The Anthony Powell Society
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The Anthony Powell Society is a charitable literary society devoted to the life and works of the English author Anthony Dymoke Powell, 1905-2000.

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Abbreviations of Anthony Powell Works

References to the Anthony Powell works cited throughout this volume are, unless specified, to the first UK editions of the individual works using the abbreviations given below; in the interests of concision these works are omitted from bibliographies. Other works are cited in full.

AP  Anthony Powell

*Dance*  Anthony Powell, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (London: Heinemann, 1951-75)


*VB*  Anthony Powell, *The Valley of Bones* (London: Heinemann, 1964)


*BDFR*  Anthony Powell, *Books Do Furnish a Room* (London: Heinemann, 1971)


*V*  Anthony Powell, *Venusberg* (London: Duckworth, 1932)

*FVD*  Anthony Powell, *From a View to a Death* (London: Duckworth, 1933)


*Plays*  Anthony Powell, *Two Plays* (London: Heinemann, 1971)


*TKBR*  Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983)


Strangers  Anthony Powell, *To Keep the Ball Rolling: The Strangers All Are Gone* (London: Heinemann, 1982)


Editorial

In November 2007 the Society (in collaboration with the Wallace Collection) presented the inaugural Anthony Powell Memorial Lecture, reprinted in this journal. It was given by Tariq Ali, who said of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, “There is nothing quite like it in English letters”. Powell’s uniqueness is perhaps indicated by the number of times his name crops up in the media. I have a “Google alert” set up on my computer for “Anthony Powell” and there is rarely a day goes by that Powell is not mentioned somewhere in the world’s press or in the blogosphere. That, I think, is one testament to his enduring popularity.

As with the first and second editions of the *Journal*, this edition not only reflects the Society’s overall aim (“to advance for the public benefit, education and interest in the life and works of the English author Anthony Dymoke Powell”), but also reflects the wide range and depth of “Powelliana” in all its forms.

Stephen Holden
Hon. Editor
Kenneth Widmerpool, it may be conceded at once, was not an attractive character at any stage of his life. Hitchens distinguishes the schoolboy from the adult: insufferable from the start, but more as someone prematurely pompous and absurd than, as he later proves, someone decidedly sinister.¹

Stringham, Templer and Jenkins find Widmerpool unsympathetic primarily because he lacks poise and style (to say nothing of the ancestry or wealth that would ensure his status in the school without them). He is an obvious striver in a culture where the pretence of effortless superiority is *de rigueur*. His attempts to make the most of his negligible athletic superiority attract unfavourable notice. His hearty singing in Chapel gets commented on. His quiescence when Budd hits him in the face with a banana makes an elaborate anecdote for Stringham. (How, incidentally, should Widmerpool have reacted? By beating up the Captain of the Eleven and his attendants?) But it is not essential to adopt schoolboy standards to agree that there is something decidedly rum and unpleasant about Widmerpool, more significant than his overcoat, his walk, or his contortions of the bottom.

When Widmerpool enters the adult world his pomposity and his absurdity become even more pronounced. Barbara Goring, with whom he is hopelessly in love, drenches him with caster sugar. At the Andriadis party the same night Gypsy Jones lures him into paying for her abortion. Whether she ever grants him a reciprocal favour remains uncertain. He makes an ass of himself by delivering an inappropriate and boring speech at the Old Boys’ dinner. In all of these incidents, as narrated by Nicholas, his self-satisfaction ensures that he does not arouse our sympathy, not even when we are introduced to his mother, who may well account for the sexual incapacity and perversity that persist throughout his life.

His job at Donners Brebner gives him more scope than he enjoyed when serving his articles as a solicitor to plot and scheme disobligingly. He has, in fact, moved into a business world where sharpness of manner and action and a readiness to do the dirty on someone are accepted as at least one aspect of the norm. Sunny Farebrother, who, when the occasion demands, is probably every bit as unscrupulous in his dealings, remains an engaging character whom one would be happy to have lunch with, despite knowing where the bill was likely to end up. Lunch with Widmerpool is not something to look forward to, even though he is planning to take you to the St James’s or Brooks’s.² Widmerpool never feels the need to develop the insincere charm that would conceal his indifference to anything other than his personal interests and objectives. If he does something to his credit, such as joining the Territorials, he spoils it by turning up at a country house party in uniform in the belief that “it makes a good impression these days”. 
The Gravamen

Two distinguished commentators have (by my reading) gone on to imply that when the opportunity offers Widmerpool arranges for Stringham to be posted to the Far East knowing that this will expose him, as in practice it did, to capture by the Japanese and eventual death at their hands. Christopher Hitchens puts it this way:

\[\text{Widmerpool does deliberately and cynically, by the exercise of bureaucratic fiat in sending the unresisting young man to a front-line wartime posting, cause Stringham’s death.}\]

Dr Nicholas Birns gives a slightly different interpretation:

\[\text{The central event of The Soldier’s Art, not necessarily immediately visible in all the bureaucratic machinations and details of the book, is that Widmerpool sends Stringham to his death. True, he does not know that the Japanese will take Singapore, as few did. But he did know that the Middle East was where the British were doing their best in military terms (having uprooted the Italians from Ethiopia, forestalled the pro-German coup in Iraq and held off the Afrika Corps from Egypt) and that the Far East was far more exposed to the as-yet-unbelligerent Japanese.}\]

The subordinate clause in the middle of the Hitchens sentence takes the edge off the main statement. “Widmerpool does deliberately and cynically .... cause Stringham's death.” Not much room for doubt there then The reader may still be puzzled by the portentous description of the transfer – a run-of-the-mill administrative procedure – and by the characterisation of Stringham, well into his thirties and looking every day of it, as “the unresisting young man”.

Dr Birns opens with an unequivocal statement that “Widmerpool sends Stringham to his death”. Only after the full stop does he go on to qualify it by conceding that Widmerpool did not know that the Japanese would occupy Singapore, but, this seems to be merely a mitigating circumstance rather than evidence of his innocence. The argument, that Widmerpool could have arranged a safer posting for Stringham to the Middle East raises two points I should like to revert to in a moment. First we have to consider one relevant question of fact and two central issues: What regiment does Stringham belong to? Why does Widmerpool decide that he has to arrange a move for him? And how far is he aware of the likely consequences when he takes his decision?

The Mystery of Stringham’s Cap-Badge

The regiment Stringham belongs to while serving at Div. HQ is a mystery. By his own account his first attempt to join the Army was rejected:

\[\text{they wouldn’t look at me when I first breezed in. Then the war took a turn for the worse … and they saw they’d need Stringham after all.}\]
He enlisted in the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (RAOC), a service body, not a front-line unit, that seems an appropriate billet for someone not in the prime of youth or graded A1. He tells Nicholas that he “managed to exchange into the infantry” (on the diverting if fanciful grounds that he would not serve in a formation where Warrant Officers were called Conductors). He does not say which infantry regiment he joined or how he achieved the transfer. The phrase he uses is an unnatural one, as the infantry in the British Army, unlike, say, the Royal Armoured Corps or the Royal Artillery, has no formation higher than the Regiment. You cannot join “the infantry”, only The Green Howards, The Beds and Herts, The Northumberland Fusiliers or whatever. Nicholas can obviously see his regimental insignia, but remains silent on the point. His description of Stringham when he fist recognises him in the mess extends to the fit of his battle-dress collar but not the name of the regiment, displayed on each shoulder, which would be the first thing he would have glanced at. Why the discretion, why not at least some such formula as “an unfashionable Midlands regiment”?5

Having accepted Stringham, the infantry regiment was quick to shuffle him off to Divisional Headquarters, where he is employed on general fatigues, including putting up Biggs’ boxing ring, before applying for the vacancy of waiter in F Mess. Or at least so one is told, but in his twilight conversation with Nicholas, down the side-street or alley, he also says that it was the Ordnance Corps that transferred him to Divisional HQ. The confusion remains unexplained, and is compounded by the fact that the Mobile Laundry Unit, to which he is transferred, is an RAOC formation.

The question is not just of interest to pedants who enjoy Dance minutiae. If Stringham is indeed an infantryman, Widmerpool could, by declaring him surplus to requirements at Div. HQ, have him automatically returned to his regimental depot, where he would either be shunted off to some other dogsbody job or, just conceivably, be kept hanging around doing fatigues until pressed into service as a reinforcement when one of the regiment’s battalions sees action and suffers casualties. Other things being equal, the Mobile Laundry is a more agreeable option.

**What Made Widmerpool Act?**

Widmerpool is tetchy and irritated, not deeply disturbed, when Nicholas informs him of Stringham’s presence and he expresses reluctance to take any action. In fact, he delivers a pi-jaw on the undesirability of allowing personal feelings to affect professional conduct:

> Why should Stringham have some sort of preferential treatment just because you and I happen to have been at school with him … War is a great opportunity for everyone to find his level. I am a major – you are a second-lieutenant – he is a private.
Widmerpool returns to the subject the next day, with the question “So you think something else should be found for Stringham?” Nicholas confirms that he does and Widmerpool promises to give it some thought. That is the last he says on the subject before Nicholas departs on leave. If Machiavellian motives are to be ascribed to Widmerpool it should be noted that he is only aware of Stringham’s presence at HQ because Nicholas tells him of it, and that it is Nicholas who urges him to do something, without giving any thought as to what it might be. As Nicholas must know, the range of agreeable jobs in Widmerpool’s gift that Stringham could be considered for is limited to non-existent. He would not even qualify for the plum of sanitary lance-corporal. One of Widmerpool’s objections to doing anything is that a mess-waiter has quite a good job. It is certainly one that Stringham has applied for and professes to find tolerable, more tolerable, he claims, than Nicholas’ own existence. (“You’re not going to try and swap jobs, are you? If so, it isn’t on”.). Despite knowing Stringham’s wish to be left to get on with things Nicholas says nothing further to Widmerpool, though he has the opportunity to do so before he goes on leave. If blame is assigned for gratuitous and ill-considered interference, some of it must go to Nicholas.

How Wicked Are Widmerpool’s Intentions?

The events narrated in The Soldier’s Art can be dated with a fair degree of precision. At the start of Chapter 3 Nicholas returns from his harrowing leave in London (failed interview with Flynn, friends killed at the Café de Madrid, destruction of the Jeavons’ house and the death of Lady Molly) to find that Stringham is no longer the waiter in F Mess. Guarded enquiry over the mess table establishes that he has been transferred to the Mobile Laundry Unit. The next day Nicholas learns that Widmerpool has arranged the transfer, and mistakenly assumes he has done so to end a potentially embarrassing situation while, at the same time, taking reasonable care of Stringham’s welfare. The day after, following the encounter with Bithel in the blackout, Widmerpool reveals that he acted in the expectation – possibly even the certain knowledge, so far as knowledge of this sort is ever certain in the Army – that the Laundry Unit was about to be sent to the Far East. It is clear, from a reference in the text, that Widmerpool effected the transfer no later than the German attack on Crete, \textit{ie.} 21 May 1941. The Soldier’s Art ends with the Mobile Laundry on the point of departure, and Colonel Pedlar’s announcing that the Germans have invaded Russia. The German invasion began on 22 June 1941.

Japan did not launch its attack on Pearl Harbour that started the war in the Pacific until 7 December 1941, more than five months later. Up to that point Britain was not at war with Japan, and America was not at war with anyone. Japan had been at war with China, intermittently since 1931, on a full scale since 1937. Both Germany (until 1938) and the Soviet Union (until 1941) were giving major support to the Chinese with military equipment, munitions and, in the case of the Soviet Union “volunteers”, including Marshall Zhukov. The Western powers
gave no such help, apart from the American “Flying Tigers” squadron, though Britain sold and shipped arms and supplies to China.

Japan had announced grandiose plans to assert itself in the Pacific area and beyond. Details and timescale were not specified, but clearly they would be at the expense of American, British and Dutch colonial interests. Japan concluded the Tripartite Act with Germany and Italy in September 1940, but the only obligation Japan accepted was to fight the Soviet Union if the latter attacked Germany. Within the Japanese Cabinet the “North” faction considered that, if a new war of aggression was to be launched, the better course was to move against Russia, the traditional enemy, rather than to attack Southwards. Moreover the Japanese Cabinet were not united in the view that a new war should be launched. In September 1940 the Commander of the Japanese Combined Fleet had warned that the risks involved in going to war with America were colossal, and the Japanese naval command remained much less bellicose than the army faction. On 16 July 1941 (while Stringham must have been steaming towards Singapore) the hawkish Foreign Minister, Matsuoka, was dropped from the Cabinet. Tojo, a former General, remained at the Ministry of War, however, and the Army continued to press for a date for war to be set. On 6 September Emperor Hirohito attended a Cabinet conference and urged caution on Ministers. The balance does not seem to have swung decisively to war until Tojo forced the Prime Minister’s resignation and took office himself on 12 November. Even then the Japanese Cabinet still went ahead with two proposals to the Americans for *amodus vivendi*, but, if genuinely intended, they were preposterously unrealistic.

