combined Loyalist Military Command to announce their ceasefire, and expressed “abject and true remorse” for the suffering on the group’s behalf’.

The scene was set for McWilliams to help transform these community-based women’s networks into an organisation that would be listened to in the political talking that was to follow. The task was huge.

*‘Avila had worked out that the new electoral system allowed for ten parties to be at the talks, a women’s party might be able to reach the threshold for admission if it won enough votes across Northern Ireland. Bronagh Hinds contacted a Northern Ireland official to enquire what the position would be if a new party wished to stand. “Stunned” silence was followed by the question, “What Party?” Bronagh replied “A women’s party”, and asked for time to consult about a name.*

Once Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC) had a name, it set about finding enough candidates to stand under its agreed programme of three principles: ‘Inclusion, Human Rights, and Equality’. Monica describes how:

*'... the final list of 70 names was like a mosaic: there were women from all classes and every part of Northern Ireland, rural as well as urban. We came from Catholic, republican, nationalist traditions as well as Protestant, loyalist and unionist backgrounds; worked in the home, in business, trade unions, in all tiers of education and in public service. This was the type of diversity we wanted; It was the cumulative voice across the country that would allow two representatives to be at the table.'*

The brilliant teamwork of this effort was astounding. *Stand Up, Speak Out* celebrates each and every moment. The clock was ticking and nearly beat them as they delivered their registration papers to May Blood at the electoral office with only a minute to spare.

By then a framework had been set as the two governments agreed to invite George Mitchell from the US Congress to oversee the talks, while General John de Chastelain from Canada and former Prime Minister Harri Holkeri from Finland were asked to lead an international body on arms commissioning which would work in parallel with the peace talks. The women's lobby, therefore, and its two tier goal of a peaceful future alongside inclusivity, human rights and equality were established from the start. In addition the whole process had become international.

The next chunk of *Stand Up, Speak Out* brings back vivid memories for me, because a couple of days after the 1997 general election, on 1<sup>st</sup> May, Mo Mowlam asked if I would be her PPS (Parliamentary Private Secretary) and take on an additional task to liaise with women in their communities, which I eagerly agreed to. 'We can't do it, Helen, without the women's support' she said at our first meeting, on returning from her first visit to Belfast as Secretary of State, 'so do the Parliamentary stuff here, but get over there as much as you can to meet the women'. More importantly, it gives new insight into the fascinating day-by-day retelling of intense debate and diplomacy, homophobic insults, new friendships across the community divides, disruptive violence over parades, and compromises to make it work. *Stand Up, Speak Out* is riveting to read, and because it is riddled with Monica's reminiscences of how she was able to combine her children's school activities with meetings, international events, politics and very tense moments, it brings a new perspective into the ensuing intense dramatic year that led to the Good Friday Agreement on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1998, the referendum on 21<sup>st</sup> June giving the Agreement public endorsement and, finally, the election of a devolved Legislative Assembly sitting at Stormont on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1998. All this took place just 11 days before the start of the Orange Order marches on 12<sup>th</sup> July. Mo's

favourite phrase over this period was ‘momentum’ and, indeed, it was that speed and momentum that brought success.

Throughout the book, McWilliams analyses and picks out special moments which threatened the whole process but also those where careful and skilful diplomacy won through. For example, the Women’s Coalition, intensely aware that the campaign did not stop with the Agreement, knew that a strong ‘Yes’ campaign had to be fought and won at each and every community meeting they attended. The same urgency and buzz that formed the NIWC was indeed fundamental to the 75% ‘YES’ result in the north.

Belfast’s ‘Good Friday Agreement’ is a lasting tribute to how women and local communities should be at the heart of peace building. It is used as a fine example around the world. McWilliams autobiography is an important illustration of why that is the case. It expounds why and how the pain of violent enmity and destructive acts can be transformed into political dialogue and debate when human rights, diversity and equality become normal rules of decision making.

