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Janina Ramirez photographed at her home near Oxford. "Saints seem to have transcended a lot of other hierarchies because the church had such a presence among the people," she says

Photography
by Fran Monks



INTERVIEW / JANINA RAMIREZ

"What made a saint in the Anglo-Saxon period was notoriety and celebrity"

Janina Ramirez talks to **Matt Elton** about her new book exploring the lives and legacies of 10 Anglo-Saxon saints – who, as she explains, were often more earthly than heavenly

FRAN MONKS

PROFILE JANINA RAMIREZ

Following degrees at St Anne's College, University of Oxford and the Centre for Medieval Studies in York, Ramirez is now a course director in the history of art at Oxford. She has presented BBC TV series on subjects including Vikings and medieval kings, and will be speaking in York and Malmesbury for this year's BBC History Magazine History Weekend. See historyweekend.com for details

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IN CONTEXT

The litany of saints in the Anglo-Saxon period, often regarded as running from 600 to 1066, features some of the era's most famous names. Many, such as Bede, Hilda and Cuthbert (all of whom lived in the seventh century) were monks or religious figures; others were members of royal families. These saints came to occupy a huge role in the public imagination, with shrines being set up in their honour and stories told about their actions.

What role would the saints have played in Anglo-Saxon England?

One of the inspirations for writing this book was flicking through *The Sun* and seeing famous people who are part of the zeitgeist – arguably celebrities are more recognisable than politicians – and thinking that, if there had been such a thing as an Anglo-Saxon tabloid newspaper, it would have featured people such as Saint Cuthbert or Saint Hilda. The stories would have been about the latest martyr or strange hermit who had taken themselves off to the Fens and had been seen battling demons in the middle of the night. These would be the people that the populus wanted to know about.

It's important to remember that the Anglo-Saxon period was a time of great religious and imaginative transition. The pagan world had been inhabited by local deities, gods of the river or glen, and household deities that people thought about inside their houses. The saints took over both of those roles, and people would pray to little icons or statues of them instead. So saints became the intermediary between the earthly and the divine, but they were also part of the environment. People would wake up and think about them.

What do we mean when we talk about 'saints' in this context?

Our modern conception is that saints have to prove themselves by going through a long period of canonisation, decided by a particular branch of the Vatican. But that wasn't the case in the Anglo-Saxon period: what made you a saint was notoriety and celebrity. If your stories were well known you could become a saint – individuals sometimes started work on building a cult around themselves before they died – or you could be crafted into one after your death.

The murder in 1170 of Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, may be somewhat later than other examples I write about in my book, but it's still a very good example of the benefits for particular locations of someone becoming a saint. Canterbury Cathedral got completely rebuilt and became a tourist hub – the Disneyland of the medieval period. People flocked there: Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* about this constant stream of tourists going to be near Becket's relics in the hope of miracles.

On a more local level, if a monastery had been corrupt, or a royal family wanted to prop up a new monastic estate, attaching a saint's identity to it could help them do so. That would then mean that they could invest in beautiful manuscripts, wonderful reliquaries and all the trappings of sanctity to support the cult of that particular saint.

Anglo-Saxon saints were often very different from the pious image of selflessness and helping others that we have today. None of that was required: in fact, some saints were selfish, bloodthirsty and tyrannical. They show all the shades of human failings as well as human achievement.

So they weren't the heavenly figures we sometimes think of them as being?

Absolutely not. I want to get over the idea of the one-dimensional mass of the blessed, the hundreds of interchangeable homogenous-looking saints of painted friezes. That's not what the Anglo-Saxon saints are about: each one is unique and has their own story. We're particularly fortunate with the Northumbrian saints, because we have the writings of the monk Bede – the Alastair Campbell of his time – that give us a very clear insight into their lives and identities.

Yet researching the saints does require a lot of detective work, because you have to selectively piece together what little evidence there is – and have a good understanding of

“Anglo-Saxon saints were very different from the pious image of selflessness that we have today”

the broader historical period. Sometimes I may have got it wrong, and I may have missed some things, but I want to start a dialogue, and for others to start looking at these people afresh.

How did the saints get their power?

There's a mixture of those who were less powerful and had a subtle, spiritual role, and the big names who were incredibly powerful. Wilfrid was one such saint: a power-hungry man who built up a group of monks that was almost like a standing army. He had a lot of power within the church and was made bishop of York, and he negotiated on an international level. He even had the ear of the pope, and his influence and power meant that he was a threat to the king.

Saints seem to have transcended a lot of other hierarchies because the church had such a presence among the people. This meant that they could assume huge amounts of power.

What did these saints desire?

We tend to wear rose-tinted spectacles when it comes to looking to the past. We like to think about fancy costumes and wooden huts and everything being frightfully alien and different. But going back into the past would not be that different to going to another part of the world that you don't know about. In terms of shared human concerns, people from 'the past' were exactly the same as us, and had exactly the same concerns: they wanted wealth, power, security, and to look after their families.

