

Lockdown in ten books

List-making is a fairly innocent pastime in most cases. But it can all too easily descend into one-upmanship. Hang on, shouldn't that be one-up-non-gender-specific-personship? Or maybe even one-up-per-nongender-specific-progenyship? As Tammy Wynette once almost sang, *Sometimes it's hard to be a woke man*. But I digress. For my own amusement I have sought to list ten books which I have enjoyed under the Protectorate of Boris Cromwell. Two 'rules' have informed the choice. First, I have sought to avoid a showy parade of the books which might form the 'wall-paper' for an astound-the-others Zoom call; after all, how many have actually read their copy of Hawking's *A Brief History of Time*? Second, I have ignored well-known, and much thumbed, old favourites such as *The Wind in the Willows* and *John Macnab*; 'twould be difficult to add much new on such volumes.

One either loves or loathes diaries. If the former, two to try are Kenneth Rose's Journals (stick to the first volume, *Who's In, Who's Out* - the second's less satisfying) and Laurence Catlow's *Confessions of a Shooting Fishing Man*. Rose was the snob's snob (I say that in no pejorative sense); if, in secret, you confess to being one too, you will enjoy his comments on the establishment between the War and the end of the seventies. Catlow, a classics master at Sedbergh and the anthesis of Rose's metropolitan man, writes of his small shoot in Cumbria with both insight and entertaining asides on the *mores* of the modern world. His Spring to early Autumn entries cover his deployment of the fly, that exemplar of a certain type of Englishman's preference for avoiding the effective in favour of the (hopefully) stylish but difficult.

The late Sir Roger Scruton deserves both his fame, as the second sage of Malmesbury, and a paragraph to himself. Many will be familiar with his small, and delightfully bound, volume *On Hunting*; but that is not the book I presently have in mind. He was a prolific writer, though on occasion his writing could err on the Delphic side. His best works, however, bring a directness and freshness to politics and philosophy. His brand of conservatism provides a useful contrast and antidote to the – may one say rather *dirigiste* - policies of the modern party of that name (though possibly not of that ilk). He affirmed his conservatism sprang from his reaction to *an unruly mob of self-indulgent middle-class hooligans* in the hothouse of 1968 Paris. This both echoes Burke's reflections on the (earlier) Revolution in France and seems prescient today in the light of Extinction Rebellion's antics in more recent times. So, if you are still with me, try *The Uses of Pessimism*. It is not dauntingly long and exposes the fallacy of the irrational hope that so often infects political credos. It provides a useful corrective to much which offends in our present time, the more so given the equally irrational fear which seemingly assails a Covid-besieged populace.

In the area of fiction, I move away from politics, albeit not perhaps entirely. Try *A Lurcher in the House* (William Lloyd 1994, with wonderful illustrations by Mick Cawston). Now, some quarter of a century after publication, it still chimes with those of a traditional, if-it-ain't-broke-don't-fix-it disposition and whom the Conservative Party of the Cameron-May-Johnson era sometimes leaves uneasy. It charts a by-election in which an Independent Tory wins over the established parties. Without spoiling the plot I can reveal that *Kaid*, the eponymous lurcher, cocks his leg as they pass through one of the division lobbies. And what other nick-name but Stella could one attribute to Peregrine d'Artois's gin-slurping and cerebrally challenged wife? You might also (re)read *Porterhouse Blue*; so much nonsense seeps these days from universities (even proper universities) that this type of antivenin is a much needed treatment for the snake-bite of worthy wokedom.

History often provides a good read - though that in the great Whig tradition (as lampooned by the mordant wit of Sellar and Yeatman in *1066 and All That*) is better avoided by those wanting an Harumph-free zone. So, no Trevelyan then. Here I indulge in a slight cheat, but for good reason, by pairing two more diaries with a proper history book. The latter is Duggan's *Fascist Voices* recounting the political history of Italy post the Great War. It charts Mussolini's tempting but unfulfilled promise of a glorious Wagnerian future. That vision achieved some traction with a populace embittered by the events of, and the incompetence of its own leaders in, that conflict as they nursed a perception of having been screwed by France and Britain at Versailles. Pursuing the operatic metaphor, Italy, still a country in name but with a people not always thinking of themselves as Italians, failed to achieve the desired *opera seria*. It had to settle instead for the absurd uniforms and outward show – not untinged by real hardship and oppression - of Mussolini's *opera buffa*. Two diaries form a perfect accompaniment and footnote. They are the secret journals 1939-40 and 1943-44 (*A Chill in the Air* and *War in the Vald'Orcia*) kept by Iris Origo, chatelaine of La Foce in southern Tuscany. She writes perceptively, her observations sharpened perhaps by the slight detachment and differing focus of a woman of American and Anglo-Irish heritage and married to an Italian. On the Kaiser's War itself, try Peter Hopkirk's *On Secret Service East of Constantinople*. Its very title has Buchanesque echoes and conjures up phrases such as *The Second Most Dangerous Man in Europe* and *With Rod and Gun in the Hindu Kush*. The book is nonetheless a serious work of history, though the Hannayish flavour is not entirely lost since, amongst other things, it explains the real history which inspired *Greenmantle*.

What of books for the lover of field sports and especially shooting? This pick will probably not appeal to all. For example, it will leave cold he who shoots for the cachet of it – often but not always recognisable in the field by his rocking up (and it's always a he) in a 4x4 with huge diameter rims and low-profile town tyres. Picture an all-terrain Highland ghillie with his feet crammed into Hercule Poirot's patent leather pumps. I speak rather to those who enjoy not merely the shooting but also the tradition and the etiquette of it in all its various forms. This type is not limited to the driven shoot and when I say he or she aspires to a degree of style, I do not mean they are invariably stylish. For example, the dress for a good-old-boys rough shoot has a style of its own; woe betide the numpty who turns out in matching tweeds or clothing which has served less than three generations. And is anyone wearing other than camouflage on the inter-tidal this year? Sir Joseph Nickerson needs little introduction. But his book, *A Shooting Man's Creed* deserves to be better known and read.

That's my ten but I award myself a tailpiece for a little poetry. First, A E Housman's *A Shropshire Lad* – which never palls or disappoints. Second, something from the much reviled Kipling. *Recessional* (1897) contains elements which would today attract one of those (rather prissy?) content warnings – *This poem contains views and expressions which reflect the era of its writing.....* But it still punches above its weight.

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