The American Secretary of State, Cordell Hull, rejected the Japanese proposals on 26 November. The Japanese responded with a long statement of their grievances, sent to their Embassy in Washington for presentation to Cordell Hull on the morning of 7 December. It was intended as a declaration of war. How far the Japanese had allowed for time differentials between Tokyo, Pearl Harbour and Washington and for the considerable translation effort required is unclear, but in the event the attack on Pearl Harbour was launched before the declaration could be delivered. Britain declared war on Japan on 8 December. Germany and Italy, who had no advance knowledge of the attack, declared war on the United States on 11 December.

Even with such perspective and detail as history has afforded, Japanese intentions (as distinct from rhetoric) and the realities of power within the Japanese politico-military structure remain elusive. This is true not least of the position of the Emperor, who speaks as a god one week and is ignored or overridden the next. Forming a threat assessment was many times harder as the summer and autumn of 1941 rolled on. The Americans had been reading Japanese diplomatic ciphers since the early part of the year, but were not clear about Japanese intentions and, as Pearl Harbour demonstrated, certainly not expecting or prepared for war. There is a crucial difference between, on the one hand, knowing that a foreign power, already engaged in a major war where victory is a long way from won –
and in fact never was to be won – is making threats and, on the other, knowing that an attack is imminent.

In Britain, outside the small circle concerned with monitoring the Japanese, the preoccupation was, in any case, the defence of the home country against the threat of German invasion, with only green troops and the remnants of the British Expeditionary Force to man the pill boxes. The RAF had won the day-time air battle but nightly bombing on a devastating scale and the dreadful toll of civilian casualties made all issues beyond the survival of the home country secondary. Churchill’s reaction to Pearl Harbour was a wave of relief that Japan’s attack had brought about the one event that would save Britain, the entry of the United States into the war.

Britain went into the Pacific War in the belief that Singapore was an impregnable fortress, capable of withstanding any Japanese onslaught. This illusion, along with a number of other imperial illusions, was to be shattered, but not until 9 January 1942, when Field Marshal Wavell warned the Government that, now the Japanese had a land route at their disposal, Singapore could not hold out against attack. Churchill ordered that Singapore must be held, and the island was heavily reinforced with troops. Two battleships also sailed to Asian waters. But the Japanese army swept down the Malay peninsula and by 8 February 1942, they had begun the invasion of Singapore. A week later the garrison surrendered. The shock, shame and despondency this caused to the British public and press, and to the armed forces, who had been given no reason to doubt Singapore’s invulnerability, was immense. The newsreel showing the British forces marching out to surrender, led by an aged General in baggy shorts carrying a big white flag, that he casts down, still has power to appal.

It seems to me very doubtful that what happened could have been foreseen six months earlier by a DAAG, preoccupied with the details of administering a Division in the backwater of Northern Ireland, with no access to strategic intelligence and very little to go on in the thin, censored press. At the time, acting on the information available to him, he could have argued, if he wished to justify himself, that Stringham was being sent to a post where living conditions were notably better than in the UK at that time, and where, in the absence of air raids, the risk of injury or death from enemy action was less in the short term, possibly in the longer term as well, than at home. Belfast was subjected to heavy air raids on 16 April and 3 June and it seemed that the nightly pastings of cities and towns around the UK would go on and on. Characteristically, Widmerpool shows no desire to justify what he has done. A soldier of negligible military value has been transferred from one dogsbody job to another. Simultaneously an officer, Bithel, with a marginally greater potential for hampering the war effort, has been returned to civilian life earlier than otherwise would have occurred. It is all part of the day’s efficient work, so far as Widmerpool is concerned.
It seems fanciful, in any case, to think that he is seeking vengeance, which, if so disposed, he could have enjoyed already in his reversed role vis-à-vis Stringham and would continue to enjoy by keeping Stringham within saluting range. And it is still more fanciful to consider him as the unconscious agent of dark forces. There is, in fact, no evidence that Widmerpool feels vindictive towards Stringham, or that he is vindictive by nature. His qualities (including being a colossal bore) were common and current in wartime Britain – a total devotion to the system he is operating and a happy acceptance of the opportunities this provides to be difficult. He has never subscribed to the feeble Bloomsbury credo that personal relations (at least those between members of the in-group) are what really matters and he gives no priority to old acquaintances or shared memories of the wat’ry glade. His unimaginative hard work, intolerance of “conduct prejudicial to the maintenance of good order and military discipline”, his dedication to the task in hand and his decisiveness have become, if not imperative at least pervasive, in the state of crisis that Britain finds herself in. The dark days of Britain’s finest hour were the golden age of the petty bully and the self-righteous organisation man, in civilian as well as military life. War produces many heroes, but away from the battlefield, the Widmerpools abound. Most of them get through a lot of useful work.14

Could Widmerpool Send Stringham to the Middle East?

The suggestion that Widmerpool could have arranged a posting for Stringham to the Middle East seems to me to overestimate by a wide margin the power of a Deputy Assistant Adjutant General in a Divisional Headquarters. It is one thing to move a private soldier from one job in a Division to another within the same Division, much harder if not impossible to transfer him out of the Division to a different theatre of operations. The latter would require powers well beyond those enjoyed by Widmerpool, which were not enough even to get effective action taken against the miscreant Diplock. He can make Nicholas’ life disagreeable by imposing a heavy and boring work-load on him, he can expedite Bithel’s inevitable departure, and he can shuffle Private Stringham from serving the spuds in F Mess to the Laundry Unit in the town. But that is just about his limit. In a Divisional Headquarters staff majors are middle-management, nothing more.

How Safe Was the Middle East Anyway?

It also seems doubtful to me whether Stringham would have been safer posted to the Middle East. True, the British had done well in Eritrea and Somaliland, both of them side-shows where the number of troops involved was minimal and where the enemy was Italian. The idea of posting an unfit, mess waiter/laundryman there, still less a complete mobile laundry unit, can be excluded. If Stringham had gone to the Middle East it would have been to North Africa.

If he had gone there with a laundry unit, or joined one already in the theatre, he would have discovered that its role in a war of movement in the desert is more
hazardous than in the settled security of an island garrison. The mobile laundry is part of the divisional establishment. When the Division moves up into action the laundry moves with it, not in the van but at least close to within the range of the enemy guns.\textsuperscript{15} If the Division retreats and stands on the defensive, the Laundry stands with it, not all that far behind the front. If the Division retreats into Tobruk, the laundry will find itself under siege, with its troops redeployed to fight as infantry.

General O'Connor had led the brilliant advance against the Italians in Cyrenaica in early 1941, but this had been halted on Churchill’s instructions so that forces could be diverted to the fiasco in Greece. About 12,000 of the British troops sent there became casualties or were taken prisoner. A number withdrew to Crete, where they suffered heavy losses, all of which weakened the army in the Western Desert. Meanwhile Rommel had brought the Afrika Corps to Libya and advanced as far as Halfaya (“Hellfire”) Pass, laying siege to Tobruk on the way. The Western Desert was at that time the only place in the world where British land forces were engaging the German army, and, they were barely holding their own. For long months until Montgomery arrived to take over the Eighth Army in August 1942 a German breakthrough into Egypt and the total destruction of the British forces there was on the cards. In June 1942 papers were being burnt in the rear echelons, the “Gaberline Swine” of the base units were departing with greater urgency than they had ever previously shown, the Shepheard’s Short Range Desert Group and Groppi’s Light Horse had largely ceased operations. The Royal Navy, without a word to anyone, upped anchors and sailed away from Alexandria.

Conclusion and Final Thought

So, I submit, Widmerpool was thoughtless and indifferent but not calculatingly vindictive. Stringham, for whom Nicholas and we feel a great, if occasionally exasperated, affection is for Widmerpool simply an outdated relic of the privileged class whose destruction will in short order be a popular objective of the post-war government that Widmerpool and others of his sort will hasten to join. Meanwhile, Stringham can take his chances, no more and no less than Cheesman and Sergeant Ablett.

I have always been intrigued that Anthony Powell did not, as must have been tempting, put Widmerpool on a plane that came down into the Atlantic on its way back from the founding ceremonies of the United Nations. Not much goes right for him in the post-war world. Some times he shows dignity in adversity and arguably he bears himself better than any other of Pamela Flitton’s sexual partners (if that, rather than “adversaries”, is the right word). More often he is pushy, pompous and absurd, even, in his relations with the Comintern, sinister. But, more than most, he is pursued by the Eumenides. His insensitivity and consistently bad judgement ensure that he is not adept at detecting their approach. Time and again he gets his come-uppance. His insufferability ensures that few of
us care. But he maintains his own bizarre integrity until the Eumenides take their final hold on him and leave him as a catechumen of a Sixties mountebank, pitied even by Bithel if by no-one else. ■

Notes
2 Both stylish, prestigious clubs, not easy to get in to, so apparently not everyone finds him intolerable. It would be fun to discover from the Candidates Book who proposed and who seconded him and how many pages his signature attracted.
3 Hitchens, *ibid*.
5 If any such there be.
6 For Nicholas, be it noted, not at all for Stringham, who copes imperturbably and with style.
7 In fact, to Singapore, which is in South East Asia rather than the Far East. British Military geography, from Kipling onwards, gets a bit confusing once you are East of Suez.
8 Formally announced on 1 August 1940, as the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, though the idea had been around for some time before that.
9 Pearl Harbour was not, in fact, the start of things. The Japanese made a landing one hour earlier on the Malay peninsula which, being on the other side of the International Date Line, took place on 8 December.
10 They appear to have read the Japanese declaration of war before it was ready for delivery, although, typically, they could not be sure that that was what it was meant to be.
11 The Army garrison in Singapore eventually amounted to 85,000 men, outnumbering the Japanese invading force by a wide margin, but they had no tanks and soon lost air cover. All were killed or became prisoners. Both battleships were sunk.
12 As a child I was upset by reports that the Japanese were advancing rapidly on bicycles. Being overrun by the *panzers* was one thing.
13 The Germans also dropped bombs on Dublin. Bomber Command usually managed to hit the right country.
14 There was probably no job away from the battle more important to military success than Widmerpool’s subsequent work in the Cabinet Office.
15 In 1939 there was a patriotic song called *We’re Going to Hang Out the Washing on the Siegfried Line*. To the best of my knowledge this is the only time the prowess of the unit has been celebrated in song or verse. ■
Edward Burra

By Laura Miller

Edward John Burra was born in South Kensington in 1905, the same year as Anthony Powell. Of upper class background, his father, Henry Curteis Burra was a barrister and the family were based in the small, prosperous Sussex town of Rye. Under different circumstances the young Edward might have been expected to have followed the same route as other young men of his class; through school, onto university and then into one of the respected professions. His name had been put down for Éton, had he gone there he would have found himself a contemporary of Powell’s and it is interesting to wonder what kind of relationship the two might have forged. Burra had from a young age shown a strong interest in the arts. Born with arthritis, at the age of fourteen he fell victim to a twin attack of anaemia and rheumatic fever leaving his health in a precarious state for the remainder of his life. This curtailed any plans his parents had for him as it was considered that he was unlikely to live past his teens. Consequently Burra was allowed to follow his own interests and remain with his siblings at the family home. The cessation of his formal education did not stunt Burra’s development, conversely he became unusually widely read. He was free to devour the kind of literature guaranteed to enrich his visual imagination and was particularly fond of Huysman, Gothic romances and Elizabethan tragedies. Popular culture also exerted a strong attraction, cheap novellas, postcards and the cinema were of equal interest to the young Burra. Throughout his life he continued to be a voracious reader and collector. His working and living environment was a melange of books, piles of magazines, ephemera and scrapbooks.¹ His enthusiasm for reproduced images, cuttings and postcards would in later life be demonstrated by mastery of an art form also favoured by Powell, the collage (one of these “Keep your head” (1930) is currently on display at the Tate Modern Gallery). Whilst his fragile health often precluded Burra from being an active participant in life, it did not convert him into an insular recluse.