Some of the power-hungry saints wanted authority – to be listened to – as well as wealth and comfort. Other saints, such as Bede, wanted to grow intellectually, and to have access to the finest research available. Others still, such as the seventh-century Northumbrian saint Cuthbert, seemed to want to inhabit both worlds: the spiritual realm and the real one. What makes saints fascinating is that no two are the same. Their desires come through very strongly when you start to think about them as real three-dimensional human beings.

Some powerful saints were women, which we wouldn't perhaps expect in this period. Do any stand out for you?

The seventh-century saint Hilda of Whitby is a heroine of mine. There's this window in history, around the time that Christianity



“If Princess Diana had been born a thousand years earlier, there's no doubt she would have been made a saint”

was established among the Anglo-Saxons in approximately 600 or 700 AD, in which women had a power that they then don't have again for centuries. Hilda is a great example of that: she spent half her life as a princess in the Northumbrian kingdom, and then acquired a plot of land up on the cliff at Whitby and built a huge double monastery. She was made abbess of a dual community: a group of monks and a group of nuns, and she ruled over all of them.

She also had other monastic communities elsewhere, like the CEO of a multinational business, but she still maintained her links to a powerful royal family and had the ears of all the leaders of the church. It's extraordinary to see that kind of influence.

Saints seem to have been pioneers who shaped the world by force of their personality. How did this change?

As the Viking army came to England in the 800s onwards, Anglo-Saxon identity was under threat. Their world was almost entirely subsumed beneath the Viking one. The process was halted somewhat by Alfred the Great, but with Alfred there started to be a sense that sanctity could be harnessed to the political needs of 'the nation'.

In the face of pagan Vikings, the Anglo-Saxon royal family became holier than thou:

they pumped funds into the church and sponsored education on a spiritual level. So there was an investment in the church and in saints that the Anglo-Saxons came to regard as a way of setting themselves apart.

The change was even greater than that, though. One of the claims that I make in the book is that we should be thinking about the end of the Anglo-Saxon period not coming in 1066 but earlier, in 1016. I really feel that the changes brought about by the Norman Conquest were the evolution of change that was well and truly underway by the turn of the millennium. In 1016 a Danish king, Cnut, was king of England and of Denmark. There was no longer an Anglo-Saxon kingdom; Anglo-Saxon England and its saints had been subsumed beneath Viking and Danish culture. The Norman Conquest was the ultimate climax to centuries of being pressed in by the Viking world.

Are there any modern figures who you think would have been saints?

I feel that, had Princess Diana been born a thousand years earlier, in the Anglo-Saxon period, there is no doubt that she would have been made a saint and a cult would have grown up around her. She was the mother of kings; she was a celebrity; she was notorious; she did good things in her life and achieved a

lot. And, as with all of the saints in this book, she was a complex mix of virtue and vice.

She was also strongly associated with a particular location. When she died in 1997 we saw a mass outpouring of grief – people turning up to Kensington Palace and laying out those flowers. They were drawing towards a cult centre, being pulled together, and what would have happened in the Anglo-Saxon period is that a church would have gone up there and the flow of tourists would have been perpetuated. Diana would have been hijacked for the purposes of that locale and would have been made a saint, without doubt.

I think that Princess Diana embodies the complexity of the Anglo-Saxon saints. If we can think of them as being as complex as she was, then we'll start to get closer to who these people really were. They weren't cutout figures, icons with no depth. They are full of depth. **11**



The Private Lives of the Saints: Power, Passion and Politics in Anglo-Saxon England

by Janina Ramirez

(WH Allen, 352 pages, £20)

For more on Thomas Becket, see Richard Barber's feature starting on page 36.



Chamberlain (centre) with, from left, Galeazzo Ciano, Viscount Halifax and Mussolini, 1938. Robin Prior's book argues that 1940 could have been a disaster had he remained as PM

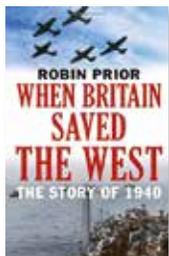
From crisis to crisis

ASHLEY JACKSON *praises an account of how 1940 shaped the fortunes of Britain and the west in the Second World War*

When Britain Saved the West: The Story of 1940

by Robin Prior

Yale University Press, 335 pages, £20



This is a robust statement of the case that in 1940 Britain 'stood alone' against the Nazis and thus saved western civilisation. It did so from a perilous position, and with

the alternative of a peace deal with Hitler still very much on the cards.

The argument offered in *When Britain Saved the West* is that 1940 could easily have been a disaster for Britain, and for the west, if Neville Chamberlain had remained in power as prime minister and sued for peace, or had foreign secretary Lord Halifax dislodged Churchill in late May and extended his peace 'feelers' more forcefully. Under Chamberlain, Britain was only waging war on the margins, with an army too small to act decisively,



and an air force largely confined to leaflet drops rather than bombing, lest a last opportunity to come to terms with Hitler be missed. Before the advent of Churchill's first war cabinet, Britain was simply not facing up to the realities and terrible costs of total war.

