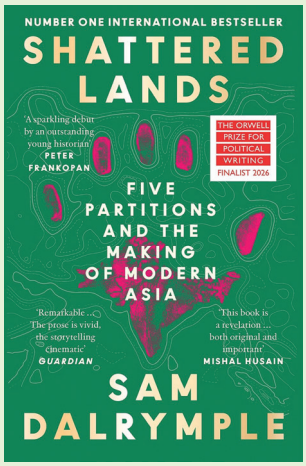
Issue 171 | Autumn 2026

THE HISTORIAN

The magazine of the Historical Association



Reviews Supplement



Shattered Lands: Five Partitions and the Making of Modern Asia
Sam Dalrymple
William Collins, 2025,
520 pp., £25.00
ISBN: 9780008466817

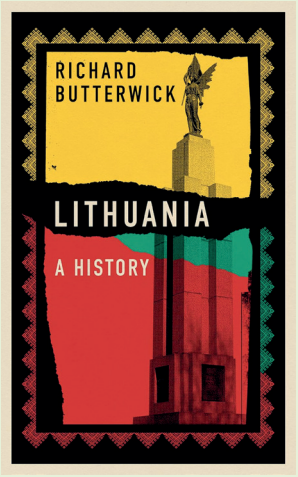
This is the first substantive study of the breakup of the Raj, Britain's Indian Empire. From its wreckage arose 12 states, in the shape of Yemen, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh and Burma, but 'as late as the 1920s, none were inevitable' (p. 7) creations.

19 maps provide an attractive and informative display of how much further 'British India' spread beyond the Indian subcontinent. 86 illustrations add to the substantial 430-page text, which is well written, informative, analytical, reflective and richly nuanced. The text flows, personal testimonies are skillfully interwoven with primary sources, with a further 50 pages of references at the end.

Five partitions of British India were 'linked, influencing the next like a set of dominoes' (p. 7). The first was in 1937, when Burma was carved out from British Indian jurisdiction. Second, also in 1937, was Aden's separation from British Indian jurisdiction, followed in 1947 by a similar transfer of the Persian Gulf states, leaving an 'Arabian Raj'. Third was the so-called 'Great Partition' in August 1947 with the formation of India and Pakistan as independent states. Fourth was 1947-1948 when the princely states in India (those not directly ruled by Britain) joined either Pakistan or India. Fifth was in 1971, when East Pakistan broke away to form Bangladesh.

Interesting ambiguities and personalities pepper the story. In 1937, U Ottama, Burma's Buddhist leader and one-time president of the Hindu Mahasabha, consistently argued that Burma was part of the wider Indian nation. In 1947, the far-western Baluchi state of Kalat, the third biggest princely state, tried for independence but was squashed by Pakistan. Hyderabad, the large Muslim-ruled state in the interior, has a valuable chapter, the 'mad as a coot' (p. 256) Nizam aiming to transform his Hindu-majority state into 'the seat of a global Islamic Caliphate' (p. 255) and brief independence, before suffering somewhat farcical military defeat in war with India in September 1948. Across the Arabian Sea, Qu'aiti had been the 'forgotten centre of Deccan Indian culture' (p. 307), its sultan a vassal of Hyderabad. Anomalies persisted, such as Omani ownership of the Gwadar, on the Baluchi coast, until 1956. The end of the 'Arabian Raj' included the poignant end game, exactly seven years after the fall of Hyderabad, when the Sultan of Qu'aiti, Hyderabad's earlier vassal, lost his own throne in 1966, to Marxist nationalists. Dalrymple's account of Angami Zapu Phizo's 'tragic' (p. 419) attempts to achieve independence for Nagaland (as had Nepal and Bhutan) represents a further partition that was not to be. The successful breakaway of Bangladesh, graphically portrayed by Dalrymple, challenges Pakistan's continuing relevance as the Muslim homeland state.

David Scott



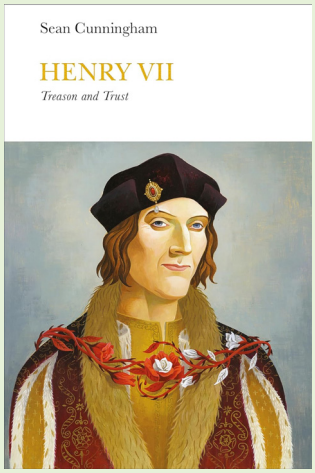
Lithuania: A History
Richard Butterwick
Hurst, 2025, x + 483 pp.,
£18.99 (paperback)
ISBN: 9781911723608

The history of Lithuania is rather like Dr Who's Tardis: an outwardly modest structure turns out, when entered, to contain far more. Present-day Lithuania is one of the smallest countries in Europe, with a population of 2.8 million, most of them ethnic Lithuanians. The medieval Grand Duchy of Lithuania, after 1386 conjoined with the Kingdom of Poland as the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, was part of a vast, sprawling polity stretching from the Baltic to the Black Sea, home to multiple ethnicities and religions before its eighteenth-century partition.

It is this complex legacy, which Richard Butterwick, professor of history at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (UCL), and an authority on the old Commonwealth, tackles in what, even at 400-odd pages, is a masterly exercise in concision. Fluent in Polish and Lithuanian among other languages, Butterwick starts with the ancient Balts: Old Prussians, Lithuanians and Latvians, whose arrival in the eastern Baltic region dates from about 2000 BC. By the early Middle Ages, the Prussians had been exterminated by the crusading Teutonic Knights; the Latvians, once Christianised, were enserfed by their new German masters. Only Lithuania survived as an empire in its own right, its grand dukes gradually expanding from the area around Vilnius to embrace present-day Belarus, a great swathe of Kievan Rus following its devastation by the Mongols, and eventually stretching all the way to Kherson. The last pagan state of medieval Europe, Lithuania successfully defended itself against the Teutonic Knights, before Duke Jogaila in 1386 accepted baptism as the price of a dynastic union with Poland; in the resulting Commonwealth Lithuania retained its separate identity and institutions, even though its noble class became increasingly Polonised. Much territory, including eastern Ukraine, was lost to Russian expansion in the seventeenth century; but until the three partitions of 1772–95 the Commonwealth remained one of the largest states in Europe. Only under Russian rule did Lithuania take on something approaching ethnographic homogeneity, as the Lithuanian-Vilna *gubernia* or governorate; and it was this entity which, on the break-up of Russia in 1917–18, emerged as modern Lithuania. The new nation-state only lasted 22 years before being gobbled up again by Stalin's Soviet Union, 'liberated' by Nazi Germany in 1941, and then re-'liberated' by the Soviets in 1945. Nearly half a century of Soviet Communism, however, proved unable to eradicate a growing national consciousness, which made Lithuanians the leaders in reclaiming independence from Russian rule in 1990–91.