In 1921 Burra was fit enough to enrol on a painting course at the Chelsea Polytechnic following this with a year of study at the Royal College of Art. It was during this period that he forged friendships with William Chappell, Barbara Ker-Seymer, Clover Pritchard, Beatrice Dawson and Gerald Corcoran which were to last throughout his life. Later in life he became friendly with Frederick Ashton and Robert Helpmann for whom he produced impressive theatre designs. Burra’s letters to them, written in his own peculiar vernacular, punctuated with snippets of gossip and veined with a caustic wit provide the biggest insight into the personality of the artist.

By the time Burra had left the Royal College of Art he had evolved a working method from which he seldom deviated. He would spread a large sheet of paper upon a table and complete a detailed drawing. The drawing would then be systematically filled in with watercolour which he used to provide both soft
washes and strong expanses of hard edged colour. He never corrected his work and showed no interest in his paintings once they were sold, and Burra was in the enviable position of selling his work consistently throughout his life.

His voracious consumption of film, book and picture had provided him with a repository of visual stimuli and ideas that he began to draw upon in the 20’s and 30’s. In addition he minutely observed the habits of dress and posture, of the interiors of cafés and the chaos of the city streets he now observed. Primarily, during the 20s and 30s, a painter of people he was intrigued by their relationships with each other. Upon returning to Rye he would draw on his memories to produce his startling and detailed work evoking the world around him as vividly as a modern Hogarth.

It is surprising therefore that his subsequent reputation as an artist has been that of a paradigmatic English eccentric loner, producing quirky idiosyncratic work in seclusion in Rye. His choice of medium, watercolour, had immediately placed him outside the mainstream. However it is likely he chose this medium as much for reasons of physical comfort as aesthetics. Burra did, despite his ill health, exist in the social world, his innate curiousity provided the impetus for his work, however he had little interest in the artistic establishment. He would in later life refuse to join the Royal Academy and rejected any psychological discussion of his work with some contempt. William Feaver describes Burra’s output of the 1930’s as:

Ernst dubbed into English, a desire to promote the bizarre, the disconcerting and inconsequential through the drawing rooms and art galleries of cultured society.

To state that Burra had ‘a desire to promote’ anything is a misconception. He never espoused a cause and displayed no allegiance to the prevalent Modernist movement or, since Feaver mentions Max Ernst, the Surrealists whom he also exhibited with in the International Surrealist Exhibition in London in 1936. This makes it difficult to place his oeuvre in a niche and has contributed to his marginalisation. When discussing Surrealism in 1936 Herbert Read wrote that:

The English sin has always been eccentricity: by which I do not mean a lack of conformity but simply a lack of social coherence.

Read’s comments reflect a growing identification by artists and writers with social and political movements and there is a thin line between conformity and Read’s social coherence. Within the artistic community the battle lines were seemingly being drawn. When Burra exhibited with the Unit 1 group in 1934 alongside Paul Nash, Henry Moore, Ben Nicholson and others in the vanguard of modernism, the juxtaposition confused critics who tended to associate Burra with the traditions of illustration. In a letter to the Times in 1933, Nash states of the formation of Unit 1 of which Burra was a member that:
Unit 1 might be said to stand for the expression of a truly contemporary spirit, for that thing which is recognised as peculiarly of today in painting, sculpting and architecture.

Yet Burra, who was a member of the group was not experimental in medium, as likely to be inspired by Velasquez as modernism and politically unpartisan. It is likely that his primary interest was in the group as a means of exhibiting his work. This is not to say he was not ‘modern’ or contemporary. In fact those new to his work are often surprised by it. Rather like Francis Bacon he took a series of images, magpie like, and then produced unique, richly coloured and often challenging work. Sometimes his paintings can be overwhelming, the combination of pattern and minutely observed detail, delicate draughtsmanship, modern subject matter jumbled with borrowed images, surreal departures and occasional abstraction can seem confusing. The construction of his paintings however was far from haphazard and his imagery was carefully selected from an unusually wide range of sources and cultures.

Burra’s cosmopolitanism was evinced by his fondness for foreign travel. Whilst indulging in gallery visits and conventional sightseeing he would also immerse himself as deeply as possible into the life of the locale, often at it’s most sleazy. His preferred haunts were the café, the nightclub and theatre. In the 20’s he had been drawn to the southern parts of Marseilles and Toulon. Lured by their exoticism, energy and a prescient air of passion and imminent danger they provided the raw material for much of his work of the period. These Mediterranean ports also provided Burra with plenty of opportunity for a voyeuristic examination of human behaviour and incident. Subsequently the paintings produced during the early thirties express an air of expectation. It was unsurprising that later in life he would have great success as a set designer.

It was in Toulon that Powell encountered Burra who was staying in the same resort with William Chappell and Irene ‘Hodge’ Hodgekins, a painter and artists’ model. Powell describes Burra thus:

I knew Ed Burra hitherto only by name. Burra never sunbathed (then the rage), his skin retaining its constitutional tint of parchment, appropriate to an air of having just stepped out of a Cruikshank engraving. Like the rest of the party he was in his middle twenties but seemed prematurely old: truer perhaps to say that he resembled a prisoner just brought out into the sunlight after years of confinement in a pitch-dark subterranean dungeon. He spoke rarely but always with devastating aptness.5

Burra himself does not record his opinion of Powell but Chappell reports that Burra and his party would occasionally meet Powell at the Café de la Rade on the Quai or at Raymond’s Bar in the Place Puget. Whilst Burra could be friendly to strangers he was intolerant of the company of those he disliked. The likelihood is that he at least found Powell’s company pleasant enough.
Powell was however obviously unaware of Burra’s chronic illness and goes on to describe his working methods in some detail and it is possible that Powell called on Burra in his room at the Hotel du Port. He does however repeat one of Burra’s most famous verbal exchanges, with the Actress Hermione Baddeley on the mysterious (and never resolved) subject of his sexual inclinations:

‘Have you ever loved a man?’
‘No.’
‘Have you ever loved a woman?’
‘No.’
‘Not even your mother?’
There was a short pause while Burra contemplated the matter. A conclusion was reached.
‘No.’

Irene Hodgekins had been expected to meet her fiancé, Denis Cohen, a middle aged publisher whom she was to return to London with, and convert to Judaism to facilitate their marriage. However she met and ran off with the painter Tristram Hillier. Powell recounts meeting the publisher at a café and asking when he and Hodgekins were to return to England? Cohen informed Powell that ‘Hodge isn’t coming with me. She’s going off to live with this fellow who came over from Cassis the other night’. Powell writes that ‘it was not easy to reply’.

Edward’s delight in such outrageous behaviour makes it strange that no letter of his records the whole episode. When Dennis Cohen arrived it was left to Anthony Powell to disclose to the wretched man that his mistress had vanished with a new lover she hardly knew.

The disparity in accounts may be the result of greater discretion upon Powell’s part; he refers to Cohen in Messengers simply as ‘C’. On the other hand the idea of Chappell and Burra leaving the hapless Powell to break the bad news is also credible.

Burra travelled alone to Harlem in the early 1930s and as a result of this journey he produced some of his most celebrated paintings and is largely known in the US as a chronicler of the Harlem renaissance. However it was his journey to Spain in 1935 that arguably had the greatest effect on his art. On his second visit, he was accompanied by his friend from college days, Clover de Pertinez (née Pritchard). His reason for the trip, apart from his perennial wanderlust was a strong desire to escape from England. De Pertinez recalled that Burra found the patriotism and festivities surrounding the Jubilee celebrations of King George V and Queen Mary irksome, declaring that ‘if I hear the word Jubilee again I’ll be sick’. In case this were not justification enough he also reassured de Pertinez that it was even better than France. It’s much cheaper and the people are much nicer. You feel it as soon as you cross the frontier. They’re not after your money all the time. And they are so much better looking.
Despite this apparent flippancy it is inconceivable that Burra was unaware of the serious situation in Spain at that time. 1934 had seen an escalation in violence which left Spain in a state of extreme tension. Quite apart from anything else Burra had witnessed an outbreak of church burning in 1933 on a previous visit. This had been part of the anti-clerical backlash which had followed the removal of the monarchy. His motives for visiting Spain again in the latter of what are now known by the Spanish as the ‘Two Black Years’ are unclear. Six months before Burra had arrived, revolts in Barcelona and the Asturias had been suppressed, the latter, by Franco’s troops, had led to little less than a massacre. Burra entered a Spain where the fuse leading to civil war had already been ignited.

Whilst eating in a restaurant in Madrid Burra noticed that smoke kept on blowing past the windows. Upon asking his companions where it came from he received the response not to worry; that it was only a church burning. Burra told John Rothenstein of his response:

that made me feel sick. It was terrifying: constant strikes, churches on fire and pent up hatred everywhere. Everybody knew that something appalling was just about to happen.12

Ironically it was a vicarious pleasure in latent violence and drama that had drawn Burra to much of his subject matter up to that point. Afterwards the drama and romanticism of his work did not diminish but its character altered. Later in life Rothenstein asked Burra about the cartoonist David Low’s famous comment ‘What can a cartoonist do after Auschwitz?’ Burra’s response was to concur:

so many appalling things happen that eventually one’s response diminishes. I didn’t feel physically for instance the shock of Kennedy’s assassination as I would have before the war.13

As the Second World War was spent quietly by Burra in Rye and he had been too young to fight in the Great War, it is likely that ‘his’ was the Spanish Civil War. His return from Spain marked the beginning of a decline in his interest in both vital exuberant crowds and the satirical opportunities they provided.

Burra refused to publicly take sides in the conflict but confided to William Chappell that he had at one stage favoured Franco. Chappell concluded, probably correctly, that this was a reflection of Burra’s strong response to real disorder and violence, the Falangists being the party of tradition.14 This indicates a dichotomy in Burra’s character. Whilst being drawn by café society, the louche, the colourful and seedy he would retreat to Rye and his family to produce most of his work. Although he mixed in bohemian company he retained a detachment and an innate conservatism. The rebellion and alternative society he enjoyed needed an establishment to exist within and he was himself, ultimately a member of a comfortable respectable family.
After Toulon there seems to be no firm indication that Powell and Burra met again although this is not necessarily the case. Powell continued to encounter friends of Burra’s and their social circles overlapped. Burra was no diarist and his letters do not cover his life comprehensively but are more akin to snapshots of the painter’s world.

Burra’s paintings never again had the feverish richness of those produced during the twenties and thirties. However he remained productive, creating amongst other things set designs for ballets and operas. His paintings, although simpler in composition retained their brilliance and incisive observation. His paintings of allotments and of Ireland retain the melancholy dark nature usually present in all his work, characterised evocatively by George Melly as the ‘rattle of bones offstage’. Despite his intentionally low profile, and having rejected the overtures of the Royal Academy, Burra was created CBE in 1971. He surprised all by living to be 72, dying as the result of a hip operation in 1976.

It is clear that Powell followed Burra’s career. In 1982 he wrote a piece for *Apollo* about the Chappell symposium on Burra. Powell shows an astute appreciation of Burra’s later work in *Messengers* when he writes:

In middle age Burra was also to explore in his own disturbing fashion a very unnaturalistic English countryside; a sphere where he was perhaps finally at his best.

These later paintings, showing an English countryside dissected by motorways or featuring large lorries rolling through the hills are less known but display all of Burra’s maverick tendencies. He cannot resist observing the roads and pylons and haulage dotting his view. Burra remained a supreme observer of people and place. His body of work is a potted view of the larger part of the 20th century. He applied his individualistic yet acute eye to the world of the Bright Young People, documented the low life of Southern Europe, the virtually medieval descent of Spain into sectarian war and expressed the growing confidence of urban black culture in Harlem. His paintings of England show all classes and types and his later works seem to predict the landscape of supermarkets, housing developments and landfill that is now so familiar to us.

