We have been suffering – it is true to say that we are still suffering and shall suffer for no little time – from the most devastating trade depression in our recorded history. We have been forced from the Gold Standard, so it seems to me, and others not unworthy of a public hearing, because of the insufficiency of money in the hands of consumers. Very well. I suggest to you that our contemporary anxieties are not entirely vested in the question of balance of payment, that is at least so far as current account may be concerned, and I put it to you that certain persons, who should perhaps have known better, have been responsible for unhappy, indeed catastrophic capital movements through a reckless and inadmissible lending policy.

*The Acceptance World*; from Widmerpool’s speech at the Le Bas Old Boys’ Dinner
From the Secretary’s Desk

Thinking about these financially-challenged times – as the Trustees have had to in recent months – reminds me of Widmerpool’s impenetrable speech at the Le Bas Old Boys’ dinner in *AW*.

One remembers Widmerpool’s speech as being interminably long – doubtless the effect AP wished to create – whereas in fact the whole section, including Jenkins’s narration, is a mere five pages.

As we all know Widmerpool actually says very little; the whole speech is a masterpiece of intricate verbiage which appears to say much but in truth says nothing. The quote on the front page is the most cogent passage.

Intricate, meaningless and self-important seems to be today’s public perception of most politicians, financiers and tycoons. In AP’s day society was much more deferential towards the great and the good although the Depression of the 1930s, when Widmerpool’s speech is made, was a time when that reverence began to break down.

Intricacy though is not misplaced. Yes AP is using it for comic effect. But the world of finance, banking and economics is nothing if not complex – as is being demonstrated by all the cross-currents of the present European financial and political turmoil. Every solution seems to be a “worst case scenario”, supported by the few and apparently violently opposed by the many.

Through all of this the Trustees have to try navigating the Society safely and you’ll see in this issue some of the actions we are taking to try to trim the sails – and some of the things you can do to assist.

Stormy seas are inevitable. Let’s all work to ensure our safe passage is too.
It seems that everywhere is in recession, prices are rising faster than income and savings rates have collapsed. The Society is not immune from this and our finances are being stretched. Our aim in this article is to report on the current situation, what the Trustees are doing to manage it and what you, the members, can do to help us.

The Background

First of all let’s look at some of the things which are affecting the Society’s finances:

1. Costs are generally rising and many costs, eg. printing, postage, room hire and labour charges, appear to be increasing faster than inflation generally.

2. What will probably hurt us most is this year’s increase in UK postage charges. UK inland second class postage increased by around 40% overnight and some overseas charges increased even more; further draconian rises are predicted. When the Hon. Secretary reported on this to the March Trustees’ Meeting it was estimated that if we took no action the cost of mailing each Newsletter issue would increase by £100 this year. That’s a 30% increase.

3. Increasingly there are smaller, or even no, discounts on services for charitable organisations and people are reluctant to commit pricing very far in advance. Moreover not everyone seems to be trying to contain their price rises despite the downturn in business.

4. Wherever we can we make use of discounts for buying in bulk, but this is not always possible or sensible. Even the glue on envelopes has a finite shelf-life!

5. As everyone will be aware the returns on investments and savings are currently very low and have been for some years. This means that while we have reserves they don’t generate much in the way of useful income or growth.

6. Keep in mind too that essentially all the Society’s work is performed voluntarily – not just by the Trustees and Officers, but also by other professionals who give their time pro bono (or at greatly reduced rates).

Actions

So what are we doing about all this? The Trustees have been considering a number of ideas for some time and these largely came together at our March meeting. Some are short-term actions and some will take longer to come to fruition.

1. First of all, as you will notice, we are printing the Newsletter on slightly lighter-weight paper. While the heavier paper does give a higher quality product the slightly lighter paper is estimated to save us around £50 per issue in postage charges (so the cost will be going up by only £50 and not £100). That’s almost £1 per member per year saved.

2. The Trustees again considered the possibility of emailing the Newsletter to members. However not all members have email and a dual-media publication would reduce the print run and make it less viable (an even smaller print run means higher
comparative costs). The feedback you give us is that a printed Newsletter is valued and you like having it drop through your letterbox – we certainly do! – it feels like value for money. The printed Newsletter is also a useful marketing tool to give prospective members. Consequently the Trustees agreed that both the Newsletter and Secret Harmonies will remain printed publications for the foreseeable future, although this will continue to be reviewed from time to time.

3. We will also be looking very closely at the number of “free” Newsletters and Secret Harmonies we mail out and the number of spare copies we print. If you’re reading this and you’re not a member this may be your last copy! So join now!

4. All the merchandise prices have been reviewed to reflect the increased UK postage rates. The changes take effect from this Newsletter.

5. Wherever we can we will be using email to keep in contact with members. Those of you with email should expect to see subscription reminders, acknowledgements, event announcements etc. appearing in your email rather than through your letterbox – please keep an eye on your email box. Those who don’t have email will, of course, still receive postal communications. No-one should lose out!

6. We are now keeping few Newsletter printed back numbers. Although this will not produce a direct saving, we have a large amount of dead Newsletter stock for which there is no demand and which it is increasingly uneconomic to post. All the Newsletters will continue to be available on the website (each issue is posted a few months after publication) and copies can always be made available as a PDF file (or photocopy) for a small donation.

7. Needless to say the Trustees are reviewing subscription rates in the light of the 2012 accounts. Early indications are that we can maintain subscriptions at the current level this year but an increase may well become inevitable in 2013. Rest assured any increases will be kept to the absolute minimum.

8. A set of much longer term actions revolves around the Merchandise Office. As you will recall we have asked for a volunteer to take on the Merchandise Office from Graham & Dorothy Davie. (Graham and Dorothy will continue to be the Membership Officers.) No-one has come forward. It has therefore been decided that the Merchandise Office will revert to the Hon. Secretary. While this is in some ways a retrograde step it is also a positive one as it will enable us to restart the work to develop the online shop. This will also enable us to put memberships online – both new membership sign-ups and renewals – and to consolidate credit card/PayPal transactions into a single facility. (Yes, paper will remain an option!) Although this latter may turn out slightly more expensive in bank charges, having memberships and merchandise online will hopefully increase membership and sales and reduce postage costs further, as well as simplifying the admin for both the Hon. Secretary and the Membership Office. This will not happen overnight as it is a significant investment of time and money (for professional IT skills). At the end of all this work we should
have a simpler, and less space intensive, set-up to hand over to a willing volunteer. Watch this space!

**Things You Can Do To Help**

So what can you, our members, do to help us? Here are eleven things you can do to help the Society; most of you should be able to do some of them.

1. Please keep renewing your membership. And please do so promptly. Every reminder letter we have to send out costs on average about £1 in postage and stationery.

2. UK members can also help us by paying subscriptions by bankers’ standing order. This alleviates postage and credit card charges. Contact us if you need a Standing Order form or details.

3. UK taxpayers (and that includes non-UK nationals who have UK taxed investments) can help by giving us a Gift Aid declaration. This enables the Society to reclaim the basic rate tax paid on your subscription and any donations – this is currently worth 25p for every £1 you pay us. We will be contacting all UK members who do not have a Gift Aid declaration in place and asking you to sign the appropriate form – please do so if you can, it costs you nothing!

4. In the unlikely event that you decide not to continue your membership, please tell us so we don’t keep mailing you reminders.

5. If you are in the UK and writing to us and you want a posted reply, then a stamped addressed envelope is always appreciated.

6. Buy Society merchandise. We don’t aim to make big profits from merchandise but every little helps!

7. Currently we have email addresses for about 75% of members. If you have email and think we may not have your current email address, please tell us – a quick email to secretary@anthonypowell.org is all it needs. And if you change your email address, or postal address, please tell us! You can also follow the Society on Facebook. All this will enable us to avoid unnecessary postage costs.

8. If you are buying online, and you can do so, please buy through the links to Amazon.com and Amazon.co.uk on the Society’s website. Doing this provides the Society with a small commission. It isn’t a lot, but again every little helps.

9. Volunteer! We still need someone to organise events in the UK and this is now even more imperative with the Hon. Secretary taking back the Merchandise Office. A webmaster and a conference organiser are also needed.

10. Encourage your friends and like-minded enthusiasts to join the Society. Anyone who needs a supply of Membership Leaflets or free Society bookmarks, please get in touch.