Such a bald summary cannot do justice to Butterwick's skill in narrating so complicated a history. Suffice it to say he provides the first comprehensive account of the multiple identities of pre-modern Lithuania, while recognising the strength of Lithuanians' national consciousness today.

Ian D. Armour



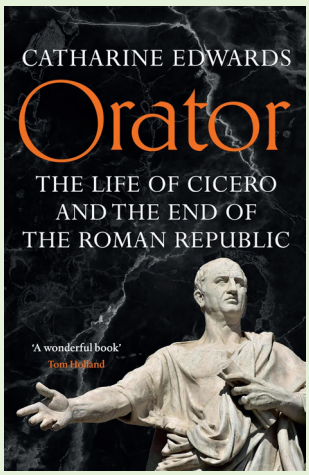
Henry VII: Treason and Trust
Sean Cunningham
Allen Lane, 2026,
160 pp., £15.99
ISBN: 9780141977768

There are forty-five titles in the Penguin Monarchs series, making it more comprehensive than the weightier Yale English Monarchs counterpart. Thus far, five authors have contributed to both biographical series: John Edwards and Jeremy Black as the respective authorities on Mary I and George III for both Yale and Penguin, with Edmund King, John Gillingham and Chris Given-Wilson each taking on two different monarchs for the longer and shorter exercises. Each Penguin text is so brief that it can be read in a single sitting, with the reader safe in such assured hands as those of Richard Barber, Norman Davies or David Cannadine. However, before reading the volumes, history buffs might like to indulge in a quick game of matching the subtitles to the monarchs. Some are ridiculously easy – 'Crusader', 'Last Catholic', 'Matriarch, Empress' – but who were the 'Phoenix' and 'Star' kings, and can you distinguish the 'Simple and God-Fearing' king from the 'Good, Simple and Innocent' one? Three come with question marks: was John 'Evil', was Edward I a 'New King Arthur', and did Richard III 'Fail' or, by turning Leicester Cathedral into a place of pilgrimage, have the last laugh?

Sean Cunningham's Penguin volume on Henry VII does not try to encapsulate him in an adjective, nor can the concise format attempt to cover all relevant aspects of Henry's life and reign. The subtitle accounts for his rebellion against Richard III, which in turn made Henry only too conscious of treachery in others; trust was in short supply. Cunningham's narrative is clear and logical, and especially strong on explaining the use of bonds to tie potentially rebellious subjects to the Crown, and also on the six years that Henry was plagued by Perkin Warbeck and his backers at home and abroad. The format dictates that coverage of international relations is sketchy and the anglicising of names is presumably a matter of house style. 'Maximilian Habsburg' may have been prompted by 'Henry Tudor'; at least we have been spared 'Charles Valois'. This is a Henry VII for the twenty-first century: the Church is sidelined because explaining Christian culture for post-Christian readers would take too much of the precious word count, but they should be familiar with 'regime change', a 'new and highly contagious virus' (sweating sickness, not Covid), and the king's second son, a redheaded Prince Henry, as a 'spare'.

There are many treats to be enjoyed in the Penguin series, but if identifying Britain's twentieth-century kings as 'Cosmopolitan', 'Unexpected', 'Uncrowned' and 'Dutiful' and their long-lived successor Elizabeth II as 'Steadfast' is insufficiently challenging, there is an entertaining alternative for one or more history enthusiasts: selecting an English Monarchs' First XI. Henry V for captain …?

Stella Fletcher



Orator: The Life of Cicero and the End of the Roman Republic
Catharine Edwards
Hutchinson Heinemann,
2026, 450 pp., £25.00
ISBN: 9781529152258

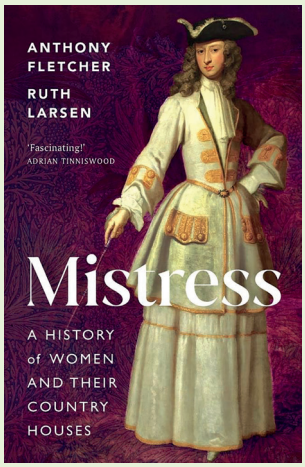
This book is about the orator and politician Cicero and his part in the turbulent events in Rome in the middle years of the first century BC. Catharine Edwards has a commanding knowledge of the many published speeches and letters of Cicero, from which she selects regular appropriate short quotations, and is also able to detect the occasions when Cicero is being subtly ironic. There are fascinating examinations of his oratorical techniques, particularly his ability to find and exploit weaknesses in his opponents. The author also finds a consistency in Cicero's ongoing defence of the checks and balances of political power inherent in the Roman Republic, with him speaking out when the system was challenged by power-hungry individuals such as Julius Caesar and Mark Antony.

Although clearly impressed by Cicero's oratory, the author also devotes considerable space to a more critical view of his actions. He appeared to have little sympathy for slaves or for the free Romans of low social status. His letters to friends and family were mainly absorbed with his own thoughts and concerns, with hardly any interest expressed in the wellbeing of the recipients of his words. Above all, he was never shy of proclaiming his own skills as an orator and reminding everybody of his achievements as a consul, desiring strongly that both his contemporaries and future generations should recognise his greatness. Indeed, the different ways in which subsequent thinkers have regarded Cicero – from the later Romans through to the twentieth century – are examined in the book's engaging final chapter.

The book is far more than just the story of one man. It also deals extensively with the political events of Cicero's lifetime and provides a context that will help readers, whatever the level of their background knowledge. Maps at the start of the book each focus helpfully on three different theatres where the action in Cicero's life took place: Rome, Italy and the Roman Empire. The different components of the Roman Republic and the ways they interacted – such as consuls, tribunes and the Senate – are explained clearly. The story of the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey has been told many times but rarely with the same degree of clarity and insight provided by Edwards. The characters with whom Cicero interacted, whether famous or unknown to most readers, are drawn with great depth and nuance.

It is a long book, with nearly four hundred pages of text. However, the author's engaging style maintains the pace while the reader's interest is held by the constant focus on the hopes and fears of Cicero and other intriguing characters as they struggled through this dramatic period of history.