However, as McWilliams moves on to her role on the Assembly and, later, as a Human Rights Commissioner we become increasingly aware of how painstakingly slow that process can be. Full implementation of the basic principle that cross community dialogue and equal treatment, rather than angry remonstrance, remains ‘work in progress’. It is sad that the problems raised by leaving the European Union, which played such an important role in delivering the Agreement, are still making the future of a devolved Legislative Assembly in Stormont shaky.

So perhaps the title of the final chapter of this book will be part of the answer: *From the Local to the Global: Sharing the Learning*. Power-sharing has worked. Monica tells movingly how grief was shared by community leaders at the funerals of former military activists such as David Ervine or Martin McGuinness. There is at a community level, and perhaps particularly amongst women, a strong desire to find solutions to current crises in the world such as climate change, health, and the cost of living, rather than returning to a sectarian past. Monica McWilliam’s autobiography sets out the continuing goals.

*Helen Jackson*

## Productive Borderline

**Allen Ellenzweig, *George Platt Lynes: The Daring Eye*, Oxford University Press, 639 pages, hardback, ISBN 9780190219666, £25.99**

Having read David Leddick's *Intimate Companions* (2000), a group biography of the photographer George Platt Lynes, the painter Paul Cadmus and the impresario Lincoln Kirstein ('and their circle'), I imagined we had all the life we needed of George Platt Lynes; but Ellenzweig's 639 pages make their own persuasive case to the contrary.

Ellenzweig speaks of Lynes having been 'raised in the bosom of rectory-tude' in the family home (p.360). His father was an Episcopal minister who had trained as a lawyer. Both parents seem to have accepted their son's homosexuality and, to some extent, the other men it brought into their orbit, with equanimity. They also tended to indulge his profligacy, helping out whenever he got himself into financial difficulties, even after the Wall Street Crash of 1929. Indeed, his was a lifetime of being constantly bailed out, first by his parents, then by his younger brother, Russell, who once said of him, 'George begins to prosper, and from then on he's broke' (p.242). Ellenzweig speaks of 'a modus operandi that was to characterize the rest of his life—enlisting others to help support him in a style of life he could just barely afford' (p.203). Lynes would learn that, even if not rich, you could get access to riches: the privileges of wealth were available second-hand if you were already blessed—as he was—with the privileges of beauty, sociability, and *nerve*.

When Lynes went to Paris in 1925 at the age of eighteen, his eyes were opened not only to modernism but also to a public homosexual subculture of a kind he had not experienced before. For instance, he visited the Strix, 'a queer place', as he called it, with a mixed crowd: tables with only men, others with only women, and others still with both. In an enthusiastic letter to a student friend back home, he wrote: 'Nothing violent happened; there was no demonstration of any kind. Only exuberance. Yet two men (well over forty) who sat at a table next to me spoke long and loud using very often the word homosexual' (p.36). The lack of violence or demonstration confirmed the sophistication of Paris.

From the start, Lynes was strategically ingratiating when it came to the development of useful relationships. But many encounters developed into genuine friendships. It is clear, for instance, that Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, who could be formidably standoffish to those who tried to come within the compass of their lives, were soon very fond of Lynes; as he of

them. It is no wonder that he made such remarkable portraits of the two women. Moreover, while there are many instances of bad behaviour on his part—one that stands out is his much later attempt to steal Don Bachardy from Christopher Isherwood—he was able to rein himself in when he had to. Great tact was required, of course, in his professional life. Not many young men could so productively have managed sittings with such grand figures as André Gide and Thomas Mann, or even with the more modestly diffident E.M. Forster.