Born into similar classes, in the same year and with lives spanning similar periods Powell and Burra seem nevertheless to have little else in common. Yet they share a number of qualities. These include strong powers of recall and observation coupled with an interest in people of all kinds. There is no doubt that Burra was more Bohemian yet at the same time he was detached, disinclined to join factions and with the strain of conservatism common to many of their class. In Burra’s case these latter qualities have led to his marginalisation at the expense of lesser but more critic-friendly artists and although his work is held by many galleries in London it is rarely exhibited. ■
Bibliography
Arts Council, *Thirties: British Art and Design Before the War* (Exhibition Catalogue: 1979)

Notes
1 Rothenstein described Burra’s studio as covered with ‘hundreds of books, newspapers and periodicals, novels in English, Spanish, French and Italian, glossy South American picture magazines and Victorian scrapbooks’ (*Edward Burra* (1973), 26).
4 Osbert Lancaster’s review of the Unit 1 exhibition in the *Architectural Review* (1934) indicates how strongly Burra’s work stood out in style and content from the other exhibitors.
5 *Messengers*
9 William Chappell (ed), *Well Dearie!, 45.*
10 Clover de Pertinez gives the most vivid description of Burra’s leisure interests whilst in Spain in her memoir “Edward in Spain” in W Chappell (ed) *Edward Burra: A Painter Remembered by His Friends*, 78-79.
12 See Rothenstein, *Edward Burra*, 23
13 *Ibid.*, 52
14 William Chappell (ed) *Edward Burra: A Painter Remembered by His Friends* 45.
15 See the introduction to the catalogue for the 1984 retrospective of Burra’s work at the Hayward Gallery.
Anthony Powell was the most European of 20th century British novelists. We need to dispense with the blinkered view that his *A Dance to the Music of Time* is a novel sequence that can be enjoyed only by English “toffs” or readers of the *Daily Telegraph*. It’s a prejudice that has dogged Powell for far too long.

What is on offer in the 12 novels that constitute the *Dance* (published between 1951 and 1975) is not the nuances of class snobbery, but a reflection of the social history of five crucial decades of the last century, beginning with the end of the first world war and ending with the turbulence of the ’60s. There is nothing quite like it in English letters. Some years ago I encountered one of our leading literary critics at a party and the following conversation took place:

“What do you think of the *Dance*?”
“Oh, you’ve read it?”
“Yes, I have”.
“Well, I didn’t like it. You obviously did?”
“I did. Why didn’t you?”
“Closed world”.

A closed world it is not. The sequence contains the most entertaining accounts of bohemian life in London from 1920-58, decades during which Powell not only mingled with that world, but also often enjoyed it more than coming-out parties in Belgravia. One of his jottings in *A Writer’s Notebook* (published posthumously in 2001) is apposite: “You can’t be a creative artist if you are in any restrictive sense an intellectual snob”.

Unlike most of his peers, Powell was steeped in continental European culture. His knowledge of that culture – not just his admiration for Proust, which is well known, also for Stendhal, Balzac and Musil – affected his work in numerous ways. His fondness for Stendhal shows us that, despite his own conservative views, Powell could appreciate the work of a writer whose world view was far removed from his own. The work of Stendhal that Powell liked the most was *The Life of Henry Brulard*, a thinly disguised autobiography and a savage reflection on the “ultras” of French conservatism. The supporters of the *ancien regime* and its successors have betrayed every single ideal. His favourite year, Stendhal informs the reader, is not 1789, the beginning of the revolution, but 1793, the year Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were beheaded.

The *Dance* is comparable to Proust and to Robert Musil’s *The Man Without Qualities* – literary projects that, while different in style, content and preoccupations (Proust and ambivalent sexuality, Musil’s *Kakania*), are analogous in terms of scale and ambition. The writers also emerged from parallel worlds. Musil, for example, fought in World War I. Powell was too young, having been
Secret Harmonies #3

born in 1905, but was still haunted by the memories of that war – he came from a military family and later participated in World War II.

A passage in The Military Philosophers (1968), volume nine of the Dance, has the uniformed narrator passing through Normandy when suddenly:

“Just spell out the name of that place we stopped over last night, Major Jenkins,” said Cobb.
“C-A-B-O-U-R-G, sir”.

As I uttered the last letter, scales fell from my eyes. Everything was transformed. It all came back, like the tea-soaked madeleine itself, in a torrent of memory. Cabourg – we had just driven out of Cabourg, out of Proust’s Balbec. Only a few minutes before, I’d been standing on the esplanade along which, wearing her polo cap and accompanied by the little band of girls he had supposed the mistresses of professional bicyclists, Albertine had strolled into Marcel’s life. Through the high windows of the Grand Hotel’s dining room, conveying to those without the sensation of staring into an aquarium, was to be seen Saint-Loup, at the same table Bloc, mendaciously claiming acquaintance with the Swanns.

Earlier there is an entertaining scene under the table during a bombing raid, where the narrator finds himself sheltering with General Liddiment, who asks, “What do you think of Trollope?” – to which the reply comes: “Not very much”. A literary discussion ensues, throughout which he’s holding a copy of Swann’s Way (volume one of Proust’s In Search of Lost Time) that he was reading before the bombs fell.

There is also a parallel in the development of the writing styles of Musil and Powell. The Austrian’s early short stories are brisk and entertaining, but different from The Man Without Qualities. Powell’s early novels are witty, and in his first fiction, Afternoon Men (1931), one can see the seeds of the Dance. (The dialogue between Atwater and Lola at a sordid, bohemian party is reminiscent of conversations with Gypsy in the masterwork, and the style has the kind of minimalism that was later made a craft by Beckett and Pinter.) The break comes not so much in subject matter, but in the writing style, which had become much more reflective. No doubt Powell’s immersion in Robert Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, and the impact of working on a book on the 17th century writer John Aubrey, had something to do with it. We await Hilary Spurling’s biography to be further educated.

By the time he came to write the Dance, Powell’s style had become almost antique, baroque – and that lifted the comedy to a much higher level than one finds in the early novels. He was lucky. He was a survivor. His European counterparts could not finish their work. Proust died at 51. Most of In Search of Lost Time was published posthumously, the author’s proof-reading and rewrites incomplete. Musil’s The Man Without Qualities remained an unfinished masterpiece.
Only too aware of all this, Powell was determined to finish his work. He understood the dangers of going on for too long. His own political sympathies had always been on the right, but many of his artist and writer chums (such as his close friend Orwell) tended to veer towards the left. By the time he concluded the Dance with Hearing Secret Harmonies, his world had changed. The book is dedicated to Robert Conquest. Charlotte Street in the late ’60s was no longer a bohemian haunt. Bertorelli’s had become the regular meeting place of a virulently anti-left cold war group of writers who, like Conquest, supported the US in Indochina. This new context, in my view, adversely affected the tone and structure of the last novel.

When did I first Dance? It was 1980 or 81. I was travelling with Perry Anderson from London to Mexico (an 11-hour hop) to attend a conference. He was sitting next to me rereading Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant, the fifth book in the series. At one point his laughter became so infectious that an American passenger came up and said: “Hey, guy, what’s that you’re reading? It must be really funny”. My friend held up the book and said, “It certainly is”, then carried on. My own reading matter was dull, which made me envious. Several months later, back in Britain, I bought the whole collection with Mark Boxer’s wonderful covers and read the entire work.

One sometimes hears people saying how they started off with the first published volume, A Question of Upbringing, and stopped there, because they had no idea how the narrative could go on and become what it became. They didn’t like the opening and never read the rest. I loved the first one, but it was useful to have them stacked up on the bedside table, so that the reading could be systematic and continuous. That’s how they should be read.

Coincidence plays an important part in the characters’ many encounters. I can’t remember how many times since I’ve read the book that I’ve run into someone not seen for years and muttered inwardly, “It’s the Dance”. Yet, structured as art, the coincidences build up into a greater patterning.

What, then, is the central theme of the series? Creativity – the act of production. Of literature, of books, of paintings, of music; that is what most of the central characters are engaged in for the whole of their lives. Moreland composes, Barnby paints, X Trapnel writes, Quiggin, Members and Maclintick criticise and the narrator publishes books and then becomes a writer. What excites the novelist is music and painting, literature and criticism. It’s this creativity, together with the comedy of everyday life, that sustains the Dance.

The sequence is also remarkable for its astonishing characterisations. To Charlus in the Proust epic, and Diotima and Ulrich in The Man Without Qualities, must be added Widmerpool and Pamela Flitton from the Dance. The late Lord Longford often claimed that Widmerpool was based on him. And there’s an entry in one of the journals where Powell is at a college reunion at Oxford and runs into Denis Healey. The former Labour deputy leader greets him like a long-lost friend, and
inquires: “I’ve always wanted to ask you this: Did you base Widmerpool on Edward Heath?”

The genealogy of fictional characters can become an obsession, like train-spotting, and should be firmly resisted. Powell has written that no character in fiction is ever based on any single person; they are always composites. As we know from George Painter’s excellent biography of Proust, a lot of the “vices” that the author ascribes to Charlus are actually based on himself; and the person from whom he borrowed most for Charlus, an aristocratic popinjay named Montesquieu, certainly understood what was going on: “Perhaps,” he once remarked, “I should now change my name to Montproust”.

Widmerpool is, in many ways, a more inspired creation than Charlus. After all, thrusting mediocrity rises to the surface in almost every sphere (the current Labour cabinet is an excellent example). This is another reason to regret the transformation of Widmerpool in the last volume, where he is taken out of his character, transformed into a sub-Dickensian grotesque and killed. A Writer’s Notebook reveals that Powell had another ending in mind: Widmerpool disappearing into the mist from whence he had emerged, much more in keeping with the dance of life and death.

In his literature, his memoirs and the journals, Powell can be witty, waspish, patronising and even vicious, but he is not malicious. He writes about many people generously – too generously. So what can one say about the remarks that have been made about him, in the eight years since his death? VS Naipaul was regarded as a friend. The Powell journals are full of him. Too full. Naipaul’s latest book, probably his worst, contains an essay on Powell, in which he claims that he had never read the Dance novels all those years that he was a close friend of Anthony and Violet Powell, visiting them regularly and often playing the court jester by mouthing remarks about race and class that were being discouraged in polite society. He writes that when he did read them after Powell’s death (why on earth did he bother now?), he was struck by the fact that he didn’t like them, that they were overrated, that there was no narrative worth speaking of, and so on. This was then illustrated by tittle-tattle picked up from X and Y who also disliked the novels and the man, despite claiming friendship. All this is a bit of a mystery. Or is it? In Books Do Furnish a Room (1971), the novelist X Trapnel, besotted with Lady Pamela and dominated by her, is slowly losing it:

In the street his incoherent, distracted state of mind was much more apparent. He was certainly in a bad way. All the talk about writing, its flow not greatly different from the termination of any evening in his company, was just a question of putting off the evil hour of having to face his own personal problems.

Or to put it another way, as the great 18th century Chinese novelist Cao Xueqin wrote:
Truth becomes fiction, when the fiction’s true
Real becomes not-real where the unreal’s real.

A version of this piece was first given as the inaugural Anthony Powell Memorial Lecture at the Wallace Collection in November 2007.

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Julia and Flavia

By Nicholas Birns

The reader will be forgiven if they assume this article is in fact a fustian yet lurid tale of Antonine or Severan Rome in the manner of the early Bulwer-Lytton, something that St John Clarke, in one of his lesser moods, or Valentine Beals, in one of his greater, might compose. They will no doubt be gratified that it is not that, but simply a comparison of the roles of Flavia Wisebite in Dance and Lady Julia Flyte in Brideshead Revisited, and a consideration of some of the reverberations that comparison induces.

Why the comparison between a very minor character in one novel and the co-emotional linchpin in the other? This is because both ladies are sisters of the narrator’s best friend at Oxford: Charles Stringham for Nicholas Jenkins and Lord Sebastian Flyte in Brideshead. There exists a very obvious intertextual relation between Dance, whose first instalment was in 1951, and Brideshead, published in 1945. Both represent more ambitious, sweeping works than the pre-war satires that had first marked their authors’ careers; both risk melodrama and soap opera; and both espouse more positive values than the puzzled indifference of pre-war Powell or the Juvenalian cackling of pre-war Waugh. Moreover, Powell clearly felt there was something wrong with Brideshead – something wrong besides it being a successful novel of another writer of the same generation and milieu – and sought to rectify it in Dance. Dance might even be termed “Brideshead Revisited Revisited”, so intently and potently does it try to rectify what Powell saw as the slackness, sloppiness and sentimentality of his friend and peer.