Steve Illingworth



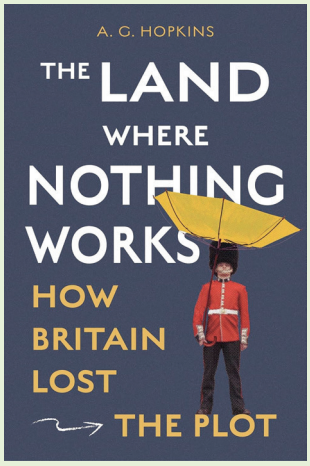
Mistress: A History of Women and Their Country Houses
Anthony Fletcher and Ruth M. Larsen
Yale University Press, 2025, 322 pp., £25.00
ISBN: 9780300163810

In *Mistress: A History of Women and Their Country Houses*, the late Anthony Fletcher, a distinguished Tudor historian, and country house expert Ruth M. Larsen sweep the dust, throw open the curtains, and welcome readers into a fresh take on one of Britain's oldest and most familiar institutions. The history of the country house is well-trodden historical ground due to the homes and their inhabitants being so often at the centre of political, social, cultural, and economic activity. These 'power houses' and narratives crafted about them in both the historical and heritage sectors have largely centred on dynastic, patriarchal power and inheritance, their female inhabitants relegated to an aesthetic with trivialised and ornamental traits as their defining features. However, *Mistress* dispels any fustiness in its examination of the role of gender in country houses across a period from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century. The book breathes new life and colour into both its subject and its gender-focused methodology.

Though ambitious in scope, covering nearly four hundred years, *Mistress* keeps readers grounded in necessary context through its useful structure. Each of its three chronological parts begins with an introductory section giving the reader grounding in the period about to be covered. Fletcher and Larson depart from the traditional structure of writing about 'great houses', which usually centres on biographies of the homes themselves, instead being guided by the writings of eighteen country house mistresses. The reader is almost immediately disabused of any anticipated snobbish distance and is instead charmed by the wit, humour, and relatability of these women who shaped not only their households and families, but the broader world around them. Fletcher and Larson deftly examine the roles of these women – particularly their proximity and access to power – through their class status and as individuals. This framing allows for the exploration of a myriad of social, cultural, economic, political, charitable and familial experiences, capacities, and identities within their lives. They are so much more than the posh women in beautiful dresses they have so often been reduced to.

In addition to expanding readers' perception of country house mistresses, *Mistress* updates familiar concepts in gender-history for a thoughtful approach to class, family, and separate spheres studies. Looking at homes comprised of two female heads-of-household is also noteworthy in its remit. However, there are missed opportunities in the monograph; namely, the near omission of enslavement and colonialism, which underpinned so much of the economic system maintaining the institution of country houses. Though the authors nod to potential exploitation inherent in the property ownership and overseas investments of elite families, the mistress as someone involved in exploitative, harmful, or enslaving practices is skirted.

Maggie M. Kalenak



The Land Where Nothing Works: How Britain Lost the Plot
A.G. Hopkins
Princeton University Press, 2026, xxiv + 256 pp., [PRICE]
ISBN: 9780691283630

A. G. Hopkins is an extremely distinguished historian of empire and Emeritus Smuts Professor of Commonwealth History at the University of Cambridge. He has remained highly active in retirement, but indicates that this will be his final book. It is, in many respects, a *cri de cœur* – a lament for what he sees as 'the decline of Britain and Britishness' (p. 220).

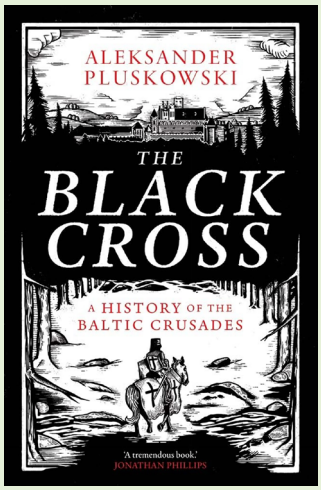
Hopkins's explanation for the contemporary condition of the United Kingdom is framed through a centre-left critique. He praises the 1945 Labour government's attempt to construct a durable form of social democracy, an achievement which, in his view, was not wholly dismantled by its Conservative successors. However, he regards the Thatcherite counter-revolution as a profoundly damaging turning point, one that helped to lay the foundations for the global financial crisis of 2008 and, subsequently, the era of austerity. These developments, he suggests, fed directly into the rise of populism culminating in Brexit, the consequences of which continue to shape British politics.

The book opens with a survey of the multiple challenges facing modern Britain, ranging from the deterioration of the parliamentary estate to the difficulties confronting higher education, alongside broader concerns about infrastructure and public welfare. Hopkins then moves into a brisk but wide-ranging historical analysis, paying particular attention to the interconnected trajectories of empire, decolonisation, and the evolution of the City of London.

Although not overtly polemical, the tone is frequently sardonic, at times to a degree that may strike some readers as slightly grating, even when one is broadly sympathetic to the author's conclusions. The book would have benefited from acknowledging certain countervailing developments over recent decades. There have been significant areas of social progress, including advances in gay rights and important public health and safety measures. The latter include the introduction of the public smoking ban and tighter gun control following the 1996 Dunblane massacre. That said, the analysis is not without nuance. Notably, Hopkins offers a measured assessment of New Labour, resisting the temptation to portray it simply as a straightforward continuation of Thatcherite neoliberalism.

There is a broader interpretative question that the book does not fully address: namely, whether Britain's economic and social difficulties are truly exceptional in a European or global context, or whether they are better understood as part of wider structural trends affecting advanced economies. There may be much to regret about recent British history but perhaps, after all, the country is not quite as special as commentators from both Left and Right often like to think.

Richard Toye



The Black Cross: A History of the Baltic Crusades
Aleksander Pluskowski
Yale University Press, 2026,
480 pp., £25.00
ISBN: 9780300279061

Aleksander Pluskowski, professor of medieval archaeology at the University of Reading and a leading Baltic specialist, offers in *The Black Cross* a sweeping history of the northern crusades and their long afterlife. Rather than a campaign-by-campaign military narrative, he presents the Baltic Crusades as a centuries-long process of conquest, colonisation and religious transformation that reshaped landscapes, societies and historical memory from the early Middle Ages to the present.