11. Finally, you can beat any subscription increases, and save us postage and admin, by taking advantage of the “5 years for the price of 4” membership offer.

These are challenging times for everyone, but if we can work together we can survive and grow through them.
At Last is the fifth, and said by its author to be the last, of his series of novels about Patrick Melrose. But he has said that before and has nevertheless kept on writing. For example, in an interview he once explained that he wrote the first draft of Mother’s Milk about what he intended to be another character. When he reread it, however, he realized that the hero was still Patrick Melrose, and it was rewritten to become the fourth novel in the series. Some reviewers have also noted that his two non-Melrose novels had some very Melrosian overtones. For example, On the Edge (1998) is a satire in which several English characters visit a New Age resort on the US West Coast for a consciousness expansion/enhancement session. More than one of the characters in this novel shares Patrick’s age, nationality, class and ironic outlook and could have easily been written in as Patrick himself. In the other novel, A Clue to the Exit (2000), about a writer (Charlie Fairburn) who is informed of his imminent death from a seemingly incurable disease, Patrick Melrose does in fact make a cameo appearance in the quoted excerpts from the novel-within-a-novel that Fairburn is writing as his last work.

Because the Melrose novels form a series of books extending from Patrick’s childhood to his middle age, they have inevitably been compared to Powell’s Dance. There are, it should be said from the outset, some fairly basic differences.

While Patrick is the hero of the novels, he is not the narrator. Much of the text is written from Patrick’s point of view but some sections (especially in Mother’s Milk and At Last) contain extensive passages written from other characters’ perspectives. And the story of the novels is about Patrick and his family, unlike Dance where Nick Jenkins is less the subject than an observer. The Melrose novels also contain fewer references to the times in which they occur than do the Dance novels. Finally, the central theme of the books is the trauma of child abuse suffered by Patrick at the hands of his sadistic upper class English father and the neglect inflicted on him by his wealthy American mother, hardly something that would seem to interest Powell or his narrator.
Because, however, Patrick and St Aubyn share the ironic outlook of Nick Jenkins and Powell (in St Aubyn’s case, often in even more extreme and unexpectedly comic forms), the books avoid becoming the usual victimization or dysfunctional family saga and exhibit a strong Powellian aura. Moreover, St Aubyn uses extended set pieces that bring the characters together to describe the action at a particular point of time in much the same way Powell does. Except for Mother’s Milk, the action in the novels all occurs in a single day or two, much the same as happens in A Buyers Market and The Soldiers Art. At Last is the description of the funeral of Patrick’s mother, Some Hope takes place over a weekend involving a country house party in the South of England, Bad News describes a two-day visit by Patrick to New York to collect his father’s ashes and Never Mind describes one day during a summer vacation in France. Mother’s Milk consists of a series of four sections describing from different characters’ perspectives the events of Patrick’s holidays each summer over a four-year period from 2000 to 2003.

The simultaneous publication of all five novels in the US, followed by the April republication of all five in the UK in individual uniform paperback editions, make it appropriate to consider them as a complete work. Never Mind sets out Patrick’s childhood which begins with 5-year old Patrick enjoying seemingly idyllic happiness on his summer holiday at the villa in the South of France bought with his mother’s inherited money. His father, David, is an upper class Englishman but seems to have inherited nothing from his family except his arrogance and cruelty. He married Patrick’s mother, Eleanor, more for her inherited American fortune, which has survived but dwindled into its fourth generation, than for the love of which both he and she seem incapable. Her attraction to David seems to be like a snake for a mongoose. He was trained as a physician but no longer needs to practice. Signs of cruelty appear in the early pages and culminate in his rape of Patrick halfway through.

In Bad News it is 1982 and Patrick is 22. He travels to New York to collect his father’s ashes. This novel is even darker than Never Mind as Patrick, while relieved by his father’s death, in is the grip of a drug and alcohol habit that seems to include every variety of addictive substance known to man. In Some Hope, eight years later, Patrick is studying to be a barrister and has brought his substance abuse problem under some degree of control. He has also developed some normal relationships with friends of both sexes. These are revealed in the course of a weekend party attended by Princess Margaret – depicted as an immature, self-centered, snobbish bore – and a legion of other guests from the margins of the English upper classes that provide ample opportunities for St Aubyn’s satire.

In Mother’s Milk, Patrick’s inheritance diminishes year by year as his mother hands over her assets, including the estate in France, to an Irish New Age charlatan named (appropriately) Seamus Dourke. Patrick, now in his early 40s, has become a barrister living in London with his wife, Mary, and two young sons. Mary is insecure and overly attentive to her younger son, while ignoring Patrick, who is pursuing a number of affairs that he blames on her inattention, while she blames her obsessive attachment to her son on his infidelity, and so on. His substance abuse problem has resolved itself into alcoholism. By the end of the book his alcoholism explodes on a vacation trip to the US to visit members of his mother’s
Anthony Powell Society Newsletter #47

insufferable family as an alternative to the previously accustomed trips to France.¹

In the final novel, *At Last*, Patrick and Mary are living separately but still married after his treatment in the suicide observation unit at the depression wing of a London hospital. He is still a barrister but earns only enough to support his family in modest London housing, with his own relegation to a bed-sit. His mother’s funeral, organized by Mary, brings together most of the leading characters from the previous novels who serve to remind Patrick of the miserable life which he has somehow survived. He withstands various temptations to drugs, drink, and infidelity and at the end seems to have controlled if not conquered his demons. Since, however, one cannot conceive of a Patrick Melrose novel with an entirely happy ending, there seems at least the possibility that he may yet lose that tenuous control in the future. In which case, we might well enjoy (if that’s the right word in this instance) another sequel or at least a coda to the series.

The most Powellian of the novels are probably *Some Hope* and *At Last*, although parts of *Mother’s Milk* would also be a contender.² These three are less dark and depressing than the first two (*Never Mind* and *Bad News*). One US reviewer has compared the funeral of Eleanor Melrose that takes up the whole of *At Last* to the Akworth-Cutts wedding in *Hearing Secret Harmonies* since it constitutes a roll call of the surviving characters from the earlier novels [James Wood, “Noble Savages,” *New Yorker*, 27 February 2012]. But one could make the same comparison to the opera performance in *Temporary Kings*, the funeral of Erridge in *Books Do Furnish a Room* or the Victory Thanksgiving Service and diplomatic reception in *The Military Philosophers*, and so on back through the *Dance* novels. Perhaps the Akworth-Cutts wedding is more like the funeral in *At Last* than are earlier *Dance* set pieces if only because they are both the last such gatherings to occur in each series.

It is equally true that the weekend country house party in *Some Hope* could be compared to any number of gatherings in the *Dance* novels such as parties at Lady Molly’s, Mrs Foxe’s reception after Moreland’s concert, the “Seven Deadly Sins” weekend at Stourwater in *The Kindly Ones*, the “night of the three parties” in *A Buyer’s Market* and the Café Royal dinner in *The Soldier’s Art*. St Aubyn and Powell use these set pieces in much the same way, and even where a single event does not take up the whole novel, as in *Mother’s Milk*, they afford the opportunity for reopening, resolving or continuing action begun, or revisiting characters introduced in earlier books or chapters.

*Bad News* and *Never Mind* are, on the other hand, so dark that whatever comic relief and irony manage to escape from the story are at risk of getting lost in the gloom. Nicholas Pratt and Victor Eisen, friends of David Melrose, provide most of the comedy in *Never Mind*, while Patrick’s ironic reactions to his father’s death somewhat lighten the pages of *Bad News* as well as all succeeding novels. Even the dreariest scenes are capable, however, of engendering some degree of irony. For example, just after his horrific beating and rape of Patrick, David Melrose thinks to himself that he may have pushed his disdain for middle-class prudery too far. Even at the bar of the Cavalry and Guards Club one couldn’t boast about pedophilic, homosexual incest with any confidence of a favorable reception. Who could he tell that he had raped
his five-year-old son? He could not think of a single person who would not prefer to change the subject – and some far worse than that. The experience itself had been brutish but not altogether nasty.