In addition to the resolve shown on the political stage courtesy of Churchill, military developments enabled Britain to continue to exist as an independent state and thus perform the saviour's role. The Dunkirk evacuations of 1940 prevented the evisceration of its army, and the navy and RAF were sufficient to prevent a German invasion or a bombing campaign that might have crippled both industry and morale. These military factors enabled Britain to continue to thwart Hitler's ambitions, and to stand between him and Nazi domination of (at the very least) the entire European continent.

In his efforts to marshal the forces of liberal democracy and western values against National Socialism, Churchill beseeched France to stay in the fight with an extraordinary offer of full political union. The PM also reached out across the Atlantic in an effort to convince the Americans that Britain's fight was their fight, and to respond accordingly. But despite the subsequent mythicism of a 'special relationship', authored largely by Churchill himself, in 1940 the US offered nothing very special at all in the way of help.

While it is impossible to know what might have been – if the British Expeditionary Force had been lost to a man, for example, or if Churchill had not become prime minister – what permits Prior to write in such stark terms about 1940 was that the knife-edge was clear for all to see. So too was the fact that the struggle was the closest to 'good versus evil' that it is possible to imagine. Churchill had a broader conception of what was at stake

“Prior's argument is that 1940 could easily have been a disaster for Britain”



COMING SOON...
 "New books on the French resistance, the life of a Persian king and communist architecture are among those set to go under the reviews microscope next issue. Plus, I'll be finding out **How to Plan a Crusade** from Christopher Tyerman, who has written a fresh study on just that subject." *Matt Elton, reviews editor*

than those around him, and the fact that he was able to fashion it into effective action is the source of the 'greatness' that attaches to his name. He knew peace with Hitler was simply not worth having, and managed to carry the argument against daunting political forces who thought otherwise.

In so doing, he was also able to carry the British people with him into the horror of total war that was the consequence of this knowledge. And that allowed him, and his country, to show subjected Europeans and isolated Americans that the fight would continue while Britain remained unbowed. Here was Churchill, the willing war supremo overcoming the doleful inaction and wishful thinking regarding

"Without the vantage of hindsight, defeat was a real prospect for people looking to the future in 1940"

Hitler's intentions that tainted his main political rivals. What emerges in Prior's account is familiar praise of Churchill, and the caustic criticism of Chamberlain and Halifax that often accompanies it.

Experts familiar with the strategic and political situation of 1940 may well find little that is new here, although an elegant, well-marshalled, and powerful restatement is welcome. Prior's authoritative, no-nonsense coverage underlines the period's momentousness: without the vantage of hindsight, the prospect of defeat was very real for people looking to the future in 1940. Indeed, the chances of defeating the forces of fascism would have appeared remote.

When Britain Saved the West will find its mark if it informs non-specialists about the realities that faced Britain, and the implications that they had for the rest of the world, in this crucial year before alliances with other nations made victory a near certainty. **■**

Ashley Jackson is professor of imperial and military history at King's College London and author of *Churchill* (Quercus, 2011)

Lone wolf?

CHRIS SKIDMORE commends a study of Thomas Cromwell's rise that counters many popular views of the Tudor politician

The Rise of Thomas Cromwell: Power and Politics in the Reign of Henry VIII

by Michael Everett

Yale University Press, 362 pages, £25



Thomas Cromwell has fascinated historians for decades. With Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell-mania seems to have reached new heights, with a rash of biographies exalting Cromwell

as a kind of father figure to the modern English state. His revolutionary work in the 1530s, it is argued, forever changed the power of the monarchy, the position of parliament, and fortunes of the Catholic church in England.

It is perhaps customary for biographers to be enthralled with their subject – Michael Everett admits that his fascination with Cromwell stems from his sixth-form days – yet refreshingly, this study is no hagiography. Everett's book is the culmination of the work of his PhD thesis, and as such is heavily weighted with analysis rather than a traditional narrative history. By focusing solely on Cromwell's rise, Everett limits his focus to his subject's early life as a London lawyer and merchant, his entry into Cardinal Wolsey's and then Henry VIII's service, and his appointment as the king's secretary in April 1534.

Everett is unashamed about the need for a narrow focus: we cannot understand Cromwell unless we understand the motivations that drove him to the top. If the chronological scope is limited, Everett's scholarship certainly makes up for it. A hundred pages alone are devoted to footnotes that

reveal he has gone back to every original manuscript in his quest to present the real man. This is revisionist history at its best, with Everett ready to challenge and dispel long-held beliefs about Cromwell's dominance and responsibilities within the king's council and the Tudor court. Every assumption about his career, personality and faith is rigorously tested before sensitive conclusions are made.