(As a side note, I am interested in the history of “… Revisited” as a novel title. I had wondered if Waugh got the idea from F Scott Fitzgerald’s 1931 short story Babylon Revisited. Jonathan Kooperstein, to whom I posed this question, then informed me that the first use of this title in English might well have been Wordsworth’s “Yarrow Revisited”, with possible further origins back in eighteenth-century country-house or topographical poems. Anybody with further information, please write me).

Dance revisits Brideshead most obviously in the Oxford scenes of both. Oxford (not actually named as such) in Dance is seen as perfectly tolerable, but it is not the dreaming spires, nor covered in aquatint. Stringham, the person to whom Jenkins feels closest there, leaves early, and they begin to draw apart; certainly Quiggin, Members and Truscott do not inspire Jenkins and draw him into a different world as Sebastian does with Charles Ryder. Yet it is Stringham and Sebastian who are obviously comparable. There is no hint of homosexuality in Jenkins’s friendship with Stringham. But in both narrators’ relations to their friends there is a sense of considerable sentiment, and an elegiac tone that their charm and promise goes unfulfilled and, arguably, wasted. Both die abroad; both are alienated from their families; both fail to endure in a world that is in a way too
cruel for them, and in which the narrator’s unspectacular persistence is not necessarily seen as a moral positive. A small grace note to confirm the resemblance: Miss Weedon, as she arrives at Oxford, is clearly a tweaking of Mr Samgrass.

And both Sebastian and Stringham have sisters. And here the difference comes. We only meet Flavia briefly in the seventh novel of *Dance*, and then (admittedly in a very important scene) in the final book, after having known her daughter, Pamela, much better. Flavia is sister to one of *Dance’s* most important characters, mother to another, but herself barely appears. It is as if her one chance at happiness, her romance with the doomed Robert Tolland, is also her one chance at effectually manifesting herself in the novel. The first time Jenkins meets her, Charles is out of sight; the second time, long dead. Julia, on the other hand, is at once the fulfilment and unravelling of the relationship of Charles (Ryder) and Sebastian. (Having written the above sentence, I now think the use of ‘Charles’ as Stringham’s first name is a semi-deliberate transfer of that name from ‘narrator’ to ‘narrative subject’ between *Brideshead* and *Dance.* ) Paul Delany, in his 2003 talk at the second biennial Anthony Powell Conference at Balliol, has described how woman are ‘trafficked’ in the early novels of *Dance* ‘between men’ in the sense popularized by the late Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Charles’s relationship with Julia starts as this, but becomes passionate in its own right. There is never a chance of this happening between Nick Jenkins and Flavia. But it could have.

We are familiar with *Dance* as a novel of coincidence, and this coincidence is often accelerated by the social deftness of its narrator. Nick Jenkins often seems like the social director of a cruise, introducing people to each other, often consequentially: Widmerpool and Gypsy Jones would never have known each other if not for Nick, nor (to Nick’s regret) Odo and Priscilla Tolland. We see Nick as someone who brings people together. From all accounts this was true of Anthony Powell biographically as well; how many times in the *Journals* do we see him deliberately bringing friends in touch who he thinks might have shared interests or traits? Quite often. But, *qua* the novel, what Wayne C Booth would call the ‘implied author’ of *Dance* also has a structural, compositional interest in keeping people apart. If everyone met each other, *Dance* would be a giant party full of superficial, meaningless encounters, and it is not; there are zones of isolation, estrangement, self-reliance (or even ‘autarky’ as in the case of a man like Tokenhouse, who seems neither to need nor to care about any other person) which mirror the existence of these conditions on our lives. Some people or strands or milieus never touch. Between the Ryder-Julia relationship and the Jenkins-Flavia relationship there is a gaping, marmoreal, deliberately crafted, authorially imposed distance.

Instead of Flavia, of course, we have – Jean Templer. Jean is the ‘Julia’ of the book. She is the great early female love interest of the narrator. And, for Powell, the difference between Celia, the woman Ryder eventually married, and Lady Isobel Tolland is as big a difference as that between Stringham and Sebastian.
Why is *Dance* a *roman-fleuve* and not a *bildungsroman*? Who makes it so? The answer is Isobel. Far from ending with marriage, the novel, as sequence, truly comes into its own with, and after, marriage. *Casanova’s Chinese Restaurant* as a book about marriage is a signal that the sequence is centered on an ongoing relationship and goes beyond the conventional ending of a young man’s life story with marriage as a capstone. The first three books are about what happens to Jenkins, the next nine are about what happens to Jenkins’s society, though his prismatic viewpoint. And this prismatic viewpoint is made possible by his marriage to Isobel. She is the ‘pivot’ that makes it possible for Jenkins to think in retrospect about his past, and to assess the lives of others from his defined perspective as the husband of Isobel. None of this obtains in the case of Charles Ryder. His marriage to Celia is unhappy and falls through. He returns, fitfully, to Julia. He does not break free of the Flyte family, their house, their ‘family myth’ (as Powell might say) and the Brideshead-nostalgia it occasions in him.

And there is no family myth to even theoretically return to in *Dance*, as Jean is not from an aristocratic family. She is well-off. Mr Templer – as irascible as even his patient associate, Sunny Farebrother, finds him – is a successful businessman. But the Templer household, as visited by Jenkins in the first novel, has no poetry, no romance. It has a hint of adult sexual appeal (Lady McReith) and adult intrigue and malice (Farebrother and Stripling) but none of the elegiac nostalgia of *Brideshead*. As important as Jenkins’ affair with Jean – the prelude and consummation of which continues through the first three books – is to the early books of *Dance*, it is not all pervasive. Nor do a lot of people know of it: presumably the company at Foppa’s – Dicky Umfraville for instance – knows (Dicky eventually telling Lady Frederica is one way Isobel may get knowledge of the affair, which she seems to have, if Jenkins has not already told her) but few others. Templer does not seem to ever find out. Nor does Jimmy Brent. Nor, most likely, does Bob Duport. Colonel Flores, with whom Jean actually spent the most time of all her love interests, may know, or at least discern.

The point is not so much that it is a covert affair (made more so no doubt by Jenkins’s and – it must be said – Jean’s tact in not broadcasting it about) as that it is cordoned off from the world of the novel in general. This is hardly true of Charles’s love for Julia, which becomes more or less generally known. Moreover, whereas the essence of his relationship with Julia is that somehow it was passed through, or is an adaptation of, Ryder’s feelings for Sebastian, not only does Jenkins not have any sort of sentimental attraction to Templer but his relationship with Jean does not seem conducted through Templer. Indeed, the two do not seem very alike. One is left to conclude that the reason why Jean is Templer’s sister is that Powell, consciously or unconsciously, was determined she not be Stringham’s, and placed her in a world with no glamour (though as worlds surprisingly congenial; Jenkins always enjoys Templer’s company more than he thinks he will). This is a way of making sure *Dance* will not revolve around the narrator’s relations with a particular aristocratic family. And when Jenkins does
meet his aristocrat wife, in her family’s historic home (as in fact the real Powell met Lady Violet in such circumstances), it is as the house is being neglected by the eccentric Erridge, the leftist peer, whose standards of domestic maintenance have gone to the left of say the reformist Lord Warburton in Henry James’s *Portrait of a Lady* much as his politics have. Furthermore, Jenkins is introduced into the house by the dour radical Quiggin, somebody who consciously made himself socially unpresentable at Oxford! A far cry from Charles and Sebastian. Moreover, Thrubworth is not at all a house that the sequence feels any affect towards. Indeed, there is no single great house upon which *Dance* revolves. Jenkins never visits Glimber, and it is made clear that Glimber is not Charles’ ‘house’ in the way Brideshead is Sebastian’s, because Mrs Foxe only has a life interest in it. *Dance* is the furthest thing from “Glimber Revisited”. Nor does Jenkins ever visit Dogdene, the other house that seems to obsess a number of characters in the extended Sleaford family, in any event not major characters in the book. Malcolm Muggeridge may have thought Jenkins’s listing of his Welsh forebears in *The Valley of Bones* was *Stonehenge Revisited*, yet, whatever one may think of Powell’s genealogical preoccupations (I myself like them, and think they are fundamentally democratic, but I know many disagree) he does not derive auctoritas from them.

In an odd way, though – and this may really be going out on a limb – there perhaps is an inverted remnant, in *Dance’s* redeployment of *Brideshead*, of the sexuality in the Ryder-Sebastian relationship. When Widmerpool puts Stringham to bed in the third book, after his public drunkenness in the wake of the Le Bas dinner, there is something almost sexual in Widmerpool’s wrestling with Stringham as he tries to put him to bed and also in the sense of dominance Widmerpool tries to exert. Moreover, Widmerpool eventually marries Stringham’s niece, which is somewhat of a reprise of the Charles-Julia relationship, as Widmerpool first knows the family through the male school friend (or, in Widmerpool’s case, acquaintance). Marrying Pamela not only brings Widmerpool Stringham’s Modigliani, but it is an act of sexual revenge on Stringham, or at least an exerting of sexual appeal that Stringham could not have imagined Widmerpool would ever be in position to manifest, least of all in relation to his niece! Stringham, in other ways, is humiliated, much as Sebastian is humiliated, or at least rendered vulnerable, by his illness and his relationship with Kurt, his German lover. But there is an important difference: Stringham rallies in the end. That the reader of *Dance* learns of the full extent of Stringham’s heroism in the Japanese prison camp means that *Dance* has a less elegiac tone with respect to him than *Brideshead* does to Sebastian; the point is not only, as it were, that ‘the old order changeth’. *Dance*, for all its greater moral subtlety than *Brideshead*, unfolds a world where ‘the good guys’ (as Rex Mottram might put it) get more of a chance to win than they do in Waugh’s world. To counterbalance this greater manifest optimism, though, Powell braids in a melancholy counterpoint. Having Pamela be Stringham’s niece and not Stringham’s sister – in other words, having Widmerpool marry Pamela and not
Flavia – is yet another act of distancing and separation, another disappointment in a minor key, hallmarks throughout of Powell’s ‘revisiting’ of *Brideshead*.

Powell has other books by Waugh, most notably the war trilogy (which came out before Powell’s) on his mind when composing *Dance*. Also, no doubt the prewar novels of Waugh influenced those of Powell, and vice versa, as well as certain episodes of *Dance* (some aspects of the Andriadis party) having an early-Waugh flavor. But *Brideshead* was the Waugh text Powell seems to found both exemplary (in the most ‘Latinate’ sense of that word) insufficient; it was at once a touchstone for him and something that challenged him to, in his mind, do far better. One also sees Waugh’s War Trilogy – which narrowly preceded Powell’s own – as operating in a similar fashion. Powell’s decision to have the third trilogy of *Dance* be a relatively autonomous ‘War Trilogy’ may well have been influenced by Waugh. In any event, one sees the same dialectic operating with Waugh’s trilogy as occurred with *Brideshead*. *Dance* is less plot-centered (Powell’s war of course being much less overtly ‘exciting’ than Waugh’s) and also takes subtle stands on issues on which Waugh is declarative. Waugh is appalled the Sword of Stalingrad is on display at Westminster Abbey; Powell welcomes the USSR’s entry into the war as needed to defeat Nazi Germany, though is at pains to foreground the Soviet massacre of Poles at Katyn. Waugh’s trilogy ends with Crouchback’s remarriage and acceptance of his first wife Virginia’s son by the appalling Trimmer as his own; Powell’s with the aforementioned marriage of Widmerpool and Pamela. Powell, in his reviews of Waugh’s war books, commented that Waugh had given Guy and his new wife further legitimate children who would be disinherited by Trimmer; he did not see the point of this detail, and Waugh both in the second edition of *Unconditional Surrender* and his overall recension of the trilogy in *Sword of Honour* eliminated this detail. In a sense Powell was suggesting that Waugh do to his own ending what Powell did to it in his revisiting of Waugh’s war trilogy – make it less continuous, more ironic, with far less genealogical hope for succor and salvation, however mordant or ironic. It is in this vein – this abstention from using genealogical proliferation as overall narrative redemption – that we see in *Hearing Secret Harmonies*, the last book of *Dance*. *Dance* as a whole ends with a marriage – but the infinitely remote one of Sebastian Cutts and Clare Akworth. Powell defers while Waugh affirms. Powell, in his January 1989 journal entry on *Dance*, states that everything serious in Waugh is connected with the Catholic Church, and then says by contrast that this method is “avoided in *Dance*”. There is no proffering of an even tentative substitute for Waugh’s seriousness; simply avoidance.