[Never Mind, 55]

Later in that novel, after his mother has allowed David to bully her into withholding any consolation from the distraught Patrick, she makes out a check to her favorite charity, the Save the Children Fund [Never Mind, 72]. In Bad News [194], one of his father’s friends remarks to Patrick, in an attempt to speak well of the dead, that he never knew Patrick’s father to lose his appetite, to which Patrick replies, “No, it was the one thing about him that was reliable”. When the mortician’s assistant opens his father’s coffin for identification, Patrick’s reaction is recorded with the irony that is typical of his attitude whenever his dead father is mentioned:

They had covered the body with tissue paper. It lay in the coffin like a present some one had put down halfway through unwrapping. ‘It’s dad,’ muttered Patrick incredulously, clasping his hands together and turning to an imaginary friend. ‘You shouldn’t have!’

After several pages in which Patrick ingests and injects overdoses of cocaine, heroin, amphetamines and tranquilizers, not to mention several strong alcoholic cocktails, he has an attack of nausea in which he recognized traces of last night’s dinner and, with his stomach already empty, knew that he would soon be bringing up that sour yellow bile which gave vomiting its bad name.

St Aubyn also shares Powell’s ability to build irony into dialogue as another means of relieving tension. These dialogues are most frequent in the dinner party in Never Mind, the country house weekend in Some Hope (which is almost entirely made up of such dialogues), and the reception after his mother’s funereal in At Last. They are also scattered throughout Mother’s Milk. One of the best of these is the scene in that novel [181-85] where Seamus comes to greet Patrick at the French villa that Patrick’s mother is gradually making over to Seamus’s control. Patrick has learned that Seamus intends to house some of his staff in the villa where Patrick’s family had expected to spend their holiday. He begins by offering Seamus a coffee, which Seamus declines. Patrick then responds:

“Well, I hope you don’t mind if I go ahead and abuse some caffeine without you”.

“Be my guest,” said Seamus. “Is that what I am?” asked Patrick, like a greyhound out of the slips. “Or are you in fact my guest this time of the year? That’s the crux of the matter. You know the terms of my mother’s gift included letting us have the house for August, and we’re not going to put up with having your friends billeted on us”.

“Well, now, ‘terms’ is a very legalistic way of putting it,” said Seamus. “There’s nothing in writing about the Foundation providing you with a free holiday. I have a genuine sympathy for the trouble you’ve had in accepting your mother’s wishes. That’s why I’ve been prepared to put up with a lot of negativity from your side”.

“We’re not discussing the trouble I’ve had with my mother’s wishes, but the trouble you’re having with them. Let’s not stray from the subject”.

""
“They’re inseparable”.
“Everything looks inseparable to a moron”.
“There’s no need to get personal. They’re inseparable because they both depend on knowing what Eleanor wanted”.
“It’s obvious what she wanted. What isn’t clear is whether you can accept the part that doesn’t suit you”.
“Well, I have a more global vision than you, Patrick. I see the problem in holistic terms. I think we should all do a solution together … Perhaps we could do a ritual expressing what we bring to this community and what we expect to take from it”.

And so on for three more pages. Despite Patrick’s eloquence and irony, Seamus (who manages to sound Irish even without the help of an accent) prevails as the result of Eleanor’s spineless senility (or senile spinelessness) and she disinherits Patrick from even the summer holidays at the villa. As soon as Eleanor has signed everything over to him, Seamus dumps her out as well, forcing her to return penniless to England where she is placed in a nursing home to live out what is left of her life.

The “consciousness” sessions that Seamus offers through his New Age “Transpersonal Foundation” are part of a theme that runs throughout the Melrose novels in much the same way that the charismatic occultism of Dr Trelawny, Mrs Erdleigh and Scorp Murtlock keeps cropping up in the Dance novels.
Consciousness is the special subject of Victor Eisen, the social-climbing philosophy don who is David Melrose’s token Jewish “friend”. He is working on a psychobabble text book in Never Mind and has become a guest professor at Columbia when Patrick visits his wife Anne in Bad News. Unlike David’s other friends, Victor and Anne seem to see through him after observing his behavior toward his wife and child at the villa in France. Patrick’s best friend (and former fellow drug addict) is Johnny Hall, in the later novels a practicing psychoanalyst and a fairly solid source of support on which Patrick can depend. In Mother’s Milk, however, the New Age consciousness quack Seamus has no redeeming features. While Seamus lacks the charisma of Dr Trelawny and Scorp Murtlock, he is nevertheless possessed of their skill at manipulating his followers by other means. In Eleanor’s case, he plays on her guilt at possessing a fortune she did nothing to earn and on her weakness for spending it on good works. With a sap like Eleanor, who needs charisma? (as Patrick himself might have put it). In At Last [69], Patrick’s wife has an affair with a lugubrious Cambridge philosophy don named Erasmus Price who has written a book entitled None the Wiser: Developments in the Philosophy of Consciousness. Patrick discovers their liaison when he sees Price’s book by her bedside, concluding that she wouldn’t “be reading that book unless [she] was having an affair with the author”. Mary realized with vague disgust that [Patrick] was pleased to have the huge weight of his infidelity alleviated by her trivial contribution to the other side of the scale.

Victor Eisen has a near death experience which he feels compelled to describe in terms of his consciousness theory, and Patrick delivers drunken lectures on consciousness to Mary. Even his six-year-old son Thomas begins to spout consciousness jargon.

This near obsession with consciousness is not confined to St Aubyn’s Melrose
novels. In *A Clue to the Exit* the characters in the novel-within-the-novel (including Patrick, as well as Crystal who first appeared in *On the Edge*) meet on a train from Oxford where they have been attending a consciousness conference. In *On the Edge*, St Aubyn does for Los Angeles and the California consciousness “industry” what Evelyn Waugh 50 years earlier had done for that same city and its film and mortician industries. Here’s how one of the British characters participating in a consciousness seminar describes Los Angeles:

One day the whole world was going to look like Los Angeles, he decided, not a city or the absence of a city, but ruined countryside, with houses squeezed between highways which never tired of whispering the lie that it was more interesting to go somewhere than be here. The entire westward move of American history seemed to have piled up on the beach, and the descendants of wagon-crazed pioneers, refusing to accept completely the restraint of the world’s widest ocean, frantically patrolled the edge of the West, like lemmings in therapy. [*On the Edge*, 77-78]

St. Aubyn continues his satirization of America (more Waugh than Powell) in the “August 2003” section of *Mother’s Milk*. Having been ousted from the villa in France, Patrick takes the family for a holiday in the New England homes of his mother’s family. When they arrive in New York for a stopover, the hotel has no room service so they have to forage in a grocery:

I couldn’t find any oats that taste of oats or apples that taste of apples, only oats that taste of apples. And cinnamon to blend with the toothpaste. A less sober man might end up brushing his teeth with oats, or having a bowl of cinnamon for breakfast – without noticing … If there aren’t any additives they boast about that too. I saw a packet of camomile tea that said “Caffeine Free”. Why would camomile have any caffeine in it? [*Mother’s Milk*, 204]

When the family stays with Aunt Nancy in Connecticut, Patrick consumes too much of the Maker’s Mark bourbon from the drinks tray, leaving a gap in the bottle too large to be ignored:

The logical thing to do was to take the bottle upstairs and pour the rest of it into the depleted bottle hidden in his rucksack, and then nip into town and buy another one for Nancy’s drinks table. He would of course have to make convincing inroads into the new bottle so that it resembled the old bottle before he had almost finished it … [The liquor store] had three sizes of Maker’s Mark. Not knowing which one he was supposed to replace, Patrick bought all three… Practically anything was less complicated than being a successful alcoholic. [*Mother’s Milk*, 227, 229]

The importance of irony, such as that evidenced in the foregoing quotations, is something on which the characters of the novels also themselves offer comment. In *At Last* [60-61] Patrick confesses to his former mistress Julia that irony
is the hardest addiction of all … Forget heroin. Just try giving up irony, that deep-down need to mean two things at once, to be in two places at once, not to be there for the catastrophe of a fixed meaning.

When Julia pleads with him at least “to leave her a little sarcasm.” Patrick responds, “Sarcasm doesn’t count. It means only one thing: contempt”. In Never Mind [71], the American Anne Eisen is disturbed to recall, after the stressful dinner party at the Melroses, having herself been lured into making an ironic reference to the showers at Auschwitz:

She felt she had been perverted by the slick and lazy English manners, the craving for the prophylactic of irony, the terrible fear of being ‘a bore’, and the boredom of the ways they relentlessly and narrowly evaded this fate.