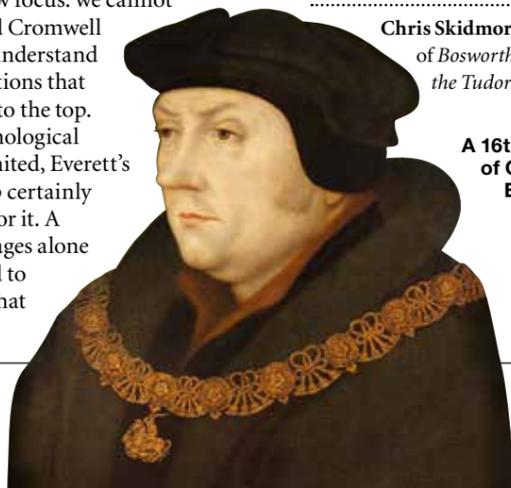
Everett demonstrates that Cromwell rose to favour not through masterminding the king's divorce, but through his phenomenal capacity for putting in long hours to deal with the more mundane aspects of business, in particular looking after the king's estates. So hard was Cromwell's work rate, travelling across the country to inspect monastic lands, that two of his horses died of tiredness.

Everett is at pains to show that Cromwell cannot be treated as some kind of genius in isolation from his fellow councillors. Cromwell did not operate as sole chief minister, but rather worked alongside equally influential members of the king's council. The king, too, retained an active interest and guiding hand in decisions, while the vital role that chancellor Thomas Audley played in legislation seems to dilute Cromwell's own achievements.

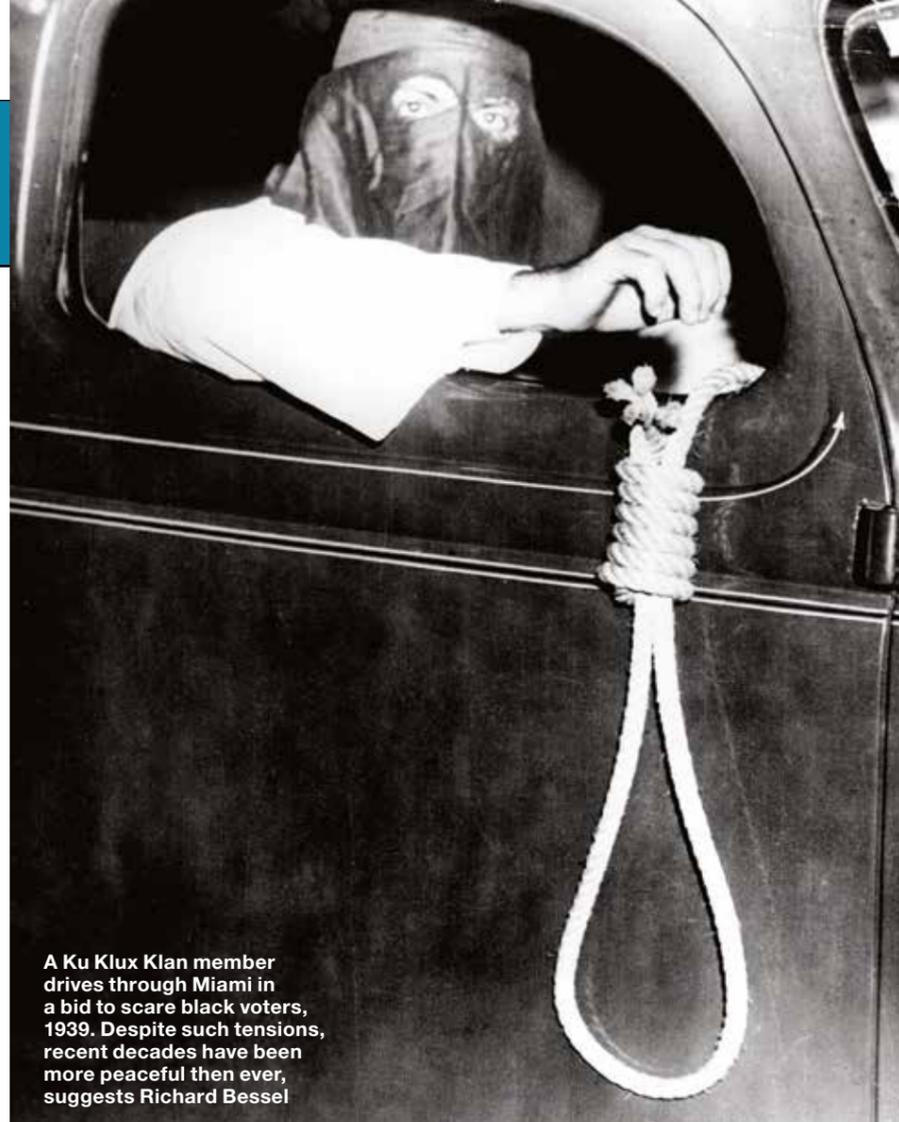
This book may disappoint those looking for a complete biography, and Everett will hopefully consider a second volume. Yet his fresh approach provides new insight into a man whose greatness seems to have been overestimated. **■**

Chris Skidmore is the author of *Bosworth: The Birth of the Tudors* (W&N, 2013)

A 16th-century portrait of Cromwell. Michael Everett shows that "he should not be treated as some kind of genius in isolation", says Chris Skidmore