Part of the Powell-Waugh relationship is that both were Tories, but of a very different stamp, and 20th century British conservatism is one of the most complicated political tendencies to grasp in recent cultural history. Waugh may well have been more in the camp of Lord Halifax and George Lloyd in the late 1930s, though Powell does not seem to have been entirely in the Churchillian camp, and the Powell-Churchill relationship is very complicated, made more so, I
believe, by the 5th Earl of Longford’s dying at Gallipoli. Lest I seem to be relentlessly casting Powell as the moderate and Waugh as the raving right-wing lunatic, I will say that I believe that, had Waugh lived into the 1980s, he would have been more of a ‘wet’ on economic policy than Powell was, and been more skeptical of Thatcherite ‘meritocracy’.

I want to close by acknowledging that what inspired this piece was the 2008 Julian Jarrold/Andrew Davies movie remake of *Brideshead*. I liked this much better than the 1981 miniseries, which not only seemed too languorous a treatment of a medium-sized novel but, partially because of the time in which it appeared, had all sorts of associations with young fogyism and neo-conservatism, or more correctly neo-paleo-conservatism, that, whatever one’s own position on these issues, certainly framed the viewer’s response in terms of their positions on such issues. The 2008 movie had an almost mythic remove from any ideological evocation; it told the story in a way that knew it had been told before, and therefore, like a Greek tragedy in which the audience is in on the plot, focuses us on the emotional energies of the characters. The movie highlights moral ambiguities in the book, such as Ryder’s opportunism and social-climbing, more than ever making me think that Waugh, in a bit of intertextual borrowing of his own, modeled this character on Zouch in Powell’s pre-war *From a View to a Death*. Yet it also gives a far more sympathetic sense of the Roman Catholic milieu of the book than did the earlier interpretation, elucidating what even Waugh’s detractors must concede is his genuine piety. I will always be a Powellian partisan in any Powell versus Waugh debate. But the movie not only made a good argument for *Brideshead*’s permanence as a literary work but also underscores the rich and diverse ways in which Powell revisited *Brideshead* in fashioning the far subtler, yet more ambitious canvas of *Dance*. Julia and Flavia, in their different levels of pathos, seem the perfect representatives of this difference.
Ferdinand Mount should be well known to the readers of this journal. Among other things, he has worked as a journalist, a non-career civil servant, a political consultant to the Conservative Party and editor of the TLS. He has also written 17 books, including 11 novels. Six of those novels make up what he named about half way through *A Chronicle of Modern Twilight*. These are all narrated by Aldous (“Gus”) Cotton and cover the period from his father’s adulthood in the 1930s until the last days of the 20th century. The primary focus is on the period 1944-99 but, unlike *A Dance to the Music of Time*, these novels reach back to a period before the narrator’s birth and overlap each other in later years to a considerable extent. Yet, it is clear from reading them that the inspiration for this substantial literary effort was at least to some extent the earlier cycle of Mount’s uncle, Anthony Powell. Together these two cycles offer a reflection of English society of the 20th century through the eyes of the two narrators, Nick Jenkins and Gus Cotton.

Mount has made no secret of his admiration for the writings of his uncle and their influence on his own fiction:

> I know that when I start a story I always have [Powell’s] shadow behind me, insisting on the importance of dwelling, of giving full value to a place, however superficially unmemorable, to a person, however dim or marginal they might be in the eyes of the world, to a moment which seems so inconsequential. (*Cold Cream*, 73)

Mount additionally notes Powell’s interest in exact particulars, the emphasis on getting things right [and noticing] people to whom we all too often do not give a second glance.

He summarizes this attitude as a “marvelous evenness of curiosity”. While there are obvious differences in the story, structure and style of the two cycles, in many ways they reflect the same detailed interest in people, places and things expressed through the narrators’ ironic detachment as a comic way of seeing (or seeing through) what it was like to live in England (or, at least upper middle class Southern England) during the 20th century.

Mount’s work has received less attention than that of his Uncle Tony. He once told an interviewer that it appeared to him that his fiction was read mostly by his family and friends if its sales were anything to go by (*Times*, 2 July 2008). Powell shows little evidence of having read any of the novels other than *Ampersand* which he found a “telling picture of [Mount’s] father” and “not unmoving” (J82-86, 11; *Faces*, 15). He says more than once that he considers Mount’s political writing superior to his fiction (J82-86, 147; J90-92, 80). Oddly, Mount himself
misses the opportunity in his memoirs to discuss his uncle’s attitude to Mount’s own fiction or whether the two of them ever had any extended discussion about the relationship between the two cycles. It is hoped that this paper will encourage dedicated fans of Powell’s works to dip into the cycle written by Mount and form their own assessment as to how much and how successfully he was influenced by *Dance*.

This paper will concentrate on the six novels in *A Chronicle of Modern Twilight*. Mount also has written three historical novels, which he groups into *Tales of History and Imagination*, as well as two contemporary novels falling outside of the cycle. These other novels are not discussed in this paper except to the extent that they may contribute to some point being made about the cycle.

**Story**

The first novel in which Gus Cotton appeared was *The Man Who Rode Ampersand* (1975) (“Ampersand”). Unlike *Dance*, which from the first volume promised to be part of a series, there was no indication in *Ampersand* that it would be followed by others. Indeed, Mount’s series title is not applied until the publication of volume 4, *The Liquidator* (1995), 20 years after *Ampersand*. Powell’s cycle was labelled as such from the first volume. Mount’s title is obviously inspired (if that’s the right word) by the 15-volume novel cycle of Henry Williamson, known collectively as *A Chronicle of Ancient Sunlight*. Since there is little to connect the two works, one wonders if Mount isn’t having some sort of joke here. The *Ancient Sunlight* novels could hardly be described as comic, and Williamson’s rather lame humour, such as it is, does not compare with the satire that characterizes Mount’s novels. Nor do the two narrators, Philip Maddison and Gus Cotton, have much in common. One thing the two *Chronicles* do share, in which they differ from *Dance*, is a first volume which starts with the story of the narrator’s father, rather than beginning with the story of the narrator himself.

In *Ampersand*, the life of Gus’s father, Harry Cotton is retold by Gus. Harry has careers as a jockey, barkeeper in a louche London club, army officer and, after the war, not much of anything. The book also describes Gus’s childhood and his coming of age in a village near Salisbury, ending in the late 1960s with Harry’s death in London and Gus starting a career in the civil service. *The Selkirk Strip* (1987) (“Selkirk”) skips ahead to the early 1980s, and Gus is now married with two children and still in the civil service where he will remain until the final volume. The story here revolves around the invasion of an obscure British possession by a neighboring country and the planning and execution of Britain’s counter-attack (a thinly-veiled retelling of the 1982 Falklands War). This affects every character in the novel in some way, in particular Gus who is demoted for a lack of commitment to the government’s decision to resort to military force. In *Of Love & Asthma* (1991) (“Asthma”) the time skips back to the late 1950s when Gus meets Joe Follows, a fellow asthma sufferer, in a clinic. They go up to Oxford
together, but Joe drops out and moves to the US for several years where he learns the principles of business in the marketplace and then returns to England to put what he has learned into practice. Gus and Joe fall out after Joe marries Gus’s girlfriend, Gillian. Joe’s business ventures, following an apparent initial success, eventually fall apart, and he is forced to flee to Ireland with Gillian in the mid-1970s. In The Liquidator Gus narrates the story of a tennis club acquaintance, Tony Allenby, who works for a firm of bankruptcy liquidators. Gus doesn’t participate directly in the action, which has little to do with the characters or stories from the other novels. Tony is the grandson of a Middle Eastern immigrant, Michel Halabi, whose story is also told. Michel changes his name to Michael Allenby, marries an English missionary and becomes a successful but philandering Anglican preacher. Tony unexpectedly inherits a family legacy and returns to the land of his ancestors only to be assassinated in a communal dispute.

Fairness (2001) begins in the early 1960s when Gus is still at university and covers the next 20+ years during which he tries but fails to establish a relationship with another student, Helen Hardress. They see each other occasionally as students and later begin affairs from time to time, but these are never quite consummated. She marries a friend of Gus, Bobs Moonman, only to run off with Bobs’ brother, taking along her five-year old daughter. She also starts a new career as a social worker and, in that rôle, helps solve an investigation in which Gus is participating as a civil servant. She is rewarded with a peerage for her government service. The final novel Heads You Win (2004) (“Heads”) takes place at the end of the 1990s and reunites many characters from the earlier books, in particular Joe Follows, who returns to London to have one last adventure in the business world, leaving his sick wife, Gillian, in Ireland. Gus takes early retirement and joins Joe and two other partners (an ex-con and science fiction writer – Keith Trull – and a reformed drug addict – Jade Treviso – who turns out to be Helen’s daughter) to form an executive headhunting firm (motto They picked themselves up, so can you”). Their success is phenomenal, and Joe floats a stock issuance to fund expansion. When its proceeds are invested with some sharp dealers from America, the partners, including Gus, lose the value of their stock. One of the partners, Keith Trull, has hedged against the stock’s price falling and has enough to buy out the headhunting firm, with Jade and Gus as partners, but Joe is excluded from the reorganized firm, ending his last adventure embittered and alone, Gillian having died in the meantime.

This plot summary does no more justice to Mount’s novels than would a similar summary of Dance. The story of Gus Cotton, his education, career and love life is not the reason to read these novels. That is merely the framework used by Mount to introduce dozens of secondary characters, themes and subplots which contribute the comedy and ironic social-historical comment that makes reading them worthwhile. The reader doesn’t really care what happens to Gus any more than the reader of Dance cares what happens to Nick Jenkins, as long as they each survive to the end of their narratives. These narratives are largely related to the
lives of others, with Gus and Nick as witnesses. In *Modern Twilight* Gus is a more active character (at least in some novels) than is Nick in *Dance*, but in both series, it is more what the narrator witnesses and how he sees and describes it than what happens to him that interests the reader. As Gus puts it when he meets Onora, one of Joe Follows’ old girl friends, at the sports day that opens *Asthma*:

> She and I were a part of the story, but it is not essentially our story, for the two of us were the survivors, not the victims, and victims get a better view. (*Asthma*, xiv)

### Time

Both novels extend over roughly the same length of time, about 56-57 years. *Dance* progresses chronologically, subject to occasional time shifts such as occur in *CCR, KO* and *BFDR*. *Modern Twilight*, on the other hand, moves forward fitfully with considerable overlapping periods. These overlaps create the same sort of mischief for Mount as the time shifts in *Dance* do for Powell. For example, in *Heads* Gus says he was married to Eleanor (née Dudgeon-Stewart) in about 1969, after Joe and Gillian went off together. And in *Selkirk*, he has a family that includes two children by 1982. Yet, in *Asthma, Liquidator* and *Fairness*, some parts of which take place in the 1970s and 1980s, Gus must be living in North London with this same family but never mentions their existence. Indeed, in *Fairness* he seems to lose four years between an Africa trip in 1968/69 and his return to England during the miners’ strike and three-day week which would be 1973/74. During that gap it seems that he would have at the same time been marrying Eleanor and pursuing Helen. By jumping forward, Mount avoids an awkward explanation. In *BFDR* Powell similarly loses a year. Both writers simply plow ahead without trying to paper over the problems created in managing such a complex chronology over such an extensive period of time. Time is obviously an important factor in novel sequences of these lengths, but neither writer bends his narrative to fit into time frames that would force him to alter the preferred flow of the narrative. Perhaps Mount is acting on the words of his fictional philosopher don in not being overly worried about these time gaps:

> The only puzzle about time, Scranell would say, is that so many philosophers wish to make a puzzle of it. (*Asthma*, xiii)

There has been considerable discussion about the position in time that Nick occupies when he is narrating *Dance*. Are the opening and closing scenes of the workers and their brazier occurring at the same time in 1971 as Nick sees them from Barnabas Henderson’s gallery or are they separated by the period between the 1950s when the narrative began to be written and the early 1970s when it was finished? One can debate that endlessly. This problem does not occur in *Modern Twilight* since there is no common connecting scene at the beginning and end of the whole sequence. Gus could be narrating each of the novels from about the time it was written. However, three of the novels (*Ampersand, Asthma* and...
Heads) open and close with time shifts similar to the workmen that open and close Dance. These scenes result in bringing back to Gus the memories of the events which he then proceeds to narrate in each of those novels, just as the workers around the brazier trigger Nick’s memories of the Dance narrative.