Both St Aubyn and Powell are careful to set their extended stories in actual time by inserting markers in the text that identify the amount of time that has passed from one novel to the next. In both cases they track the ages of the characters as the story progresses. St Aubyn also makes frequent use of Powell’s device of mentioning a song, book, or painting (or often, in St Aubyn’s case, a film) which may provide a reference point to fix in place the current or an earlier time or may have some less serious purpose. In At Last, Gershwin’s I Got Plenty of Nuthin’ from Porgy and Bess, identified in an earlier novel as one of Eleanor’s favorite songs, is played at her funeral, the words quoted at length so as to impress on the reader’s mind their ironic applicability to Patrick’s disinheritance. When her coffin is dispatched to the furnace, Frank Sinatra’s voice is heard singing, with equal irony, Fly Me To the Moon. In both cases the performance of these songs is followed by the thoughts their quoted lyrics evoke in the minds of various characters who are present at the funeral. In Some Hope, there is a subplot involving the authentication of a painting as an original by Poussin, which may be intended as a playful allusion to Dance.

St Aubyn fabricates satirical book titles in a few instances that remind one of Powell’s much more extensive use of this device. For example, Victor Eisen writes two books on consciousness theory: Thinking, Knowing and Judging and Being, Knowing and Judging. He says that the similarity of the titles is intended “to keep his students on their toes”. The title of Erasmus Price’s book (supra) is another example. St Aubyn extends this device to drug names and labels. Johnny Hall in At Last [202] refers to a new drug called Xywyz, a breakthrough medication that employs only the last four letters of the alphabet … Do not take Xywyz if you are using water or other hydrating agents. Possible side effects include blindness, incontinence, aneurism, liver failure, dizziness, skin rash, depression, internal haemorrhaging, and sudden death.

St Aubyn makes fewer references to historical events (the 9/11 attacks being one exception – he needs those to enable Patrick to start an argument with his Cousin Henry). He is also less inclined than Powell to give specific place references, although he does mention Patrick’s London residence before his marriage as Ennismore Gardens which may be intended as another Powell reference (more likely a coincidence).
That is the location in SW7 of All Saints Church where the Powells were married in 1934. In *At Last* (Chapters 9-10), the car journeys of the characters from the crematorium somewhere in Kew or North Sheen over the Chiswick Bridge to the fictional Onslow Club (in the real Onslow Gardens) in South Kensington, pass various real-life London landmarks that bring up memories of past events or ironic thoughts about the present. For example, as they pass the Fulham and Hammersmith and then the Chiswick cemeteries, Patrick thinks of the Acre upon acre of gravestones mocking the real-estate ambitions of riverside developers. Why should death, of all nothings, take up so much space? [At Last, 168]

Sometimes, however, St Aubyn’s grasp of geography seems a bit shaky. For example, his New York cab driver crosses the Williamsburg Bridge from Long Island to Manhattan when taking Patrick from JFK Airport to the Pierre Hotel on East 61st Street at Fifth Avenue, when the 59th St Bridge would seem a much more obvious choice. Perhaps the driver was lost or was running up the meter. Patrick was, I believe, sober at the time.

St Aubyn also sometimes designs a character’s name to convey some hint of his personality, as in Seamus Dourke or Nicholas Pratt, but makes less use of this practice than does Powell. Fewer of St Aubyn’s characters, aside from Patrick’s immediate family, develop fully over the course of the novels than is the case with Powell’s. This is especially true of Patrick’s numerous girl friends or mistresses whose appearances are somewhat fleeting (as they were perhaps in Patrick’s life). Two other women, Bridget Watson-Scott (first seen as a Sloane-ish girl friend of Nicholas Pratt) and Anne Eisen (Victor’s American mistress and later his wife), offer interesting possibilities but neither realizes what would seem to be her full potential. There are no Jean Templers or Gipsy Joneses or Pamela Flittons in St Aubyn’s Melrose novels.

A few secondary characters reach Powellian proportions through their reappearances over time. These would include the snobbish, gossipy Nicholas Pratt (who is unable to gain admission to the London club of that name), the social climbing Victor Eisen, and Patrick’s Aunt Nancy who shares with Uncle Giles a resentment over her inheritance (limited unfairly in her mind to $15,000 per month which she sometimes runs through on the way home from the bank), as well as a political quirkiness and a tendency to offer on every appearance an occasion for comedy. And the somewhat enigmatic Fleur, a manic-depressive who arrives uninvited and unmeditated at the reception after Eleanor’s cremation, could have stepped right out of a Powell novel. Her appearance in Chapters 12 and 13 of *At Last* sets off two of the most comic passages in the book as she asks Nicholas Pratt what mental illness he suffers from and indirectly deprives Aunt Nancy of her expected ride home in Pratt’s limo, increasing her sense of unfair deprivation.

Over all, there is much besides the fact that the Melrose novels were written as a series over a period of nearly 20 years that would recommend them to Powell fans. The satire and the irony work to lighten the darkness of the child abuse, substance abuse and familial dysfunction that drive the plot. The main problem is to get past the first two books, or really the second (*Bad News*) which is much the darker of the two. In the final analysis, I would
suggest that if the detailed descriptions of
the injections of controlled substances into
the “unhealthy canvas” of Patrick’s arm
and the painful effects of the overdoses on
his body become unbearable, simply skip
ahead after Chapter 5 and go straight on to
Some Hope. You will miss some good
passages but you can always go back and
pick those up later. I don’t believe there is
anything in those chapters that is essential
to the plot (such as it is – you already
know Patrick will make it home because of
there being three more volumes) or that
any characters are introduced that later
become important. Perhaps a special
edition of that novel aimed at the
hopelessly squeamish would suggest itself
as a marketing tool. But I’m squeamish
and I survived. And I actually enjoyed
Bad News much more the second time (as
was the case with Hearing Secret
Harmonies) because I knew what was
coming and could easily avoid the worst of
it. I would not suggest skipping Never
Mind, however, because the early years of
Patrick and his hideous parents are what
the story is about. That book is dark but
not unbearable. And you will get over it,
just as Patrick did, and can then luxuriate
in the Powellian splendours of the last
three novels.

1 A feature film of Mother’s Milk, written and
directed by Gerald Fox, was previewed at the
May 2011 Hay Festival and shown again in
Autumn 2011 at the Cornwall Film Festival, but
no release date has been announced at this writing
(March 2012).

2 In the US the first three novels appeared
together in 2003 as Some Hope: a Trilogy in a
combined paperback edition. Page references to
those novels are to that edition. They were
apparently never published separately in the US
as they were in the UK where those three books
were published in 1992, 1993 and 1994,
respectively. Page references to Mother’s Milk
and At Last are to the first London editions.

Caledonian Names

By John Powell & Keith Marshall

When he wrote Caledonia: A Fragment
Anthony Powell teasingly omitted the
vowels from all the Scottish names.
Whether this was just a tease, or whether
AP felt it a judicious hedge against action
for libel is not known. However most
(perhaps all) the copies, which were given
as gifts, had the names completed in
Powell’s hand. These completed names
were not, however, included in the
Greville Press reprint of Caledonia (2011)
which prints only the original “clues”.

While most of the actual names can be
discerned by the averagely erudite, the
identities of a number of the protagonists
are not necessarily obvious. Indeed we
ourselves have been unable to
satisfactorily explain them all.

We reproduce opposite a complete list of
the incomplete names, with their
respective identities.

Two identities however remain elusive.
Who is MACNAMEE (sic)? And who
MARIE LOUISE? If any reader can shed
light on their identities we would love to
hear from you.