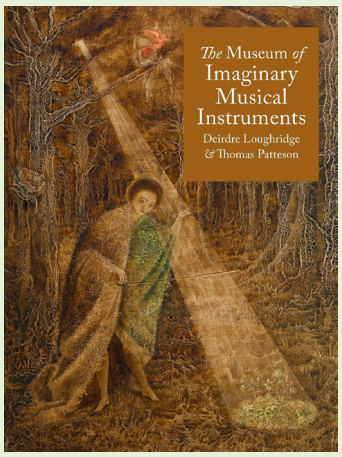
The book opens with Charlemagne and the Ottonian frontier to show that ideas of holy war in the North long predated the First Crusade. Four parts follow: first, the emergence of crusading in the Baltic and the conquest of Wendish, Prussian and Livonian lands; second, the construction of a militarised Christian order dominated by castles, towns and the Teutonic Knights; third, the 'worlds in transition' that developed, with new Hanseatic trading centres and hybrid migrant–indigenous societies; and finally, the modern reinvention of this past in national awakenings, Nazi and Soviet propaganda, and contemporary heritage politics.

Pluskowski's central argument is that the Baltic Crusades created not only a frontier of Latin Christendom but also a deeply unequal colonial world whose traces remain visible in languages, settlement patterns and contested monuments. At the same time, he insists that this was never a simple clash between 'German crusaders' and 'pagan natives': migrants from across Europe, local elites and rural communities all helped forge mixed cultures. His long view shows how the Teutonic Order's black cross was repeatedly repurposed – from crusading emblem to the Prussian Iron Cross and ultimately a symbol entangled with the horrors of the world wars – before more recent scholarship and museum work began disentangling medieval history from nationalist myths.

One of the book's strengths is its integration of archaeological evidence with written sources. Excavated towns, rural settlements and burial grounds illuminate everyday life, religious change and environmental exploitation, often more vividly than conventional narrative histories manage. The prose is clear and engaging, and the opening and closing sections are rich in evocative description. Helpful maps and carefully chosen illustrations of castles, artefacts and landscapes guide readers through a region and chronology that may be unfamiliar. The breadth of the study does mean that some episodes and groups can only be sketched, and readers new to the Baltic may at times find the succession of place names, polities and conflicts demanding. This, however, is a minor point in a substantial and impressive work that is well-placed to become a standard English-language account of the Baltic Crusades.

For readers of *The Historian* interested in the wider geography of crusading, or in how warfare, religion and migration reshaped northern Europe, *The Black Cross* offers a lucid, thought-provoking and timely guide.

Carolin Gluchowski



The Museum of Imaginary Musical Instruments
Deirdre Loughridge & Thomas Patteson
Reaktion Books, 2026,
200 pp., £17.95
ISBN: 9780228023722

There is no denying that the concept here is a strange one: a book about musical instruments that, in most cases, have never actually existed. In many respects, this is a history of science, art and literature. The authors have collected vignettes about a wide range of instruments and sounds that appear in diagrams, fine art and various forms of text, and classified them in a taxonomy as if they were just as real as the flute or the fiddle. There are thus chapters on Cosmic Instruments, Comic Instruments and Computational Instruments, for example. Living Instruments includes the harp made from the bones of the murder victim in the Scottish ballad 'The Twa Sisters', while Historical Fictophones (fictophones being the authors' suggested classification for imaginary instruments) includes both Francis Bacon's 'sound houses' from his unfinished novel, *New Atlantis* (1626), and Daphne Oram's use of this phrase to describe the studios for electronic music, such as the BBC's radiophonic workshop, in which she was involved in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the longest sections is on the 'cat piano' and its derivatives. The first known reference to the instrument is a drawing from 1596, but the most famous is an anecdote by Athanasius Kircher in the seventeenth century that describes a keyboard where each key's hammer had been replaced with pins and placed over the tail of an individual cat, thus producing a caterwauling sound when the key was depressed. Cats were not the only ones to suffer; apparently the pig piano was also envisaged.

Overall, however, *The Museum of Imaginary Musical Instruments* left me with mixed feelings. On one hand, the look and feel of the book are beautiful, and the glossy pages are liberally illustrated in colour. It is also very readable, with accessible writing and a lively style. On the other hand, it seemed in many ways to lack depth. To some extent, of course, there is a limit to what you can say about an instrument that never had material form. Nevertheless, I felt that at times the contextual information that explained how the instruments arose from scientific and cultural developments could have been expanded to give the book more weight. Given the structure of the book, however, this would have been difficult, as it would have led to a great deal of repetition.

Perhaps I do the book an injustice. It is, after all, no more or less than what it claims to be – a collection of beliefs and fantasies from the music of the spheres right up to the music of artificial intelligence. In this respect, at least, it provides an attractive overview of the breadth of human inventiveness.

Jenni Hyde



Offa: King of the Mercians
Rory Naismith
Yale University Press,
2026, x + 353 pp., £30.00
ISBN: 9780300257465

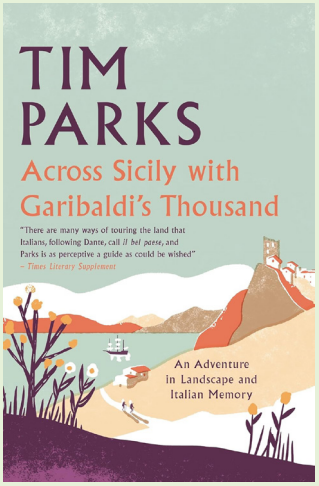
This book explores the life and world of Offa, the influential and powerful king of Mercia whose visage is shrouded in the limited source base of the early Middle Ages. Naismith masterfully and imminently readably, gathers the threads of both literary and archaeological evidence for Offa's reign and rallies these to flesh out the spectre of Offa the King. The kingdom of Mercia, and its place within the early medieval world during Offa's reign is the true star of this biography, and its institutions and inter-kingdom relationships illuminate the king behind the kingdom.

Naismith's approach is methodical and thematic, with each chapter touching on a different aspect of Offa's life and reign. The first half of the book focuses on Mercia and the second explores its interaction with other realms. Chapter one situates Offa in historical and historiographical context, as well as introducing the primary sources and their pitfalls. Chapter two explores Offa's lineage and family, placing emphasis on the family unit at the head of the kingdom and the importance of dynasty. Chapter three steps away from Offa and focuses on Mercia, the kingdom, and its rulers before Offa. Chapter four considers how Offa interacted with his English neighbours, beginning with the kingdoms of Kent and East Anglia, where Mercian rule was implemented and conflicted with the identities of those kingdoms; the discussion moves on to kingdoms more distant from Mercian overlordship. Chapter five focuses upon the practice of managing a kingdom and introduces concepts of kingship and methods of rulership, through military might, fortification building, and ecclesiastical patronage as a means of supremacy. Taking on these ideas of kingship, chapter six emphasises the importance of constructing the king's image in literary and pictorial form; the discussion of portrait coins is accompanied by illustrations of the specified coins, with supporting captions. Chapter seven furthers the exploration of the material evidence in the context of wealth and power, with the themes of the culture around minsters, trading towns and coinage accompanied by ample black-and-white illustrations and maps.