Photography was less a vocation than a contingent expediency: Lynes's first ambition had been to make it as a modernist writer. He also tried running a bookshop before turning to the camera. He began as a portraitist, and was quick to recognise that his career would make stronger headway if he chose subjects who were well-known, or getting to be so: he could hitch a ride on their fame. He later branched out from portraiture, becoming a sensitive and inventive photographer of ballet dancers, in particular for Lincoln Kirstein and George Balanchine's American Ballet (later the New York City Ballet); and when feeling the need to develop more commercial skills, he moved into fashion shoots for *Harper's Bazaar*, *Town and Country*, and *Vogue*. Less publicly, he also specialised in nude images of men, a genre in which he was to become a great pioneer.

In 1927, Lynes had met a couple, Glenway Wescott and Monroe Wheeler, eventually a writer and an arts administrator (at the Museum of Modern Art in New York) respectively. Wheeler slept with, and then fell in love with, him. The following year he joined them in the south of France. The relationship became triangular, though not equilaterally: poor Wescott was somewhat edged to one side, even though the three of them lived together for more than a decade. As Ellenzweig rightly comments, 'these three men designed a way of life that appears as inventively bohemian as the roundelay of London's Bloomsbury Group' (p.10).

In 1946, Lynes moved to Hollywood, where he found many more celebrities who, notwithstanding their fame, craved even more images of themselves and could pay to assuage the craving. He said of Tinseltown: 'This is the most homosexual, and of course anti-homosexual town in the world' (p.404). Any gay American in the post-war period had to perform a delicate balancing act on the tightrope between those two cultures.

Lynes's relationship with Alfred Kinsey in the 1950s 'supplied moral and material support' (p.422). Kinsey was an admirer of his art and helped him, both morally and financially, by acquiring many of his photographs for the Kinsey Institute's archives at the University of Indiana. Lynes, though, was concerned both that the images might vanish into the vaults never to be seen again by members of the public, and that they might be

regarded as pornography. Kinsey tried to reassure him on both counts. They also worked out ways of transferring the images to the institute at Bloomington without putting them in the mail, for which they could have been prosecuted.

When the swagger of abstraction held sway in the galleries and salesrooms of New York, times were especially hard for gay artists. On this point, Ellenzweig quotes the art historian James Saslow: 'The triumph of abstract art set back gay expression by rigorously excluding any narrative subject' (p.272). Photography, of course, is predominantly a representational art; so gay photography may be said to have found itself well out on a limb. Commenting on the fact that, on a visit to the Grand Canyon, Lynes left his camera in its case ('It's totally without human scale,' he said), Ellenzweig writes: 'George's artistic project was a human one: the face, the body, the gesture, the dance figure in posed but frozen motion, nude figures in relation to each other' (p.385). It was a project whose warmth and sensitivity is properly recognised by Ellenzweig's account of the life that made the work.

Both scholarly and gossipy, this book has a cast of hundreds (Bertrand Russell's fourth wife Edith Finch makes several fleeting guest appearances), but Ellenzweig marshals his material with a steady hand. I have just one complaint. As far as I can recall, only once, and only fleetingly, does he acknowledge Lynes's failures: 'To be sure, in his imaginative exploration of different ways to present men naked, there were failed efforts, such as a few Camp conceits that seem laughable' (p.423). This is a pity. The phrase 'Camp conceits' could mean anything, 'Camp' itself being such a flexible term and such a subjective valuation, it seems to me that the detail of such laughable conceits could tell us a great deal about Lynes's aesthetic. After all, the very best of his work is itself far from being un-Camp. I would have liked to know more about his negotiation of the narrow line between failure and success in this respect, and how he himself made such judgements about his own work.

One of the book's illustrations shows Jean Cocteau, Cecil Beaton, Glenway Wescott and George Platt Lynes on a jaunt to Coney Island in 1936. Ellenzweig presents it as being emblematic: 'Here were the Western world's gay male cultural forces meeting in a moment of high levity ... Whatever social restraints they may have lived under in England, France, and America, each one contributed, by his personal demeanor and by his art, to an easing of restrictions on the border between public and private homosexuality' (p.250). That borderline was one of the most productive locations of twentieth-century cultural development.