Page references are to the 2011 Greville Press
reprint.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Page, Line</th>
<th>Name Clue</th>
<th>Complete Name</th>
<th>Identity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8, 16</td>
<td>M–C–NT–SH</td>
<td>MACINTOSH</td>
<td>Sir James Mackintosh (1765-1832); doctor, barrister and philosopher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 16</td>
<td>M–CN–M—</td>
<td>MACNAMEE</td>
<td>not yet traced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8, 22</td>
<td>M–R— L— S—</td>
<td>MARIE LOUISE</td>
<td>? Possibly Marie Louise, second wife of Napoleon ?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 2</td>
<td>C–RLY—</td>
<td>CARLYLE</td>
<td>Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881); writer, essayist and historian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 2</td>
<td>W–LT–R</td>
<td>WALTER</td>
<td>Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832); novelist, poet and playwright.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 8</td>
<td>B–RR—</td>
<td>BARRIE</td>
<td>Sir James Barrie (1860–1937); dramatist and author of Peter Pan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 8</td>
<td>B–RNS</td>
<td>BURNS</td>
<td>Robert Burns (1759–94); poet.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 11</td>
<td>B–CH–N</td>
<td>BUCHAN</td>
<td>John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir (1875–1940); novelist, historian and 15th Governor General of Canada. Author of The Thirty-Nine Steps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 18</td>
<td>R–B–RN</td>
<td>RAEBURN</td>
<td>Sir Henry Raeburn (1756–1823); portrait painter. Painted Robert Burns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 20</td>
<td>C–M–R–N</td>
<td>CAMERON</td>
<td>David Young Cameron (1865-1945); painter, etcher and print maker.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 22</td>
<td>J–M–S McB–Y</td>
<td>JAMES McBAY</td>
<td>James McBey (1883-1953); painter and etcher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9, 24</td>
<td>F–RQ–H–RS–N</td>
<td>FARQUHARSON</td>
<td>Joseph Farquharson, RA (1846–1935); painter famous for his snowy landscapes with sheep.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 21</td>
<td>R—TH</td>
<td>REITH</td>
<td>Lord Reith (1889–1971); first Director-General of the BBC, 1922-38.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10, 26</td>
<td>L—D–R</td>
<td>LAUDER</td>
<td>Sir Harry Lauder (1870-1950); Scottish singer &amp; comedian.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Subscriptions

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Anyone whose membership is expired will be removed from the membership list at the end of June.

Reminders are a drain on our resources as they cost on average about £1 – a significant sum when we send out anything up to 50 second and third reminders most years!

Subscriptions and membership enquiries should be sent to Graham & Dorothy Davie at:

Anthony Powell Society Memberships
Beckhouse Cottage, Kendal Road
Hellifield, Skipton
North Yorkshire, BD23 4HS, UK

Email: membership@anthonypowell.org
Phone: +44 (0) 1729 851 836
Fax: +44 (0) 20 8020 1483

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Contact: Keith Marshall
Email: kcm@cix.co.uk

NY & NE USA Group
Area: New York & NE USA
Contacts: Nick Birns
Email: nicbirns@aol.com

Great Lakes Group
Area: Chicago area, USA
Contact: Joanne Edmonds
Email: jedmonds@bsu.edu

Baltic Group
Area: Sweden & Finland
Contact: Regina Rehbinder
Email: reginarehbinder@hotmail.com

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Newsletter Copy Deadlines

Newsletter #48, Autumn 2012
Copy Deadline: 17 August 2012
Publication Date: 7 September 2012

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Dates for Your Diary

London Quarterly Pub Meets
Saturday 18 August 2012
Saturday 3 November 2012
The Audley, Mount Street, London W1
1230 to 1530 hrs
Good beer, good pub food and informal conversation in a Victorian pub AP would have known. Why not bring something AP-related to interest us?
Members & non-members welcome
Further details from the Hon. Secretary

Annual General Meeting 2012
Saturday 20 October 2012
1400 hrs
Conference Room, St James’s Church, Piccadilly, London W1
The AGM will be followed by a talk at which non-members will be welcome
Further details on page 19
There’s also a rather good arts & crafts market in St James’s Churchyard, so you can solve those Christmas present problems early!

London Group Annual Powell Birthday Lunch
Saturday 1 December 2011
1200 for 1230 hrs
London venue tbc
Further details when available from the Hon. Secretary
Non-members welcome

Our billet was a VIP one, a requisitioned hotel presided over by a brisk little cock-sparrow of a captain, who evidently knew his job.

'We had the hell of a party here the other night,' he said. 'A crowd of senior officers as drunk as monkeys, brigadiers rooting the palms out of the pots.'

His words conjured up the scene in Antony and Cleopatra, when arm-in-arm the generals dance on Pompey's galley, a sequence of the play that makes it scarcely possible to disbelieve that Shakespeare himself served for at least a period of his life in the army.

[The Military Philosophers]
Anthony Powell and CP Snow

by James Tucker

Could I offer a not completely irrelevant follow-up to Keith Marshall’s very interesting article in the Spring Newsletter about Powell and CP Snow? In November 1969, Anthony Steel, the principal of University College, Cardiff – now Cardiff University – gave a talk on Snow to a private discussion group in the city named the “Fortnightly Club”. Steel had been a don at Christ’s College, Cambridge, in the 1930s when Snow arrived as an elected Fellow in science. There are several points of resemblance in Steel’s and Powell’s impressions of Snow. But there are also stark differences in their reactions to him.

Keith Marshall quotes from Strangers [178] Powell’s comment that Snow “was serious and not in the least afraid of being thought pompous; essentially good natured and obliging”. I take this to be mainly favourable, though “not in the least afraid of being thought pompous” lies somewhere between a slap on the back and a smack across the chops. Steel also notes the pompous side of Snow, but there’s no ambiguity about the tone. According to Steel, Snow displayed “a lot of solemn portentousness and pontification and an altogether exaggerated sense of his own transcendent merits”. When Snow first arrived at Christ’s, Steel found him “unpleasing in manner and appearance”.

I wasn’t a member of the Fortnightly Club but got hold of a copy of Steel’s talk in ways we don’t need to go into here. It is titled The Apolaustic. This, apparently, was a label fixed on Snow by a classics don at Christ’s, AL Peck, and is a term from Aristotle. According to Steel, “It means … an empty, vain and shallow man … essentially uncreative, un-original, talkative and bogus”. Steel says Snow was a manic-depressive at Christ’s and often seemed “in the depths of misery”. Someone came upon him in this state while he was about to make a phone call and when asked what was wrong with him replied, “Not enough fame”. I would have regarded that as amusingly frank self-mockery. Steel doesn’t.

He’s not keen on Snow’s novels and says that for a survey of 20th century life he would “far rather turn to Anthony Powell’s Music of Time, or even Simon Raven’s Alms for Oblivion”. Keith Marshall mentions Powell’s anonymous review of Snow’s novel, The Masters, in the TLS. I haven’t seen that, but wonder if Powell mentioned (or knew) that, although the book was finished in 1938 it could not be published until 1951 because of libel fears. [He did know – KM.] The Masters is about the election of a new head of an Oxbridge college and the machinations that accompany it. Steel says it is based on such an election at Christ’s in 1936 when the candidates were Charles Darwin, “grandson of a greater namesake”, and Charles Raven. Here and there some of
the characters were too easily recognised from real life. Raven objected and threatened legal action. Publication had to be delayed. Steel liked the book but says it contains “slab after slab of conversation which I can remember as having taken place almost word for word in the Combination Room”. Steel’s conclusion is that Snow was a damn good reporter but not up to much as creative artist. Steel says he was away when the actual election took place, so doesn’t figure in a fictional role. Some are not so sure.

To this jolly mix of fact and fiction I can add a minor, further complicating item. I used some of the Christ’s background from Steel’s talk in an espionage novel, Between Lives (2003), written under my Bill James pseudonym, about the Cambridge Communist spy recruitment scene of the thirties. Powell, of course, doesn’t get into the spy game until the post war Temporary Kings and Guy Burgess and Donald Maclean (factual), and L-J Ferrand-Seneschal (fictional). ■

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Complimentary sample copies and subscriptions available by calling +44 (0) 1507 339 056 or email to editor@quarterly-review.org

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**Annual General Meeting 2012**

**Notice is hereby given that the 12th Annual General Meeting of the Anthony Powell Society will be held on Saturday 20 October 2012 at 1400 hrs in the Conference Room of St James’s Church, Piccadilly, London W1**

The formal AGM business will be followed by refreshments and a talk:

**Leitwardine and Powell Ancestral Country**  
by John Blaxter

---

**Nominations** for the three Trustee posts which become vacant this year (by rotation) must reach the Hon. Secretary by Monday 6 August 2012. Candidates must be proposed by two members, indicate their willingness to stand and provide a short biographical statement. Nominations will be accepted by email, post or fax.

The elected Trustees must not be barred from being trustees under English law and a majority of the Trustees must be ordinarily resident in England and Wales.

**Motions** for discussion at the AGM must also reach the Hon. Secretary by Monday 6 August 2012. They must be clearly worded, proposed by at least two members and contain a statement in support of the motion which will be published to members.

The AGM agenda and voting papers will be included with the Autumn Newsletter in early September. Proxy votes must reach the Hon. Secretary by Monday 15 October 2012.
Katy Wheatley : A Reader’s View

I have finally finished reading Anthony Powell’s sequence of novels that makes up *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

It has taken me about two years to finish them.