BRIDGEMAN



A Ku Klux Klan member drives through Miami in a bid to scare black voters, 1939. Despite such tensions, recent decades have been more peaceful than ever, suggests Richard Bessel

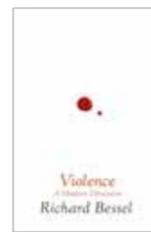
Peace for our time

IAN MORRIS praises a book that argues that life is less brutal than ever – but that violence remains a major source of anxiety

Violence: A Modern Obsession

by Richard Bessel

Simon and Schuster, 374 pages, £20



The world has changed. When I was a teenager 40 years ago, there were certain expectations. If I answered back to teachers, I got the slipper. If I fell out with friends, I (or they) got thumped. And,

at the football matches that I attended, things could get very nasty indeed.

But little of this, the historian Richard Bessel tells us in his excellent new book, now holds true. "In recent decades," he argues, "people in many western societies

have become increasingly and acutely sensitive to violence, refusing to accept or condone behaviour that in earlier times had been widely tolerated." The result: "A remarkable contemporary concern about, even obsession with, violence."

Bessel traces the rise of these attitudes across the past 200 years in Europe and North America, where the process has gone furthest. He ranges widely, with chapters on religion, revolution, politics, war and social control. Told with flair

"The more removed we get from violence, the more we seem to worry about it"

and full of arresting details, each chapter documents similar trends. Not only has the number of situations in which violence is seen as legitimate shrunk, but the definition of violence has also expanded, so that it is now "not necessary to lay a finger on someone in order to have committed an act of violence". In law as well as in popular opinion, Bessel suggests, what counts as violence "is determined not necessarily by a supposedly objective observer but through the perception of the alleged victim". This is quite a change from the boys-will-be-boys attitudes of 40 years ago, let alone the positive joy that many of Shakespeare's characters took in violence 400 years ago. It prompts an obvious question: why have attitudes changed so much?

On this point, Bessel is perhaps less convincing, offering not a causal analysis but a list of seven variables that he sees as relevant, ranging from revulsion at the bloodletting of the world wars to improved media reports on violence. He seems ambivalent about the increasingly influential argument that westerners are simply much less violent than they used to be. In the Stone Age, rates of violent death may have run as high as 10 to 15 per cent; in the 20th century – despite its wars, genocides, and nuclear weapons – they were just 1 to 2 per cent. Today, according to the World Health Organisation, the global rate is 0.7 per cent.

If rates of violence have really fallen so much, and attitudes to violence have really changed so much, it seems reasonable to seek causal connections between the two trends. At some points Bessel explicitly refuses to do this, but at others seems to implicitly accept a link. How else, after all, can we explain the appeal of 'Nordic Noir' crime fiction, full of rapes and murders, even though fewer than one Swede in 150,000 is murdered each year? The more removed we get from actual violence, the more we seem to worry about it.

Arguments will continue, but Bessel has produced a fascinating book. It seems that the western world, at least, is a kinder, gentler place than it used to be. **■**

Ian Morris is the author of *Foragers, Farmers, and Fossil Fuels: How Human Values Evolve* (Princeton University Press, 2015)



Behind every great man...

JOANNA BOURKE on a biography of Clementine Churchill that cannot quite escape the shadow of her famous husband

First Lady: The Life and Wars of Clementine Churchill

by *Sonia Purnell*
Aurum Press, 392 pages, £25



The 'great man' view of history hasn't had many devotees for a long time. Readers have become entranced by ordinary people who have turned out to be extraordinary in the ways in which they renegotiated their lives, resisted oppressive power structures and sought to forge better futures for themselves and their children. The exploits of 'great men' can seem trivial in comparison. But is the 'great woman' view of history any better?

Sonia Purnell wants us to reassess the importance of Clementine Churchill, wife of Winston. Purnell is an exhaustive researcher and eloquent storyteller. She traces Clementine's life from her insecure and unloved childhood to becoming the

wife of a man widely considered to be one of the greatest Britons of the 20th century. The book concludes with a sad story of nearly 13 years of widowhood.

This biography is partly a history of domesticity, and this is its great strength. Winston clearly loved his wife. More to the point, he needed her. Purnell shows convincingly how much 'great men' rely on the everyday emotional labour of the women closest to them. Clementine devoted her life to ministering to her husband's needs: she soothed his 'black dog' mood swings, talked him through dilemmas, hosted his dinner parties, and (most importantly) won over potential enemies with her abundant charm.

"Sonia Purnell is an exhaustive researcher and an eloquent storyteller"



Clementine Churchill with her husband, 1945. "Winston clearly loved his wife; more to the point, he needed her," says Joanna Bourke

Purnell wants to say much more than this, however: she wants Clementine to be recognised as a 'great woman'. Was it Clementine's charisma and dinner-party skills that persuaded the US to enter the war? I am not convinced. She was indisputably popular during the Second World War, but, in reality, the fact that she listened to the grievances of war-stressed citizens and made recommendations to politicians and civil servants did little to improve the morale of people bombed out of their homes.