Both writers rely on the reference to historic events in the background to set the time in historic perspective. For example, Powell uses the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, the slump, the abdication, the Munich pact, various WWII events, the Cold War and the sixties as defining events. Mount uses D-Day, the miners’ strike and three-day week, the Falklands War, the fall of Communism and the Millennium celebration as similar markers. Their narrators rarely give you an exact date but talk about these historic events and then tell you that something is taking place a few or several or a number of years or months earlier or later. This can be confusing or even annoying but, in works of non-historic fiction, these “soft” time references are probably preferable to being reminded of a date as if the story were plotted against a calendar.

Narrators

The narrators of both cycles resemble each other in several ways, and Mount surely followed his uncle’s example in creating his narrator and choosing to write the narrative in the first person. Both are self-deprecating (Gus even more so than Nick) and both view the world through a similar ironic lens. Both resemble their creators in social class and education. Nick, however, hews more closely to his author’s life than does Gus. Thus, both Nick and Powell are born in the same year, begin in publishing after university, work for a time at scriptwriting, serve in the Army in similar positions, write books, and work in literary journalism after the war. Both live in London (Shepherd Market and Regent’s Park) before and after the war and both move to the country about the same time afterwards. Mount was born in 1939 and Gus in 1941. Gus goes straight into the career civil service after university and stays there until the last volume when he joins Joe’s business venture. Mount, on the other hand, follows a different career. After university, Mount works as a journalist, then goes to work for the Conservative party, takes a non-career civil service appointment under Margaret Thatcher, goes back to the Conservative party think tanks and journalism then ends his working life as editor of the TLS. He also writes numerous books, while Gus just plods away in the civil service. I’m not sure what one is to make of these differences except that Mount seems to prefer to distance himself somewhat more from his narrator than does Powell.

Both narratives are strictly first person as witnessed by the narrator unless otherwise noted. For example, in TK when Nick describes in great comic detail the demise of X Trapnel in the Hero of Acre, he admits that he was not present but is repeating the report he had received from Malcolm Crowding. Similarly, in Liquidator, Michel Halabi/Allenby’s courtship of Beatha, the missionary, is in the distant past and the assassination of Tony takes place in the remote Middle
Eastern country to which he has moved. Gus is not present to record these events. For these passages he relies on his cousin Theo Hale or Richard Shay, a travel writer who was visiting Tony at the time of his death. Shay in turn relied for details about the earlier period on his mother who lived next door in Battersea to Michel’s wife, Elizabeth (“Beathe”) Allenby, in her old age.

Both writers struggled with other forms of narrative voices before settling on the first person alter ego. In Powell’s pre-war novels, the earlier ones are third person or authorial narratives but the last, What’s Become of Waring?, is a first person narrative with an unidentified narrator. Mount’s first novel, Very Like a Whale (1967) superficially resembles Afternoon Men or Agents and Patients as they might have been written in and about the 1960s with a third person narrator. His third novel, The Clique (1978), is also about the sixties and is also written in the third person. Indeed The Clique, with a bit of adjustment, could easily be transformed into a Gus Cotton novel in which Gus takes his first job as a London journalist rather than a career civil servant. The characters and actions described are quite similar to those in the Gus Cotton novels and the hero, Gunby Goater, would fit comfortably into Gus’s persona. Perhaps because it takes place in the late 1960s, overlapping the period described in the previous novel Ampersand, Mount felt that there wasn’t room for Gus to have a journalistic career. And it may also be the case that, at the time The Clique was written, Mount simply had not yet decided to write a series based on the life of Gus Cotton.

Places

Place settings and references are of great importance to both writers. In his memoirs quoted above Mount recognized the importance that Powell accorded to a place, no matter how “unmemorable”. Powell gives careful consideration to describing or naming a place, or as Mount puts it, to giving the place “full value”. For example, one can frequently locate places mentioned by Powell in his books from the information he provides. In MP, the hat shop with the cat in the window where he runs into his Army colleague, Slade, after the war is still located on Jermyn Street (Bates). The fictional Café Madrid where Max Pilgrim performed in the thirties and was almost killed in an air raid in 1941 is still there between Leicester Square and Piccadilly Circus, called as it was then Café de Paris, not far from the Café Royal on Regent Street where Moreland and Jenkins met with Priscilla and Odo on the night of the same air raid. The bookshop on Sackville Street to which an unnamed soldier’s nose was glued when Field Marshal Alan Brooke (later Viscount Alanbrooke) was spotted by Nick is still right around the corner from the Café Royal (Henry Sotheran Limited). Similarly, X Trapnel’s Fitzrovia pubs can be identified. The Marquess of Sleaford and the French Polishers Arms are easily paired with the Marquess of Granby and the Bricklayers Arms, and from Powell’s description of their locations in BFDR, the Hero of Acre can be triangulated as The Wheatsheaf, all still there.
Mount also uses real but renamed places and provides accurate descriptions of their locations. In *Asthma* (224, 229) Gus comes upon Joe Follows in a London street after their period of estrangement. This is near a street called Jenny Wren Lane, named for the dolls dressmaker in Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*, which is the location of Follows House (the headquarters building for Joe’s business empire). It is described as a “sombre twisting street of warehouses on the edge of the garment district”. There are towering 1950s blocks nearby obstructing the view. This sounds very much like Brick Lane and its surroundings in London E1. The fictional name even has an etymology: Jenny Wren is cockney rhyming slang for Ben Truman beer (Jenny Wren-Ben). The Ben Truman brewery was located on Brick Lane. What the designation “garment district” adds to the locale is a bit more difficult to fathom since there seems to be no widely accepted such district in London, as there is in New York along 7th Avenue, south of Times Square.12

In *Fairness* (47-8), Gus is invited to visit Helen’s parents in their little house on Minnow Island. This is located near the Southern Region railroad line where it crosses the Thames between Richmond and Twickenham. Gus makes the wrong turn out of the station (since he was coming from London, he probably got off at Richmond) and ends up on the Surrey side, from which there is no access to the island. He retraces his steps to the ironwork bridge and crosses over to the Middlesex side, where there is a “high skinny footbridge” to the island (from Twickenham):

> There was no road on the island, only a winding footpath of crumbling tarmac between the bungalows, shacks and chalets scattered through the undergrowth at odd angles to one another, refusing to present a front even to the narrow path.

This is an exact description of Eel Pie Island and its approaches.

Both writers also create fictional places which may be wholly imaginary or inspired in part by real places. Powell does this a good deal with country houses. In *Dance* for example, Powell creates such country houses as Dogdene (the seat of the equally fictional Sleafords and site of many historic visits as well as a Veronese painting), Stourwater Castle (Gothic pile owned by Magnus Donners and full of his art collections), Thrubworth Park (seat of Lord Warminster; “a seventeenth century brick mansion of no particular interest”). The locations of these country houses are not hinted at, although Powell locates the Donners Brebner building (a “huge and shapeless edifice”) on the south bank of the Thames opposite Millbank, and the Ufford Hotel (sometime home of Uncle Giles) in Bayswater (“two corner houses in a latent, almost impenetrable region west of the Queen’s Road”) just as Gus locates Follows House.

Mount does much the same thing with London churches. St Wulfstan’s (“the cathedral of the docks”) is the East End church where Michael Allenby is rector in *Liquidator* (133):
its great white profile sailing like a ship through the tangle of rusty cranes and dingy brick warehouses … its soaring twin bell-towers, the spiralling crockets and finials which topped off its dizzy tower, its great light heart-lifting interior.

This church comes up again in *Heads* (110) when Gus wishes the evangelical services frequented by Trull would relocate to St Wulfstan’s from the equally fictitious St Thomas Didymus, aka. Tommy D’s (“a great barn built of that deathly greyish-yellow brick that makes you think of the Fens”). These Betjemanian (or Pevsneresque) descriptions make one wonder whether Gus’s churches may be made up of bits and pieces of real ecclesiastical edifices somewhere in London. Indeed, St Wulfstan’s seems to share certain characteristics with Hawksmoor’s East End churches. Another example is St Columba’s in North London: “a dear little Victorian gothic box. With a miniature green spire, modeled on the Sainte-Chapelle ...” (*Fairness* 93, 246).

Powell alludes several times to Mr Deacon’s antique shop in Fitzrovia which can’t be that far removed in distance and appearance from the offices of *Frag* magazine in the same vicinity (just off Tottenham Cross Road) over a similarly rackety shop maintained by their landlord (“G Clapp, Lifemonger, Books, Food, Toys, Talk, Love”). Indeed, *Frag* itself reminds one of *Fission*, the magazine founded by Quiggin and Craggs for which Nick worked after the war – one is modelled on the real magazine *Private Eye* and the other, on *Horizon*.¹³ Both writers also give extended satirical descriptions of the government offices where they worked: the Old War Office and Cabinet War Rooms (Whitehall) in *MP* and the Lower Marsh Street (Victoria) office complex in *Heads*.

In Mount’s book, a place can have a time dimension as well. In *Liquidator* (33-34) Tony’s employer acquires an auction company located at Trotter’s Corner, a particularly dreary patch of South Essex

> Just get on the North Circular and keep driving in the general direction of the North Sea … A boarded-up pub, the Jolly Highwayman, had gypsy caravans in its car park … The office was a pebbledash bungalow with a portakabin next to it.

In the subsequently published novel, *Fairness* (84), Gus has occasion to visit Helen at Trotter’s Corner where she is working in a food laboratory. Although later in publication, this visit takes place earlier in time, and the pub is still functioning:

> a big half-timbered pub with its lights on … with a creaking sign depicting some olden footpad of the North Circular.

In *Asthma* Gus recalls that the scent of oil derivatives relieves his asthma attacks when he smells the fumes in 1958/59 from the boat carrying Keith Trull and Richard Shay. He then recalls having had the same sensation in connection with
passing by a “ramshackle body repair shop under the railway arches” which is called the Cyprus Re-Spray and Valeting Centre (53). About 15 years later, as he is leaving Joe’s upscale London restaurant, The Shorewind, he mentions that he is walking “in the lee of the great dusty brick viaduct [with] the smell of paint from the Cyprus Re-spray and Valeting Centre next door” (240). This is a bit like the workmen and brazier in Dance since the later recollection in 1974 was the same one he had recalled as he was narrating the earlier events. He does provide a clue to this in the earlier narrative when he notes that the paint and body shop “has other associations as well,” meaning its proximity to Joe’s restaurant and scene of Joe’s street fight with Pod Pease, his rival at the time for Onora’s affections. In both cases the seemingly unmemorable moment of smelling the scent and the equally unmemorable place where he smelled it combine to bring back memories to the narrator.

If anything, Mount gives even greater prominence to geographic references than Powell. In his last two novels, the chapter titles are named for places, and places figure prominently in many of the chapter titles in Asthma. In at least one instance Mount offers an echo of a place reference mentioned in Dance itself. One of Joe’s business ventures is named Merrythought Property Developments which may have been located on the London site of the night club at which Heather Hopkins performed on the piano and Gypsy attended a fancy dress party dressed as Eve, accompanied by Howard Craggs as Adam.

Characters

The second feature of Powell’s writing that Mount says influenced him is recognizing the importance of a “person no matter how dim or marginal they might seem in the eyes of the world”. Both writers create characters out of material that others might not have given “a second glance”. In Mount’s work it is unusual to find a character not given a name even if that name is only mentioned once. And when a character is unnamed, it is usually for a very good reason, for example, to emphasize some comic or other feature possessed by that person.

Unnamed characters in Powell’s works occur not infrequently. For example, there is the “famous conductor” at Mrs Foxe’s party in CCR who circulates among the guests and appears several times in the narrative but is never named. At another party in LM (24ff) there are the unnamed swarthy young man with a black moustache who speaks only French and the prototypical but unnamed school friend of Priscilla. This somehow adds to the importance of these characters by creating an aura of mystery. Mount does the same thing to similar effect. For example, in Fairness (113-16, 239-40), Gus visits Bobs at the latter’s travel agency, and, while they are talking, “a large man with hairen brosse came out of an inner office and proceeded out of the glass door, breaking wind delicately as he passed my chair”. Bobs reveals that this is the manager, but doesn’t introduce him to Gus or reveal his name, suggesting some sensitivity on Bobs’ part. The
unnamed character reappears twice in the next few pages but is never further identified by Gus other than as the *en brosse* man. On his final appearance, apparently having been to lunch, he is “belching with equal delicacy as he passed”. When Gus later visits the travel agency after being told by Helen’s mother that Bobs has bought it from “the man,” he finds Bobs “in the inner office previously occupied by the large man with the hairen brosse”.