There are twelve novels in the series, which are arranged chronologically, starting in the roaring Twenties, and finishing up in the late Sixties.

You can buy each book separately, or as I did, in four volumes of three books each.

The novels are all told through the eyes of a man called Nick Jenkins, who narrates his experience of life, but mostly not in relation to what happens to himself, rather what happens to everyone else he knows.

The whole sequence is supposed to be inspired and based on Nicholas Poussin’s painting, also called *A Dance to the Music of Time*. It is supposed to depict life in all of its major phases and representations, and is chock full of allegory and symbolism, mainly impenetrable to the modern observer, unless you have been classically trained.

I would say that this is pretty true of Powell’s work too, both in its scope and impenetrability. You have to really concentrate to read Powell. It’s not an easy read, not because it is deliberately ‘clever, clever’, like say *Ulysses*, to which some people have been known to compare it, but more because it is very specific to the times Powell was writing in, and much of the background which may have been obvious to those who lived through those times, is lost to the modern reader.

The action, such as it is, is rather slow going for the most part. I believe Powell envisioned the work as being monumental right from the get go, consequently he didn’t feel any particular need to rush the story along.

Also, there isn’t, to my mind, much of a story at all. There are only really two things that persist to the bitter end; the voice of Nick Jenkins, and the character of a man called Kenneth Widmerpool.

Why Powell is so obsessed with Widmerpool remains unclear to me. He is a singularly unpleasant character, disliked by me the reader, and every single other character in the books, including Widmerpool’s own mother. He has no redeeming features whatsoever, and yet he endures, to the bitter end.

I found the first three books, which deal with Jenkins’s school days and his first foray into the world of work, the hardest going of all. There are hundreds (no word of a lie), characters, and Jenkins has an encyclopaedic knowledge of all of them. The stories are all basically driven along by Jenkins going to public gatherings where he meets people and exchanges stories and gossip about other people. These strands, weaving in and out of each other, are the novels.

Like those epic Russian novels where everyone has three names and is related to everyone else, it can be very hard to place everyone accordingly. You really need a cheat sheet. There is a reference book called *Invitation to the Dance*, by Hilary Spurling, which does this job, and which, if you are keen on getting through Powell, I recommend highly.
It would not be quite so difficult if there weren’t so many books, but even I baulked at reading all twelve volumes back to back. It just didn’t grip me enough for me to want to devote my life to it. Consequently there were big gaps between me picking up the volumes, and there was a lot of catching up to do.

The second three novels deal with Jenkins’s progression through the world of work, his love life and his eventual joining of the army just as WWII breaks out.

The third three, and my favourites, are all set during WWII. I liked these because (a) I like a good war book, (b) they reminded me quite strongly of Evelyn Waugh’s Sword of Honour trilogy (although I preferred Waugh), (c) by now I knew pretty much who everyone was, and (d) he writes a lot about London, which I am interested in.

The final three novels were rather challenging. Many of the characters who you would have known from reading the other nine books, died during the previous three novels, and Powell introduces a whole new raft of figures, presumably to buoy Widmerpool up on his triumphant, and not so triumphant, post war journey.

I will not say too much, because I appreciate that you may well want to tackle them one day yourselves and it would be a shame for me to give away the ending now, but I found the last book a raging disappointment and was most annoyed by it. I thought it was totally pointless in lots of ways, and the series would have been much better off without it. This was a bit of a downer after I had put all that effort in.

There were a few things that aggravated me all the way through:

- Jenkins is a total nonentity. You never get the sense of him as a real person. He is strangely colourless.
- The women characters troubled me for many reasons, particularly the total failure of Powell to give any flavour at all to Nick’s wife Isobel. This failure to go into more detail regarding Nick’s own life and loves is one of the things that makes him so ghostly.
- Widmerpool. The question I ask really, in regard to Widmerpool, is ‘why?’

The good things were:

- Powell writes with a real sense of place and the world he creates seems very real, despite some of the characters being less so.
- I love the bits in the first six volumes that deal with the hierarchy and society of the Twenties and Thirties. I love Waugh as an author and Wodehouse, and reading Powell gives you a kind of grounding in the society they are writing about.
- The war books were highly enjoyable.
- I found it interesting enough to keep reading, despite it, in my opinion, not really going anywhere I wanted to be, and not really having what you might call a conventional plot.

I post this with some trepidation. My friend Keith is a bit of an expert on all things Powell and Dance. I don’t think he’s going to be entirely happy that I have summed up my experience of two years reading and twelve books in just over 1000 words.

I expect his comments with some alarm!

I will say that I am not writing this with the eye of a literary critic, or a Powell enthusiast (which I think, after some thought, I am not). I am writing this post
as your average, reasonably intelligent, reasonably interested in literature, reader.

And now, to Proust ...

**Keith Marshall : Context and Background**

I’m delighted my friend Katy has finally finished reading Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* and has written about her thoughts of it. Despite being a deeply-dyed literarist she isn’t very enthusiastic, so more power to her for having stuck the course. She’s also worried about what I might say!

Well there’s no need to worry. I may be one of the progenitors of the Society but I am also a realist. *Dance*, indeed any of Powell’s work, isn’t for everyone. *Dance*, especially, you have to “get”. And either you do or you don’t; many people don’t get it. No shame in that; I don’t get Tolkien.

So, no, I’m not going to try to change Katy’s mind, or tell her she’s wrong. There are no right and wrong answers. Katy’s (anyone’s) reaction to the work is as valid as mine. Yes because of Katy’s Eng. Lit. academic background she should be able to read anything more easily than I can – and appreciate it for its style, or lack thereof – but she is still allowed to know what she does/doesn’t like; as are you.

What I am going to do is to try to pick up on a number of Katy’s observations about *Dance* and try to put them into some sort of context to help others better understand the work.

At this point I should say that anyone who wants a potted summary of the 12 novels can find one on the Society’s website (www.anthonypowell.org); and anyone who wants to buy the books can find the current paperbacks on Amazon.co.uk or Amazon.com. (Use the links on the Society’s website and we get a tiny commission towards keeping the website running.)

OK, so what points does Katy make and which appear to have hindered her enjoyment?

1. The book is hard to read because of the historical background.
2. It is slow going.
3. There isn’t any plot and the books go nowhere.
4. It covers a lengthy timespan.
5. Why does Powell persist with a horrible character like Widmerpool?
6. We learn nothing about the narrator Jenkins and his family.
7. The women are poorly drawn.
8. Evelyn Waugh is a better read.

Any comments one makes to these questions are, naturally, inextricably intertwined, so I’m going to write some narrative rather than try to answer each question in a standalone fashion. So here goes.

Interestingly women do seem to have more of a problem with Powell than men do. And there’s a good reason for this. Powell was born in 1905 into an upper middle-class family. He had an Edwardian, all male, public school (Eton and Oxford) upbringing in a world where men’s relationships with women were very different from the way they are today. Indeed the whole of English society was very different. This is one of the things which, as Katy perceives, makes the work hard for modern audiences. It is also one of the reasons why, I think, women predominantly find the female characters
poorly drawn. This isn’t “wrong”, it is just Powell’s very different perspective on women and the world; a world which was different from the one we have been brought up in.

But there’s something about Powell’s very different view of this very different world which is one of the books’ great strengths. It covers a huge timespan: from the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 (a flashback at the start of book 6, *The Kindly Ones*) to around 1971. It is detailed in places; detail which is inexorably accurate. It covers times and echelons of society many of us will never have truly encountered but which Powell did – much of the work is based on and drawn around his own experiences although it is decidedly not autobiographical, nor only about toffs, as often supposed. All of this makes *Dance* a tremendous piece of social history – something which scholars are now beginning to appreciate.

That doesn’t make for an easy or fast-moving read for one does need to have some understanding of that history, and to concentrate, to be able to make best sense of the book. And the better one understands the history, the more one gets from the book and the more one appreciates its humour. This detail, this lack of understanding of English society and 20th century social history, is why one of my dreams is to be able to create a complete annotation of *Dance*, in the way that Martin Gardner created *The Annotated Alice*. Without such a resource much of the detail, interest and subtlety of *Dance* is almost bound to get lost.