Purnell claims that Clementine's achievements "would put many present-day government ministers, speechwriters, charity chiefs, ambassadors, activists, spin doctors, MPs and hospital managers

to shame". But she devotes only a few paragraphs to Clementine's appeal for the Red Cross Aid to Russia Fund, despite calling it her "greatest work (apart from Winston, of course)".

More interesting, though, is what this look at Britain's 'first lady' tells us about the role of leaders' wives in the UK compared to in the US. Purnell also has an elegantly understated way of using Clementine to expose us to sides of Winston that are often neglected, such as his emotional neediness and insecurity. But isn't that just a way of returning us to the 'great man' view of history? **11**

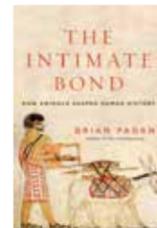
Joanna Bourke is the author of *The Story of Pain* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

Tooth and claw

HELEN COWIE rates a look at the crucial role of animals in human history, from food and farming to work and worship

The Intimate Bond: How Animals Shaped Human History

by *Brian Fagan*
Bloomsbury, 308 pages, £18.99



"Cursed be the pesky cat that urinated over this book during the night." So wrote a monk in Deventer in c1420 upon discovering that his illustrated manuscript had been damaged by the monastery's resident feline. To underline the point, he drew hands pointing at the

stain and sketched a picture of the offending creature alongside.

The cat is just one rather amusing example of man's often close relationship with other animals, the subject of Brian Fagan's wide-ranging and insightful book. By turns worshipped, sacrificed, worked, hunted, farmed, ridden, and consumed by humans, animals have played a crucial role in history. They have facilitated trade, spurred settlement and migration and even triggered the rise and fall of civilisations.

Focusing on eight species – dogs, pigs, sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys, horses and camels – Fagan traces changing attitudes

towards, and treatment of, animals from the Ice Age to the present day, showing how their domestication and use undergirded human achievements. The book features a large cast of humans and animals, from the donkeys buried in the tomb of an Egyptian pharaoh to Obaysch, the hippopotamus famously exhibited in London Zoo from 1850.

Some of the most illuminating sections draw upon recent archaeological evidence to reveal how and when particular species were domesticated and what they meant to their human owners. Mummified cats, dog bones and cuneiform tablets offer fascinating glimpses into human-animal relationships in the ancient world.

Inevitably such an expansive study contains significant omissions. The discussion of animals in the modern period forms a comparatively short proportion of the book and is largely

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Anglocentric in its focus. There is also minimal coverage of the Americas, where the domestication of the llama in Peru might have provided an interesting counterpoint to that of the camel in Africa and Asia, and where the sudden influx of species following the Spanish conquest had a major ecological effect on the continent's subsequent development.

Overall, however, *The Intimate Bond* is a valuable and highly readable overview of the contribution that animals have made to human history. Loved, feared, abused and exploited, they deserve their place in the history books and are well served by this engaging and, at times, moving account. **11**

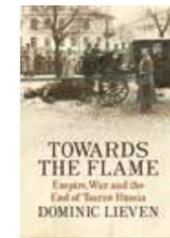
Helen Cowie is lecturer in early modern history at the University of York and author of *Exhibiting Animals in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

Balance of power

ANTHONY HEYWOOD admires a new take on Russia's role in the First World War by one of the leading voices in the field

Towards the Flame: Empire, War and the End of Tsarist Russia

by *Dominic Lieven*
Allen Lane, 448 pages, £25



On the eve of the First World War, as we all know so well, Europe's five imperial 'great powers' were aligned in two hostile camps: the German-Austro-Hungarian alliance, countered by the looser entente of Britain, France and Russia. But imagine instead that in 1914 Russia's tsar, Nicholas II, heeded the urgent advice of former interior minister Durnovo to realign Russia with Germany, abandoning the Franco-Russian alliance and Anglo-Russian accord.

That change would have left France and Britain facing the daunting combination of Germany, Austria-Hungary and Russia, together with countries such as Italy. What chance in that scenario that the brutal murders in Sarajevo in June 1914 would spark European war? What chance too that Germany would fulfil Whitehall's nightmare of establishing economic and political hegemony over western and central Europe?

The point is not the likelihood of such a change or counterfactual speculation: it is simply to stress the importance of imperial Russia in the European balance of power on the eve of the First World War – a point all too often neglected by western historians.

To highlight and analyse that fundamental reality, and pursue it through the war to the aftermath, is the overarching aim of this book from one of Britain's foremost historians of tsarist Russia. Lieven first addressed Russia's role in a book published in 1983, several years before *glasnost* and the opening of the Russian archives to scholars. This new study, then, has been keenly anticipated. Does Lieven's trawl of these archives

transform the old debate about the war's origins and, especially, Russia's role in the July Crisis of 1914 that led to war?