The latter chapters of the book turn the focus from Mercia itself and explore its interaction with the surrounding realms, and situate Mercia within broader political context. Chapter eight focuses on the Welsh kingdoms, and chapter nine looks across the Channel to Francia and Rome. These chapters highlight Offa in context and his relationship with contemporaries, such as Charlemagne, and his standing within Europe more broadly. The final two chapters take us to Offa's death, the aftermath, and his historiographic legacy through the Middle Ages and into the twenty-first century.

Naismith presents a soundly researched and wonderfully approachable account of one of England's most powerful yet elusive rulers.

James Connelly



Across Sicily with Garibaldi's Thousand: An Adventure in Landscape and Italian Memory
Tim Parks
Alma Books, 2026,
280 pp., £20.00
ISBN: 9781846884757

The events from the landing of Giuseppe Garibaldi and his red-shirted followers at Marsala in Sicily, on 11 May 1860, to the withdrawal of the Neapolitan army from Palermo and its evacuation from the island on 7 June, can be seen superficially as a triumphal process. In fact, as Tim Parks makes clear, it was anything but.

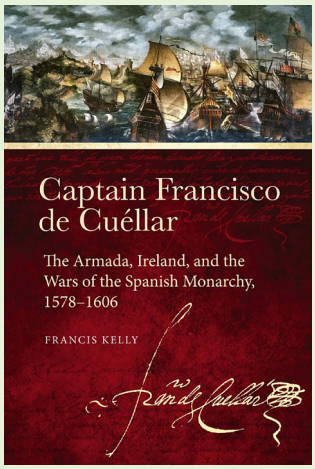
Following with his wife on foot the route taken by the *Mille* across the island, and using amongst other sources the numerous journals and memoirs of those who took part, Parks, a novelist and thirty-year resident of Italy, shows not only the endurance, bravery and discipline Garibaldi's men showed, but also how easily their expedition could have failed. When led by competent and aggressive officers, as at Parco on 24 May, the Bourbon army proved capable of forcing the Garibaldini into hasty retreat and near disaster. The same troops might have been able to inflict another severe setback, or total defeat, at Palermo. They were, however, ordered not to attack by royal negotiators sent from Naples.

Parks reflects on these events and the fatal confusion and weakness in the higher reaches of the Bourbon regime, from the inexperienced young king downwards, which led to its defeat and the almost immediate rise of conspiracy theories involving Freemasons, liberals, English bribes and treachery to explain its suddenness. He also notes the often fraught relations between the 'Piedmontese', as the Thousand were known, despite only thirty-two of them being from Piedmont, and the Sicilian insurgents who had been fighting before they arrived. The latter often felt ignored and belittled despite their contribution to the outcome – another attitude which has persisted.

The republican nationalist Garibaldi, whose calm leadership and decisive thinking at significant points were essential to success, understood that the unification of Italy he so desired was only possible with the help of the Kingdom of Piedmont. The consequences of this annexation by Turin of the entire peninsula, plus Sicily, has in many ways tainted the history of the *Risorgimento* ever since, especially when the Fascists claimed Garibaldi for themselves as a sort of prototype blackshirt.

As an Englishman married to a southern Italian and long resident in Italy, the author's thoughts about the often-desecrated modern landscape of Sicily, which he observes as they walk, and about the divided nature of Italy itself and the general ignorance or worse of even educated Italians about this period in their history, are truly insightful. His style is lucid and the book itself is beautifully presented, especially in the quality of the maps. As Parks puts it (p. 3), 'History lives in so far as we engage with it afresh.' The book cannot be recommended highly enough.

Ian Porter



Captain Francisco de Cuéllar: The Armada, Ireland and the Wars of the Spanish Monarchy 1578–1606
Francis Kelly
Four Courts Press,
2026, paperback [2020],
312 pp., £22.50
ISBN: 9781801512084

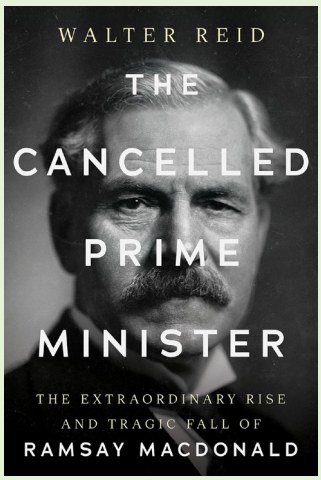
The paperback edition of this book, first published in hardback in 2020, is an account of how several vessels from the Spanish Armada were shipwrecked off the west coast of Ireland in 1588. The focus of the book is Captain Francisco de Cuéllar, but its thematic sweep is greater. It traces Cuéllar's military career, starting with his earliest assignments helping to ensure safety and Spanish dominance in the *Carrera de Indias* (the route to the Americas). The book goes on to recount his service with the ill-fated Spanish Armada and concludes with his final sojourn at the royal court in Madrid, unable to obtain a further commission. The book also provides insights into the life of Spanish sailors and soldiers during this period. The author, Francis Kelly, who has written extensively about the Spanish Armada in Ireland, is a native of Manorhamilton, County Leitrim and an alumnus of NUI Galway and University College Cork.

Kelly's research is based on an impressive range of primary and secondary sources. Among these is the celebrated *Carta* or letter which Cuéllar is thought to have addressed to King Phillip II, as well as petitions composed by Cuéllar and documents issued to him during his military career. There are several appendices. The *Carta* itself is provided in English translation, as are Cuéllar's views about the Irish. Another appendix contains an affidavit from Seville where Cuéllar makes an official complaint against Andres de Eguino, comptroller of the fleet that went to the Strait of Magellan. Eguino had accused Cuéllar of failing to engage in a battle with English galleons near Santos. There is an appendix which lists military salaries and Cuéllar's income. And there is a final appendix that provides ten documents relating to Cuéllar's military service.

This book will appeal to students of Spanish history and warfare in the last decades of the sixteenth century. The general reader will enjoy reading the accounts of Spanish shipwrecks on the west coast of Ireland and Cuéllar's travel adventures in particular, although Kelly diverges somewhat from his principal theme when he goes into over-minute tactical details about the Low Countries campaigns.