If one has the background in English society one can read over a lot of this detail without fully understanding it. As an example how many of us really know what is a “regiment of the line”? We have a rough idea what it is about and that’s enough at a first level. But if one gets the nuances of the detail the whole work becomes so much more interesting. However it confuses the non-English reader and the less educationally mature reader. And that’s a great shame as there is much to enjoy in *Dance*.

For yes, *Dance* is at times comic: in an understated English way. Powell doesn’t
do stand-up, laugh-out-loud farce set pieces in the way that his friend and contemporary Evelyn Waugh does. Think of Waugh’s war trilogy and Apthorpe’s “thunder-box” or the whole of Black Mischief. Powell is more subtle and takes a drier, more askance look at what’s happening, making humour from everyday situations and his characters’ turns of phrase.

Being contemporaries, Powell is so often compared with Waugh, which is somewhat misleading and unfair to both writers. They are birds of completely different plumage. It’s a bit like comparing apples and smoked haddock. Waugh writes books with stories and plots and is good at farce. Powell is more discursive and descriptive; more in the style of Dickens or Walter Scott, or, as often stated, Proust. This is in part what makes Dance slow going for some people. But in my view Powell is a much superior writer, technically. Powell and Waugh are trying to do very different things; nevertheless they were genuine admirers of each other’s work. Which one prefers to read depends how one is constituted.

All of this is why there is a perception that Dance doesn’t have a plot and goes nowhere. I see the logic here. There is no well-defined story line or giant denouement with an “everyone lives happily ever after” ending. And that is the whole point. Why? Because that’s the way life is. And what is Powell doing? He’s writing about life. The way life twists and turns. About how people weave in and out of one’s life at unexpected times and in unexpected ways, like the dancers in Poussin’s painting. About how people connect to each other also at unexpected times and in unexpected ways. Life isn’t tidy and for the vast majority it doesn’t have a pre-defined plot or story line.

This too answers the question of “Why Widmerpool?”. The answer, again, is because that’s how life is. We all have people who weave in and out of our lives, who we maybe dislike or who are horrible characters. That’s how people are and how life is. Powell uses this for great comic effect. Widmerpool is a sort of heroic anti-hero. Or is he an anti-heroic hero? Whichever. The novels wouldn’t work with a nice, well-behaved, “every-girl-would-like-to-take-him-to-bed” style hero. Try substituting Waugh’s Charles Ryder or Sebastian Flyte for Widmerpool. It just wouldn’t work!

Another reason there isn’t a well-defined plot is that, as Powell himself says somewhere, the novels are written as being like a series of stories told over the dinner table. If you like, Jenkins the narrator is telling stories about his life and about the way in which Widmerpool has wandered in and out of his life. The stories are set off by this image (at the very beginning) of the men with a brazier mending the road and culminate, 12 books later, with a reprise of that same scene. (We’ll ignore for now the debate over whether the start and end really are the same scene or not.) But again that’s why there is no well-defined plot in the conventional sense: it is a set of meandering stories which, as we all know from having talked over dinner, often do indeed go nowhere.

But there are plots, or at least story lines. Widmerpool himself is the main plot. There is an army/war story line. There’s another around the interaction of the literary/arts world with the business world. And overarching even the Widmerpool leitmotif there is one about power: men of thought versus men of the will.
This is also why we learn little about Jenkins himself and his family. It isn’t relevant to the stories being told which are largely observational about other people. Just as Powell is often criticised for not dealing more with the Katyn Massacre or the Holocaust. It isn’t that Powell denies them or belittles them. It is merely that they aren’t relevant to the particular stories he’s telling.

Which brings me to the final point, about the final novel: that Hearing Secret Harmonies is the weakest book. I have to be honest and say I agree; I too think it is the weakest book. But many do not agree. Indeed I have had exactly this debate with Eng. Lit. academics and other deep thinking persons. HSH doesn’t work for me; it isn’t the life I lived through. But, again, there is a good reason for this. I was a student at the time HSH is set; I was there; I lived through the “swinging sixties” and early ’70s as a student. Powell was not there; he was already in his 60s and looking at what was happening with the eyes of an uncomprehending older generation. We should not expect him to see and understand those times in the same way I do. That doesn’t mean I’m right and he’s wrong. We have different views of the world. It’s like me, now in my 60s, trying to understand the culture of the present generation of students: I don’t understand it (and arguably nor should I) in the way those living the life do; I’m looking at it through totally the other end of a telescope from them. This is a part of what makes HSH feel a somewhat contrived ending. But then again I know many who would not agree with that either. That’s why, I think, HSH doesn’t work well for me. Against that the war trilogy does work well and they are my favourite three of the 12 books, as they are for many readers.

I’ll finish by saying what I often say to people asking about whether to read Dance. First of all don’t be off-put by the fact it is 12 novels. Each novel is essentially standalone, although some are better at it than others. Read one, or two, and see if you like it. If you are a person who must read a sequence of novels in sequence then you have to start at the beginning with A Question of Upbringing; but be prepared to persevere as I find QU the slowest of the books. If you are someone who needs to be captivated then start by reading one of the books from the second trilogy or from the war (third) trilogy depending on whether you’re more interested in the swinging thirties or the war.

But most importantly if you’re a serious reader and you haven’t tried Powell, do so. There’s so much more in Dance than a mere 12 novels. I believe Powell is one of (if not the) best writers of the 20th century, and greatly under-rated. And he was a lot more than “just a novelist”!

Katy Wheatley has a first-class honours degree in English from the University of Wales, Lampeter. She is Storyteller in Residence at the primary school attended by her two youngest children, where she is trying to get the youngsters enthused about literature. Her contribution was first published on 1 March 2012 on her weblog at http://katyboo1.wordpress.com/2012/03/01/a-dance-to-the-music-of-time/.

Keith Marshall is a chemist and physicist by training. Nevertheless he is a long-standing devotee of Dance and has been the Society’s Hon. Secretary since its inception. His contribution was likewise first published on his weblog at http://zenmischief.blogspot.com/2012/03/dance-to-music-of-time.html on 2 March 2012.

Keith and Katy met online via their respective weblogs and have since become real, as well as virtual, friends.
Graham Davie sends this from the *TLS*, 9 December 2011. Jonathan Barnes is reviewing John Sutherland’s book *Lives of the Novelists*:

It seems unexpected at first that, in his discussion of Anthony Powell, Sutherland should seem to be on slightly defensive form (“he left Oxford – though in one sense he never did”) at least until one realizes that, of all the fictional people gathered here beside their creators, it is Nicholas Jenkins, Powell’s hero from *A Dance to the Music of Time* – the wise observer, he who is welcome anywhere, the quiet man who sees and understands – whom the critic most resembles.

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AN Wilson was interviewed in the *Observer*, 22 April 2012. The primary focus of the interview is the republication of his biography of Tolstoy. In the course of the interview he brings in a quote from Powell which makes Powell appear dismissive of Tolstoy:

How would you sum up his writing? The word that leads you in is realism. When I was writing this book, Anthony Powell said to me: “Why do you want to waste your time writing about him, his books are just cinema?”. I know what he means, particularly if you turn to Dostoevsky, and there’s all that agitation and innerness, as if you’re inside people’s heads. Whereas with Tolstoy it’s as if you’re in the room. In many ways, he’s an extraordinarily detached writer. As I’ve got older, I’ve become keener on this.

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Julian Allason spotted Alan Massie blogging in the *Daily Telegraph*:

Anthony Powell said at least once, and probably more often, that Auberon Waugh hated and resented his father, Evelyn. That wasn’t my impression from conversation with Bron, and it’s not the impression one gets from his autobiography, *Will This Do*? Nevertheless, having written some five novels, none of which was as good as Evelyn’s weakest ones, Bron sensibly gave up fiction to become the most brilliant and incisively comic journalist of his generation. Good career move: if you can’t beat Dad, don’t join him.