The short answer is no. The archival sources add depth, colour and authority, but you will not find a radically different interpretation of late imperial Russia's place in Europe and the world than in Lieven's magisterial *Empire* (Yale, 2002). For him, as before, Russia was not an aggressor in the July Crisis. To use the terms of Josh Sanborn's recent article on Russian imperialism in *Revolutionary Russia*, Lieven's Russian government was 'proud but anxious'. Lieven is thus firmly at odds with two recent critical assessments of Russia: Sean McMeekin's *July 1914: Countdown to War* (Icon Books) and Christopher Clark's *The Sleepwalkers* (Allen Lane, both 2013). To again employ Sanborn's phrasing, McMeekin's Russia was aggressively 'annexationist' while Clark's Russia was an 'adventurist sleepwalker' towards war. I'd suggest reading all three for a full sense of the debate.

Despite its subtitle, Lieven's book gives relatively little attention to the war itself, albeit in a characteristically thoughtful and challenging way. But this is excellent: closely argued and beautifully written. It is a must-read for anyone interested in the origins of the First World War. **11**

Anthony Heywood is chair in history at the University of Aberdeen



A 1914 poster calling for aid for Russian war victims

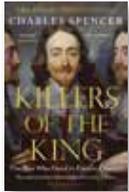


PAPERBACKS

Killers of the King: The Men who Dared to Execute Charles I

by Charles Spencer

Bloomsbury, 352 pages, £8.99



On a cold day in January 1649, a condemned man named Charles Stuart was led out to face his executioner.

How many men would have to hang to outweigh that one death? This riveting book tells the story of the hideous Restoration manhunt for the 'regicides': the men who had tried and condemned the king.

First to die in 1660 was Thomas Harrison, brave and unrepentant. He was dragged from Newgate Prison to Charing Cross, the place of execution, through a hostile crowd. "Where is your cause now?" asked one bystander. "Here it is," Harrison said, "and I go to seal it with my blood." Either he or the source, Edmund Ludlow, based this heroic Puritan martyrdom on the typical Protestant demeanour depicted by the 16th-century historian John Foxe in his *Acts and Monuments*, the record of the burnings under Mary Tudor.

Like them, Harrison had to suffer: hanged but cut down alive, he had his genitals cut off and was held down while a red-hot iron was driven into his belly. A fighter to the last, he managed to punch his executioner while his innards were still being incinerated. The exasperated executioner finished him off immediately. Not even the dead were safe in their graves: the tombs of three regicides were broken open and the rotting bodies hanged.

This is a fast-paced and often moving history, but its use of

sources is troubling. Spencer is inclined to lean on the account of Edmund Ludlow, one of the regicides who managed to flee to Europe, trying thereafter to keep the 'good old cause' alive by writing an immense memoir. When it was printed in 1698–99, religion was all but edited out. Recently, however, the discovery of the original manuscript has prompted an important reassessment of the document.

This attractive story could do with some interrogation, then, but it is also worth retelling for a new generation. Spencer makes it a gripping and gruesome tale.

Diane Purkiss is the author of *The English Civil War: A People's History* (HarperPress, 2006)

Plants: From Roots to Riches

by Kathy Willis and Carolyn Fry
John Murray, 368 pages, £9.99



First came the BBC Radio 4 series and glossy hardback – now here's the paperback edition of this

history of plants, which like all good botanical field guides can

be easily carried in a pocket. Well illustrated and timely, this Kew-centric account places the scientific work of the institution firmly within its historical context.

Willis and Fry depict Kew as a giant clearing house from which our botanical knowledge has been created and disseminated since 1759. Plants, we are reminded, are not only the basis of the food chain but provide shelter, fuel, medicines and a vast array of economically important goods.

As well as acting as a general introduction to the history of botany via Kew, the book is interspersed with interesting nuggets. For example, who knew that the giant Amazonian water lily named after Queen Victoria smells of pineapples when it first flowers, or that one-time director of Kew and friend of Charles Darwin, Joseph Hooker, once had a childhood ambition of killing penguins?

There are some limitations, including the repetitive nature of some of the chapters, and the complex colonial relationship of Kew with the world is also only alluded to in passing. However, at a time when Kew is under threat from funding cuts, this work helps highlight its essential role in relation to

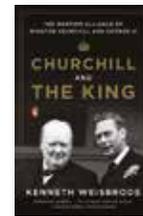
botany – once the most exulted of all natural philosophies.

Clare Hickman is research fellow in medical history and humanities at King's College London