Francisco de Cuéllar comes across as an argumentative but resolute mariner. He was an acute observer of his own travels and misfortunes after the shipwreck at Streedagh in Co. Sligo. The most exciting part of the book is where we follow his journeys towards the north of Ireland, to Scotland and subsequently to the Low Countries. He narrowly escaped death through shipwreck and ambush. He faced disciplinary charges on at least two occasions and evaded a death sentence for disobeying the orders of his commanding officer during the 1588 Armada campaign.

David Wilson



The Cancelled Prime Minister: The Extraordinary Rise and Tragic Fall of Ramsay MacDonald
Walter Reid
Hurst, 2026,
357 pp., £25.00
ISBN: 9781805265306

Walter Reid's biography of Ramsay MacDonald, Britain's first Labour prime minister, gives equal weight to both personal matters and political events in examining this highly significant but controversial figure. Although the use of the modern idiom 'cancelled' in the title may be slightly inappropriate and misleading when assessing the early twentieth century, it does provide a clear focus for the author's intention to re-examine MacDonald's reputation, and this thread runs consistently through all chapters.

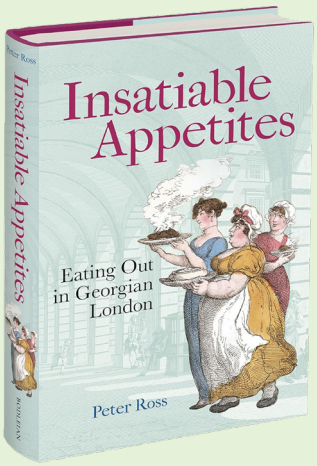
The main charge against MacDonald has been that he 'betrayed' the Labour Party in 1931. Faced with a severe financial crisis, he chose to end the Labour government he had led since 1929 and formed a National Government with the Conservatives and Liberals, which then implemented significant cuts in public spending. The author's consistent argument is that MacDonald did not desert his principles in 1931, as he had always put pragmatism before political dogma and had previously been willing to collaborate with political rivals if he believed it to be necessary. This sympathetic portrayal of MacDonald is maintained throughout the book, though the author also recognises his subject's faults, particularly his sense of self-importance and an aloof attitude in many of his dealings with people.

The 'extraordinary rise' indicated in the book's subtitle is emphasised repeatedly by the author, especially in the first few chapters. The humble farmhouse where MacDonald was brought up in Lossiemouth, north-eastern Scotland, is portrayed as being remarkably distant, both geographically and socially, from the corridors of Westminster and London aristocratic society where he operated effortlessly for most of his adult life. Borrowing an American expression, the author argues convincingly that in British politics there has never been such a journey 'from log cabin to White House.' (caption to illustration 2, between pp. 176–77).

Although taking a broadly chronological approach, the book deviates frequently from the central narrative to consider MacDonald's personal reflections and aspects of family life, supported by extensive reference to private diaries. The loss of his wife Margaret at an early age and of his six-year-old son David were tragedies that ate deep into MacDonald's consciousness for the rest of his life. Constant reference is made to the impact of these losses on both his social and political activities.

These deviations can be mildly frustrating for the reader keen to find out the next development in the narrative. At the point where MacDonald is on the brink of the historic moment of becoming the first Labour prime minister, there is a chapter all about King George V. Overall, though, this blend of the personal, the political and the wider historical context provides a profound and thought-provoking account of an intriguing man and his times.

Steve Illingworth



Insatiable Appetites: Eating Out in Georgian London
Peter Ross
Bodleian Library Publishing, 2026, viii + 247 pp., £30.00
ISBN: 9781851246649

In this important study of food consumption, the author takes us on a tour of the dining experiences of Georgian Londoners over a period of twenty-four hours, from early morning until midnight. Unlike many previous works, the book discusses the food eaten by the poor as well as fine dining. As the former principal librarian of the City of London's Guildhall Library, Peter Ross draws on a wide array of sources including contemporary food guides, letters and diaries, and the *Proceedings of the Old Bailey*.

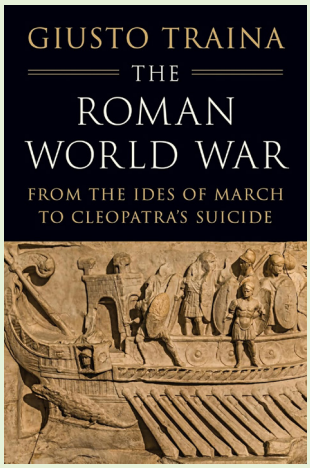
For some the culinary day began with saloop, a warming drink made from the powdered tubers of orchids, while for others the day drew to a close with the consumption of a glass of jelly, then regarded as an aphrodisiac. In the hours in between, a huge variety of food was on offer, including 'hasty' or 'flying' lunches, and an array of food sold by street vendors which provided poor Londoners with a form of 'fast food'. The amount of food sold and prepared is staggering. Such was the fame of the Chelsea Bun House that in 1792 it reportedly sold 24,000 hot cross buns on Good Friday.

Insatiable Appetites explores not just what Georgian Londoners ate, but where they ate, when they ate, and how they ate. The author describes the interiors of the establishments they frequented, the décor, the cutlery, and the staff, and discusses the equipment used by street sellers to cook and serve their wares. He also considers the economics of the food trade from the point of view of both the consumer and the retailer. In a sales ploy familiar to modern readers, pie men, at the end of the eighteenth century, held down their prices and compensated for the rising cost of food by reducing the size of the pies they supplied.

The author also considers food consumption within broader patterns of sociability and the expansion of empire. Newspapers could be read and business transacted in the coffee houses, women might dine in the more respectable confectioners or pastry shops without risking their reputations, and Vauxhall and Ranelagh Gardens offered fashionable evening entertainment, reflected in the price of the food served there. The influx of immigrants to London and the activities of organisations such as the East India Company were reflected in the variety of food on offer. The East End became associated with Jewish fried food and London's first Indian takeaway appeared in 1773.

The book is illustrated with full colour images on high quality paper and can be recommended to anyone interested in the history of food and in the wider social and cultural history of Georgian London.

Jane Saul



The Roman World War: From the Ides of March to Cleopatra's Suicide
Giusto Traina (translated by Malcolm DeBevoise)
Princeton University Press, 2026, 226 pp., £30.00
ISBN: 9780691257877

This book has an intensive focus on just fourteen years (44–30 BC) in the long history of Rome. They begin with the murder of Julius Caesar, followed by factional struggles in the final years of the Roman Republic and leading eventually to the emergence of an emperor, as Octavian adopted the name of Augustus and the Romans conquered Cleopatra's Egypt.