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From DJ Taylor’s *Independent* Diary “Celebrities love to lift the lid on their tumultuous lives, but why, other than to make money?” on 4 March 2012:

Anthony Powell once wrote that whatever one most strongly believes about oneself should probably be kept to oneself – a remark that now seems as antiquated as a medieval frieze. This call for personal silence seems a particularly handy way into Rachel Cusk’s *Aftermath*, an account of her divorce, over which the broadsheets have been agitating – and amusing – themselves for the past 10 days, if only because the prose style of Ms Cusk is sometimes as chilly as anything to be found in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Having read it, sidestepped any debate on its precise significance as a contemporary feminine text (on the craven grounds that I am a man and have no vote), and felt an irrepressible pang of sympathy for poor Mr Y, her other half, I found myself wondering why such books get written.
Two words: Help me! I’m in the weeds of boredom. And no matter how bad I want to stop, I must continue. This was my fear: a 3,000 page book that isn’t interesting. In fact, it’s extremely tedious. When I discussed last month the first of twelve books in the massive novel that is *A Dance To The Music of Time*, I mentioned that I felt like Anthony Powell was doing a lot of “setting up” the story. Well, book two, *A Buyer’s Market*, continued that trend. Even more so.

In fact, the second book in this series – *A Buyer’s Market* – may be the most boring book I’ve ever read. I’m not kidding. *A Buyer’s Market* isn’t boring in a Virginia Woolf kind of way. Everything makes sense. But, for a reason I’m sure will show itself at some point in this book, Powell writes about the most mundane, seemingly pointless topics from the point of view of his narrator, Jenkins. It’s like the most boring reality show ever, but in book form. For example, here’s a passage that gives you an idea of what Jenkins talks and thinks about during 90% of the book. In this passage, he thinks his foot has brushed against the foot of his love interest, Barbara:

*I thought I could feel her foot against mine; but, a moment later, found the shoe in question to belong to Miss Manasch, who immediately removed her own foot; whether because aware of a pressure that had certainly been quite involuntary, if, indeed, it had taken place at all, or merely by chance, I was unable to tell.*

Anthony Powell says in 50 words what most authors can say in about 10 words. Not only that, but I don’t think Powell ever heard the mantra of many a writer: “Show, don’t tell”. He leaves nothing to the imagination.

The novel’s style reminds me of sitting between two elderly 90-year-olds who talk for ten minutes about things like leaves, ants, and the appropriate size of a styrofoam cup.

For what it’s worth, *A Buyers Market* is a book about socialite parties. The book is set in the high society of post World War I England. I would say that 95% of the story – if you can really call this a story – takes place at some type of social party. We revisit Jenkins’ friend Stringham. The awkward Widmerpool apparently gets his groove on with a woman of “questionable morals”. Jenkins is just kind of there checking it all out.

Gosh, just writing about this book is boring me to death. Here’s hoping book 3 – *The Acceptance World* – gets much better, because the thought of reading 10 more of these books fills me with dread.

*A Dance To The Music of Time* is just a dance to the music of boredom at this point.

Tell me it gets better! ■
From a review of Judith R Walkowitz’s *Nights Out – Life in Cosmopolitan London* by DJ Taylor in the *Independent*, 23 March 2012:

When Walkowitz manages to overcome the anxieties of the impending peer review and stops writing in academic cipher, the effect is often startlingly good. To go back to Italians in Soho, her account of the area’s pro- and anti-Fascist factions (symbolised by Leoni, the Quo Vadis’s pro-Mussolini owner, and Recchioni, of the King Bomba provisions shop, who underwrote several failed assassination attempts) is a matter of finely-graded distinctions. What a Soho Italian said in public about Il Duce might be very different from what he thought in private.

Here the trail leads back to fiction, and in particular to Anthony Powell’s account of Castano’s (formerly Previtali’s) restaurant in Greek Street in *A Dance to the Music of Time*. Its proprietor (“Foppa” rather than his real name of Pietro Castano) plays a nicely ambiguous game, never expressing political opinions but allowing his daughter to wear the fez-like cap of the local Fascist branch. On one occasion, Foppa shows Powell’s alter ego Nick Jenkins a newspaper portrait of Mussolini declaiming from the balcony of the Palazzo Venetia (Powell’s memoirs confirm that this incident took place). No comment is made, but the combination of silence and the dictator’s manifest absurdity is enough. “Merely by varying in no way his habitual expression of tolerant amusement, Foppa had managed to convey his total lack of anything that could possibly be accepted as Fascist enthusiasm”.

From an article in the *Guardian* “Rereading: authors reveal their literary addictions”, 8 April 2012:

**Ian Rankin**

There are certain books (and poems) that I reread with pleasure. These range from *Bleak House* to TS Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, and from Anthony Powell’s 12 novel sequence *A Dance to the Music of Time* to Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*. I’ve probably reread Muriel Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* more than any other book, partly because I studied it at university and partly because I glean something new with each reading. With Eliot, I find that the older I get, the more I understand – as is true of Shakespeare. But the book that sticks in my mind is *Rivals* by Jilly Cooper.

We were snowed in one winter, and this was the only book in the house I’d not read (it belonged to my wife). I found it great fun, and decided to reread it the following summer – then again many a summer after that. Pure escapism and a non-guilty pleasure.

**Jilly Cooper**

Rereading is crucial. If a plot of a book grabs me I gallop to the end, and only on later readings appreciate the depth of the characters, the wit, or the beauty of the language. Poetry I reread constantly. Currently on the bathroom shelf, their pages wrinkled with being dropped in the bath, are Tennyson, Housman, Ezra Pound, Yeats and Eliot’s *Four Quartets*. With fiction I frequently reread Anthony Powell’s *A Dance to the Music of Time* and Barbara Pym’s *Jane and Prudence*. ■
From *The Commune* blog (“for workers’ self-management and communism from below”) [http://thecommune.co.uk](http://thecommune.co.uk). In *Trouble in ‘paradise’: the Maldives coup*, 7 April 2012, Taimour Lay writes about the reality of power and struggle in the Indian Ocean country better known in the West for its luxury resorts:

People tend to fall for Mohamed Nasheed. It’s not because he possesses the specious charm of a politician or the skills of a social operator. It’s not down to good looks or wealth (though he has both). He has made mistakes, inherited privilege and never strayed far from a patrician liberalism. But he has always drawn people in with sincerity and bright humour and a uniquely open kind of moral clarity after years of harassment, torture and struggle.

A brief democratic opening was thwarted by a coup d’état.

An investigative journalist, author, political prisoner and finally President of the Maldives before being ousted by a coup on 7 February, he is one of many charismatic individuals who claim they don’t want power but end up having it thrust upon them by popular acclaim. With ‘Anni’, as Maldivians know him, he really did mean it.

“I don’t want this or that position, it’s about changing this country”, he said to me in his instantly recognisable, high pitched croak of a voice the first time I met him in early 2006. I smiled politely, thinking I was getting the benefit of a routine line.

Back then, he was still under house arrest at his family home, Keenerege, on the island of Male (pronounced ‘Maa-lay’), the Maldivian capital, facing charges of terrorism. His wife made fish and he played with his daughters while I grabbed a Zadie Smith novel *On Beauty* off his shelf. He kept trying to persuade me to read Anthony Powell, who he’d loved since studying in the UK. Anni had used his time in prison to write a history of the country and a romance novel set on an isolated island.

‘An exceedingly well-informed report,’ said the General. ‘You have given yourself the trouble to go into matters thoroughly, I see. That is one of the secrets of success in life.’

*The Kindly Ones*

But anyway, it takes a bit of time to realize that all of the odds and ends milling about round one are the process of living.

*Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant*

From DJ Taylor’s *Independent* Diary, 29 January 2012:

In the wake of the release of Cabinet papers outing the people who declined honours between 1951 and 1999, one grows tired of the assumption that refuseniks are sturdy individualists avid to cock a snook at authority. Evelyn Waugh turned down a CBE in pique, thinking he was worth at least a Companionship of Honour. Anthony Powell, on the other hand, passed up a knighthood on the somewhat obscure grounds that unsophisticated people would not know how to address his already-titled wife.
## Society Merchandise

### SOCIETY PUBLICATIONS

**Jeff Manley et al.; Dance Music.** A 150-page guide to the musical references in *Dance*; compiled in the style of Spurling’s *Handbook*. **UK: £7, Overseas: £10.50**

**Centenary Conference Proceedings.** Collected papers from the (third, 2005) centenary conference at The Wallace Collection, London. **UK: £11, Overseas: £16.50**


**Writing about Anthony Powell.** The talks given at the 2004 AGM by George Lilley, Michael Barber and Nick Birns; introduced by Christine Berberich. **UK: £4, Overseas: £7**

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### OTHER PUBLICATIONS


**Anthony Powell, Caledonia, A Fragment.** The 2011 Greville Press reprint of this rare Powell spoof. Now publicly available in its own right for the first time. **UK: £8, Overseas: £10.50**

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