Churchill and the King: The Wartime Alliance of Winston Churchill and George VI

by Kenneth Weisbrode

Penguin, 224 pages, £11.99

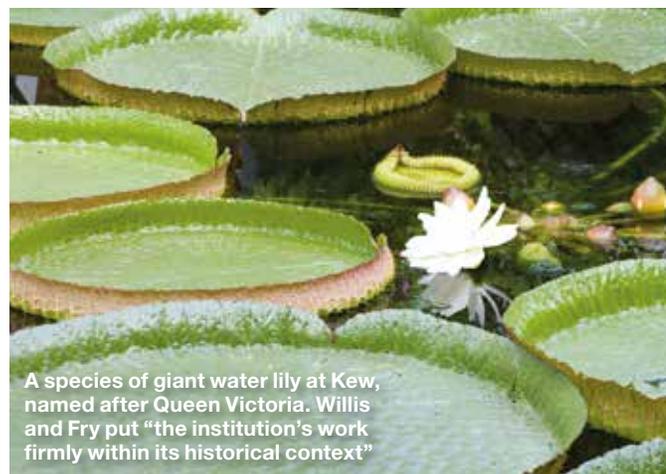


The hugely successful 2010 historical film *The King's Speech* presented a moving portrait of George VI's

struggle to overcome a speech impediment during the run-up to the Second World War. But in suggesting that the king and Winston Churchill were essentially on the same side over such critical issues as the abdication of Edward VIII and prime minister Herbert Asquith's policy of appeasement towards Germany, the film was inaccurate.

In reality, the king and royal family revered Chamberlain and, like most mainstream opinion in the 1930s, disliked and distrusted Churchill. The merit of Kenneth Weisbrode's short and perceptive book is to demonstrate how this inauspicious start was transformed into a highly successful wartime alliance. Both men, he concludes, had a highly developed sense of duty to the nation, and understood that they needed each other both for it, and for themselves, to survive.

David Stafford is the author of several books including *Ten Days to D-Day: Countdown to the Liberation of Europe* (Little, Brown, 2004)



A species of giant water lily at Kew, named after Queen Victoria. Willis and Fry put "the institution's work firmly within its historical context"

GAP PHOTOS



A 19th-century depiction of Nat Love, the African-American cowboy who stars in Joe R Lansdale's "hugely engaging" novel

FICTION

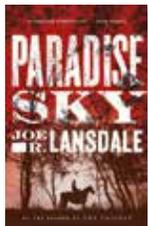
The wild wild west

NICK RENNISON on a darkly comic novel following a former slave as he negotiates the perils of the American frontier

Paradise Sky

by Joe R Lansdale

Mulholland, 416 pages, £14.99



Born a slave but emancipated, like millions of others, after the American Civil War, Nat Love is not long free when he is threatened with lynching after taking

one look too many at a white man's wife. Fleeing his home in east Texas, he embarks on a career that will make him a legendary figure in the American west.

A dangerous but civilised mentor trains him in the arts of shooting, riding and reading and, after this father figure dies, Nat joins the army. As a so-called 'buffalo soldier', he fights in a desperate skirmish with Apache warriors who kill all but one of his comrades before decamping into the night.

The two survivors decide they have had enough of military life and head north to the wild town of Deadwood. There Nat wins a sharpshooting contest, pals up with Wild Bill Hickok after taking his side in a sudden gunfight,

and falls in love with a beautiful girl he meets one night while out catching rats.

All the while he is being tracked by the man whose wife he once ogled. The semi-deranged Ruggert has barely survived his own encounter with the Apaches but turns up in Deadwood still determined to make the young black man pay for letting his eyes stray towards a white woman. He recruits a gang of desperadoes and plans his revenge. Further horrors await Nat before he can finally settle his account with Ruggert, including torture at the hands of his enemies and a spell working as a deputy marshal for the 'Hanging Judge' Isaac Parker.

Loosely based on the life of the real Nat Love, often said to be the original version of the dime-novel hero known as 'Deadwood Dick', this is a hugely engaging read. Over many years as a bestselling crime writer, Joe R Lansdale has developed a style all his own. Blackly humorous, it's ideally suited to the telling of the tall tales of the Old West which fill the pages of *Paradise Sky*. **T**

Nick Rennison is the author of *Carver's Quest* (Corvus, 2013)

THREE MORE EPICS OF THE AMERICAN WEST

Butcher's Crossing

John Williams (1960)



Will Andrews, a young man weary of the civilisation of Boston and Harvard, rides into a one-horse town in search of experiences that he believes will bring him closer to his true self. In joining a buffalo hunt into the wilderness, he learns just how unforgiving nature can be. Written by the author of the recently rediscovered 1965 US classic *Stoner*, this is a powerful portrait of men driven to the limits of physical and mental endurance.

Little Big Man

Thomas Berger (1964)



Jack Crabb was born white but raised by the Cheyenne. In Berger's picaresque novel, he looks back, at the age of 111, on his life as an Indian scout, his encounters with the likes of Wyatt Earp and Wild Bill Hickok and his experiences as the sole white survivor of the battle of the Little Bighorn. Thomas Berger combines historical accuracy with riotous burlesque in this classic of Western fiction, made into a memorable film starring Dustin Hoffman as Jack.

Blood Meridian

Cormac McCarthy (1985)



A teenager, known only as 'the kid', survives an Apache massacre to ride the frontier between the United States and Mexico with a band of scalp-hunters, led by the terrifying figure of Judge Holden, on a grand orgy of slaughter. In Cormac McCarthy's uncompromisingly brutal vision, the American west is divested of any kind of mythology or heroism and depicted instead as an inferno of violence in which his characters have to kill or be killed.