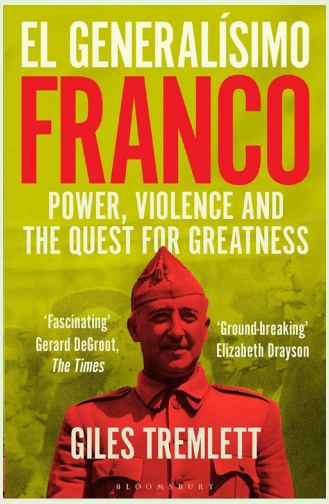
The most interesting and engaging chapter is the book's preface. Here Giusto Traina puts forward a powerful and convincing argument that the events in these fourteen years can best be understood by placing them in a framework of a 'world war'. He surveys the existing historiography covering this period, suggesting that the focus of other scholars has been too narrow. These historians, he claims, have concentrated on the power struggles between the central Roman characters such as Caesar, Brutus, Octavian and Antony, with the campaigns fought by these people against Parthians, Egyptians and other external groups being regarded merely as peripheral to Rome's civil wars. Instead, Traina argues, there was constant interplay between the conflicts in the wider world and the power politics at the centre in Rome.

The rest of the book is a narrative of events during these fourteen years, supported by regular helpful maps to support the reader's attempts to visualise the many place names mentioned. The author's command of the sources is evident as he provides an authoritative account of events, making it clear where the sources show some uncertainty about various details.

Unfortunately, much of this narrative can be difficult to follow and often the detailed style makes full engagement challenging. There is a wealth of names, military campaigns, political manoeuvres and diplomatic marriage alliances. These details would make more sense by the inclusion of greater analysis of the wider context, such as the background to some of the characters involved in these events, a discussion of the motivation of these people and the significance of some of the places the Romans were trying to subjugate in this period. The underlying struggle between different ideas of government could be explored more, as the Romans moved from republic to empire during these years. Overall, there is a feeling that the author assumes too much prior knowledge on the reader's part, as characters such as Brutus and Cassius are brought into the narrative with hardly any introduction to their personalities, social background or motivation.

Those who like their history to be mainly military and political will probably gain the most satisfaction from this book. Readers who prefer to learn about personalities and ideas are likely to be intrigued by its promising beginning but then disappointed by the main narrative.

Steve Illingworth



El Generalísimo Franco: Power, Violence, and the Quest for Greatness
Giles Tremlett
Bloomsbury, 2025,
528 pp., £27.00
ISBN: 9781526651952

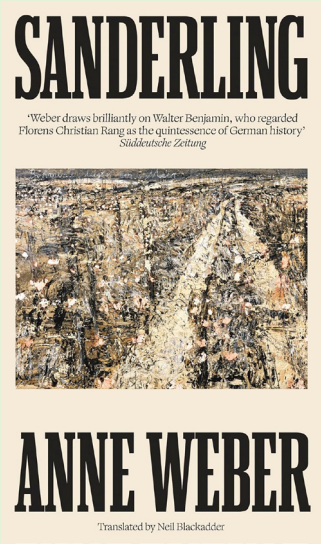
Prior to this excellent contribution from Giles Tremlett, the most recent popular biography of Francisco Franco was the work of an eminent American historian using the trappings of corrective neutrality to veer towards far-right apologia. Tremlett's volume, I believe, aims to offer an alternative. It is a fastidiously researched narrative that withholds nostalgia for the Second Spanish Republic while building the case that Franco was a vicious military leader and a blunderer as Spain's postwar head of state. Nevertheless, Tremlett argues, it is an error for opponents of the anti-democratic right to ignore the passive support that Franco enjoyed until the end of his life, or to underestimate the continuing potency of ideologically slippery authoritarianism.

Tremlett's use of perspective in the chapters on Franco's pre-dictatorship career reveals an underlying sophistication in his reading of primary sources. He counterbalances Franco's own unreliable accounts of his military record in Morocco and Spain with more candid testimony from his allies, his cousin Francisco Franco Salgado and his fascist brother-in-law Ramón Serrano Suñer. Where possible he also includes dispatches from foreign journalists or left-leaning writers. The result is a refined explanation of how Franco and other officers serving in the Rif War claimed to be the sole guardians of Spain's national ambitions. Imperialism, by Tremlett's account, became a basic ideological assumption for a young officer who claimed to be non-political.

In narrating the prelude to the 1936 coup, Tremlett demonstrates that Franco's affinities with the exiled monarchy, the Catholic parties, and the *Falange* fascists were intermittent and ambiguous. Tremlett suggests instead that the foundations of Franco's political life were conspiratorial: namely an anti-masonic obsession intermingled with anti-communism and cultivated through channels of military sociability. In the final third of the biography, Tremlett argues that this reactive tendency worsened the effects of the dictator's postwar experiments with autarky and orthodox fascism.

Elements of this book's presentation, however, gave me some disquiet when placing it on my bedside table or pulling it out in a crowded café. The subtitle's description of Franco's life as a 'quest for greatness' is a slogan so vague that it might as well come from the dictator's 1942 propaganda film *Raza*. A handful of chapter endings attempt to leverage this notion of 'greatness' sought and achieved. These moments undermine Tremlett's otherwise subtle portrait of Franco consolidating power: a man hedging his bets and avoiding the sort of personal sacrifices that he demanded from others. This is a cosmetic issue, but a meaningful one, in a valuable biography that anyone interested in twentieth-century Spanish history or the history of fascism should consider reading.

Isaiah Silvers



Sanderling
Anne Weber (translated by Neil Blackadder)
Indigo Press, 2025,
240 pp., £14.99
ISBN: 978191738055

In this meandering account ('this book won't suit impatient readers', p. 14) Anne Weber, an author and translator of note who has lived most of her life in France, engages with her great-grandfather, Florens Christian Rang (1864–1924), who was consecutively an official and Lutheran pastor in the Prussian province of Posen before, disillusioned with God among other things, he left to resume an official career elsewhere.

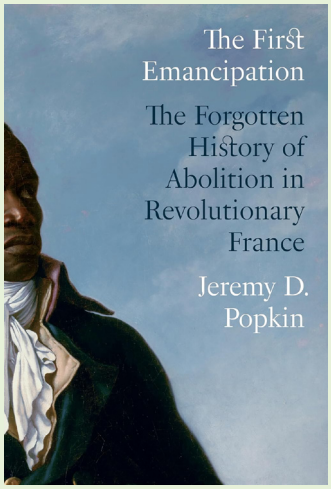
What motivates Weber to investigate this man is not just his presence there when the Prussian government's campaign to Germanise the area was reaching new heights, but his now largely forgotten life as an intellectual. His friendships with Jewish thinkers such as Walter Benjamin and Erich Gutkind is striking, given that his son Bernhard Rang, the author's grandfather, was a member of the Nazi Party and eventually an official of the SS internal security service, before covering his tracks and resuming his former life as city librarian of Bielefeld. How could the father lead to the son?

Weber fails in her investigation, because there is no straightforward answer to the question, but also and importantly because she limits herself in her approach due to her deeply felt guilt about what Germans did between 1933 and 1945 to Jews and others they considered unworthy of life and euthanised. In doing so she does not engage with the totality of the Third Reich and its ambitions. A great-grandfather who could join the army in his fifties in 1914, and could write that he was glad to be permitted to take part in 'this struggle of the most noble and peaceful of peoples on earth against the envy and vengefulness that wish to choke them' (p. 157), suggests an outlook which did not vanish from Germany later, even if he apparently came to regret it and was dead before its Versailles settlement offspring fully emerged.

Weber also fails to consider that the sort of Jews Rang associated with were assimilated intellectuals, who shared his preoccupations and could discuss them while smoking cigars and drinking schnaps at the preliminary meeting in Potsdam, in June 1914, of the so-called *Forte Kreis*, a small intellectual group which thought Europe needed spiritual rule through the leadership of people like themselves.

All of which leads to the question: is it worth reading? To which the answer is undoubtedly yes. Weber is not an historian and should not be judged as such. Her struggles with identity and her depiction of these three generations of her intellectual family are sufficient reasons. The Rangs come across, from Florens to Weber's father, as consistently unfeeling and often predatory in their relations with others. The translator captures Weber's elegant style well.

Ian Porter



The First Emancipation: The Forgotten History of Abolition in Revolutionary France
Jeremy D. Popkin
Princeton University Press, 2026, 434 pp., $39.95/£35.00
ISBN: 9780691246925

Upon seeing the black deputy Jean-Baptiste Belley on the jacket, a reader might assume that, like much recent scholarship, this book on France's formal abolition of slavery in 1794 emphasises black agency and self-liberation. But, Jeremy D. Popkin argues, 'acceptance of the need to end slavery was a dialectic process' that also involved 'the white-dominated societies of the Western world' (p. 5), so his main focus is the legislative process in Paris (the author is particularly fond of Jacques-Pierre Brissot and Claude Milscent de Mussy, a slave-catcher turned abolitionist).

Haitian historians have written about their ancestors' emancipation for over two centuries, as have, more recently, French and American historians like Yves Bénot in *La Révolution et la fin des colonies* (1989) and Popkin himself, in *You Are All Free* (2010), so the abolition of slavery is not exactly 'forgotten history'. But this book is the best written and researched account to date of the maddeningly complex debate on the colonial issue in revolutionary France.

Many scholars, following C.L.R. James's *Black Jacobins* (1938), have lambasted French legislators for being in the grip of the planter class. But Popkin credits them for ground-breaking steps like allowing colonial deputies in the National Assembly in 1789, granting voting rights to free people of colour in 1791–92 and, of course, abolishing slavery in 1794. The process was slow, contentious, and ultimately futile, as the planter lobby remained powerful, and Napoleon Bonaparte ultimately restored slavery; but it went much further than the contemporary abolitionist movements in Britain and the United States.

Though Popkin mentions the influence of slave revolts in the Caribbean, he emphasises two causal factors to explain the passage of the abolition law. The first was idealistic attachment to the rights of men. The second was political chaos. In *You Are All Free*, Popkin argued that a single *journée* of street fighting in Cap-Français led to the 1793 abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue. His new book, with its detailed accounts of factional politicking in Paris, often embraces an accidental approach as well.

This is especially true of the chapter on the raucous passage of the abolition law, which begins by noting that, five years into the French Revolution, there was still 'no sign that France's legislators were about to tackle the issue of slavery' (p. 242). Then, in February 1794, Belley's multiracial delegation from Saint-Domingue reached Paris – only for two of the delegates to be imprisoned. Thankfully, Maximilien de Robespierre, who opposed abolition because his Girondin rivals supported it, was otherwise occupied and they survived the Terror. Three days, more close calls, and two great speeches later, the Convention not only abolished slavery in all French colonies, but granted freedmen full citizenship.

Philippe Girard



Ausländer
Michael Moritz
Profile Books, 2026, 315 pp., £20.00
ISBN: 9780241722909

Sir Michael Moritz is a billionaire venture capitalist, philanthropist, author, and former journalist. In 2006, he discovered that he has a rare blood cancer caused by a genetic abnormality and, as an Ashkenazi Jew with roots in Central and Eastern Europe, he shared the errant gene. In subsequent years, he became increasingly aware of his ethnicity and the pull towards finding out more about his heritage. His parents had escaped Germany in the 1930s, eventually settling in Cardiff. This memoir tells the story of his family and, through this, a history of the Holocaust. He also provides commentary on antisemitism and his views on current politics in the United States.

Moritz considers antisemitism as something that has existed for thousands of years and which will not change. He is certainly not a supporter of the current administration in the US. However, his commentary on these issues does not dominate the book. Instead, it is the powerful telling of his memoir and the resulting observations about the Holocaust and its impact on his family and himself that form its substance.

During the Covid pandemic Moritz reflected on his family's history and found time to research it. He wanted to find answers to all the questions he never asked when his parents were alive, to understand them and discover his own sense of identity.

He scrutinised a box containing his mother's papers, a memoir written by an uncle, the records of his murdered paternal grandfather and family photographs. These are established materials for research. However, it is the discussion of books, paintings and films, providing a lens through which he discovers his family's stories and the historical context, that sets this book apart. As Moritz comes to realise the significance of childhood memories and experiences, the depth of emotion leaps from the page.

A key theme is the title of the book. *Ausländer* means 'foreigner' or 'outsider'. Moritz's parents considered themselves British citizens who had once been refugees, and he identifies more than anything else as the son of refugees. Another key theme is the notion of not having a 'home'. His parents were forced to flee theirs. Survivors live hundreds or thousands of miles from the places they called home. The resulting trauma, concerns and fears are passed on to subsequent generations. It comes full circle when Moritz reveals that he has applied for German citizenship.

Whether some readers agree with Moritz's political views or not is beside the point. This book is the story of a family and how that family was affected by the Holocaust. It is beautifully written from the heart, blending story and history seamlessly. More accessible than weightier tomes, it is highly recommended.

Mamie Philp