Both writers also make a comic point about a character’s lack of distinction by having their narrators confuse the character’s name. Powell did this in *Dance* with Betty Taylor or Porter, one of Templer’s wives. In *Fairness* (56-7, 228) Gus meets a barrister at a party in a London hotel given by his American employer (and former mistress) who has told him what a brilliant legal mind and great charm this man possesses. Gus remembers him only as

Pettifer, Pettigrew, some suitable name like that … If there had been a contest for the Best Use of Two Cubic Metres of Hotel Space, he would have walked it.

Later when the same barrister is encountered in the US, Gus sees a face he can’t at first recognise but then realises that it is “Pettifer, Pettigrew or whoever – the man famous for his charm”. The two secretaries at the *Frag* offices are collectively called “the Fionas” and continue to be so called over the years, even as replacements are hired.

Far more of Powell’s characters move from one volume to another than is the case with Mount’s. Indeed, only a few of Mount’s characters appear in more than two volumes and by far the majority stay put in the volume where they are introduced. Mount’s decision not to include his major characters in several novels probably contributes to their underdevelopment in comparison with their counterparts in *Dance*. Thus, there are no major characters in Mount’s novels of the stature of those in *Dance* – no Widermerpool, no Pamela, Moreland, Stringham or Templer. Joe Follows has some of Widmerpool’s characteristics as well as some of Templer’s but he’s also more human and even sympathetic in a way that Widmerpool is not. Helen Hardress, although something of a man-eater, lacks the malice of Pamela. Onora (the young woman “from Nottingham” who has an on-and-off relationship with Joe for several years) might be nominated for the Pamela Prize, if such there were, but she falls short of Pam’s record. Onora’s pinnacle of maliciousness manifests itself in her scheme to run simultaneous affairs with three men (Joe Follows, Richard Shay – the travel writer, and Pod Pease – an east London market trader), and then have a child without revealing which of them is the father, effectively making each of them responsible. Pam might have appreciated that scheme but actually having a child would have been too much bother.

Mount’s novels do, however, have numerous minor characters who seem to be taken from the Powell mold. They don’t bear special resemblance to any particular Powell characters, but they could walk into a Powell novel and feel
right at home. In *Ampersand* there are “Pip” Parrott (last of the Bright Young Things, 30s leftie, queer, good war, antique dealer); Tom Dunrabin (Hegel scholar, weakness for drink and the horses, lives on cakes and buns from Lyons and the ABC, dies of malnutrition in his Bloomsbury flat). In *Selkirk*, there are Alan Breck Stewart (unhappy childhood; bullied at dim public school; leftist in 30s – knew Parrott in fact; worked on outlandish government projects before and during the war; seduces a babysitter); and G Clapp (shopkeeper, landlord to *Frag*, caterer for their lunches, political intriguier, seller of occult articles). In *Asthma* there are Peter Dudgeon (knows Wystan and Norman Douglas, writes a sketch of his eccentric friends at the Mariner’s Rest that is found offensive, dies in that pub of a seizure brought on by an argument over the proper name and ingredients of an Italian pastry mentioned in *The Leopard*); Derek (former acolyte of Aleister Crowley, admonished by his wife not to talk of “all that” anymore, shops Keith Trull to the authorities for illegal importation of threatened butterflies); John Dudgeon (known as “Low” to be distinguished from his father who was known as “High”, extreme right wing politician and pamphleteer, leader of troop of young men); and Jervoise (investigator assigned to solve kidnapping of Joe and Gillian, from the Fraud Squad and not Criminal Investigations, speaks like Stephen Frye in skit with Hugh Laurie). In *Liquidator*, there is Geoffrey Pagan-Jones (director of City firm called Pagan, Jones & Co as result of a typo, staccato speech pattern like Uncle Giles or as if from a script written for British actor Geoffrey Palmer). In *Fairness*, Helen’s father, Martin Hardress, fits this mold (BBC sound engineer, argumentative to a fault, collector of military field telephones, lives on island in Thames). Sadly, although Peter Dudgeon, Martin Hardress and Alan Breck Stewart each shows considerable potential for future comic development, all die before the end of the only novel in which they appear.

Boy Kingsmill is one of the few characters to appear in more than two of the novels. He is first seen in *Ampersand* as a friend of Harry’s, racing fan, politician and owner of the Pyjama Club where Harry works as a bartender and meets other members of London’s bohemian world. Boy, in fact, introduces Harry to Pauline, who eventually becomes Harry’s wife. The club seems to be modelled on the Gargoyle Club which, in his memoirs, Mount says was frequented by both of his parents. It was owned by his father’s friend David Tennant who may therefore have contributed to some extent to Boy’s character, perhaps his charm:

> Boy can’t buy a box of matches without making the woman behind the counter think all his past life has been a preparation for that moment. *(Fairness, 15)*

Boy goes on to become a government minister in the 1970s, where Gus works for him as a young civil servant. He reappears in *Selkirk* where by 1982 he is an ex-minister but still keeps his hand in by hosting a meeting of the Conservative economists in the Cubitarian association. His last appearance is in *Fairness*, but it
predates by several years the Cubitarian gathering. He shows up in France in the early 1960s, an MP (Leicester Central, Conservative) but perhaps not yet a minister, with two of Harry’s racing buddies, the jockey Froggie O’Neill and the bookie Cod Chamberlayne, where they fix a race at the Ville’s racetrack by bribing a jockey and are later exposed in the press when the authorities banish them to England. The scandal seems not to have hurt his political career, however, since by the early 1970s he has become a minister, presumably in the Heath government.

With respect to narrators’ wives, both writers are rather reserved. Isobel Jenkins sometimes offers a tart comment but really doesn’t contribute much to the narrative. Eleanor Cotton appears in only two of the novels, Selkirk and Heads. Unlike Isobel she has a career – population historian – and has an affair (with her assistant, a librarian known as “the Bug”) but comes to regret it. Both wives do, however, contribute an interesting collection of characters from their families. In Isobel’s case this includes the whole Tolland family. In Eleanor’s, there are the Dudgeon-Stewarts (academic family descended from brass founders and tea merchants and maintaining a “flirtatious relationship with gentility”) as well as the West Country Dudgeons such as “High and Low”, Joe’s Uncle Peter and his mother “Monkey”, and the “Über-Catholic” parents of Thérèse (the babysitter seduced by Alan Breck Stewart).

**Inconsequential Moments: Music, Paintings and Other Details**

The third feature of Powell’s work that Mount says he feels is cast by his shadow is giving full value to “each moment which seems so inconsequential” and his “interest in exact particulars”. I take this as meaning Powell’s practice of referring to details based on events or objects that occur or appear during such inconsequential moments to mark those moments in the reader’s mind. Both series, for example, contain frequent references to music, tagging an otherwise inconsequential moment with a memorable tune, lyric or other musical reference. Both writers also make similar use of references to paintings but there is less of that in Mount’s work than in Powell’s. Finally, both writers use references to other details to lock in place seemingly unimportant moments.

**Music**

Mount uses music much the same way as does Powell. Powell’s musical references are fairly widely spread among classical, operatic, popular and religious music. His popular music includes numerous songs from the music hall or West End productions of the pre-1950 years as well as contemporary songs of that era such as South of the Border, famously sung by the Welsh troops in VB. Mount makes rather fewer references to hymns or opera but also refers frequently to classical music and contemporary popular music. In Mount’s novels, as in Powell’s, a character may overhear a song or tune somewhere in the background and then pick up another bit later. For example, in Ampersand (30-31), Harry’s
friend, the Irish jockey Frogmore ("Froggie") O’Neill sang out the words of Noel Coward’s *Green Carnation* at various points in their journey through the streets of Nottingham on the way to the next race. Upon arriving at CL’s place, Harry overhears a voice that later turns out to be that of Stella Slonimski (a German or Polish girl from Silesia with whom he falls in love) singing an aria ("Vedrai carino") from Mozart’s *Don Giovanni* (*Ampersand*, 43-44). Harry Cotton and his cousin Kate sing the song *Two Little Babes in the Wood* to the accompaniment of their employer, CL, beating time. Later in the army Harry hears the song again and joins in (*Ampersand*, 48, 196). Gus’s mother, Pauline, is described as “tone deaf”; she “wouldn’t recognize *God Save the Queen* if the whole room was standing to attention” (*Ampersand*, 111). In *Asthma* (32, 153, 159), Gus overhears the words of a popular song of the 1950s (“She wears red feathers and a hul-hul skirt ...” emanating from a caravan as he proceeds to the seaside; and he similarly overhears a recording of US country music singer Slim Whitman’s (b. 1924) “sad, twanging tremolo” played out over a car radio in Devon and then again when he is driving in the US, mewing out the word “Lonesome,” when Gus is on his way to visit Joe and Peggy in the town of Footprint, Wyoming. In *Fairness*, Gus and his friends hear the unidentified Edith Piaf (“the little woman in a black dress that looked so worn”) sing “*Quand tu me prends dans tes bras*” at the “Ville’s” casino (27); Gus sees himself as the operatic character Cherubino from *The Marriage of Figaro* when he has a brief affair with his employer’s wife (33, 81); Bobs Moonman possesses such trivia as knowing who, other than Bill Haley, made recordings of *Rock Around the Clock* (104). In *Heads* Gus plays a memory game in his doctor’s office going through the letters of the alphabet by surnames of composers (“stumped by I (Ireland) and Q (Quilter)”) (56-57) and attends a church service at St Thomas Didymus where he cannot remember the closing hymn, which “perhaps had been chosen for its dimness” (117).

The most extensive musical reference occurs in the concluding scene of the series when Gus hears a recording of a French tune played on the accordion as he is leaving the Millennium Dome with Joe on a stretcher and is reminded of the words “voici la ronde de l’amour” (from Max Ophuls’ classic 1950 French film *La Ronde*). He then muses what a mistake it is to think, as Joe had done, that love, or life, or opportunities missed come round again. He recalls that classical music tries to convey the same message, with final movements frequently based on a *rondo* “going round and round in a dance-like manner … [sounding] as if somewhere in there a dance is struggling to get out and be danced”. Although this finale is supposed to cheer one up after the “thunder and yearning of the earlier movements …,” the *rondo* only “sharpens [Gus’s] thoughts of mortality”. He doesn’t buy the upbeat message of the *rondo* finale but sees the real ending as more of a *danse macabre* because

the human condition isn’t any kind of recurrence, eternal or otherwise [but] just goes on until it stops. Whether you think it’s a bargain or not, it is an unrepeatable one.
As the accordion music disappears from earshot, Gus hears another loudspeaker playing “some old Motown numbers” as they pass out into the chill air (*Heads* 288-90). These two randomly overheard tunes, wholly out of any previous musical context, encapsulate Gus’s concluding thoughts to 1500 pages of narrative extending over 56 years of his life.

**Paintings**

Although references to paintings are thinner on the ground in Mount’s work than in Powell’s, Mount does use a painting prominently to add an ironic comment to the character of his civil service supervisor, Hilary Puttock. Before joining the civil service, Puttock was contemplating an academic thesis on the subject of Ambrogio Lorinzetti’s 14th century fresco of *The Allegory of Good Government* on the walls of Siena’s Palazzo Pubblico. In the sessions planning the government’s response to the Selkirk Strip invasion, Puttock is very much of the peace party until he sees that the wind has shifted to a military response, at which point he shifts with it. Gus sees Puttock’s general shiftiness and ambition to be contrary to the good government he so admired in Lorinzetti’s *Allegory* and is reminded of this painting in later moments when indicia of Puttock’s unreliability arise (*Selkirk*, 99; *Fairness*, 161; *Heads*, 74). In *Ampersand* (170-82), Harry Cotton rides a horse named for the Ford Maddox Brown painting *The Last of England*. In *Asthma* (109), Gus and Joe discover the works of the fictional painter, WF Haynes (“the Lancashire Giotto”). In *Heads* (81, 252) Gus is reminded of Joe’s resemblance to Francis Bacon paintings (“like a tormented figure … miserably hunched and twisted on a spindly chair”). He had previously wondered just where these Bacon figures, depicted against bare beige backgrounds, were supposed to be located in their torment, but now realised that “what they were doing was having a bad day at the office”.

In *Ampersand* (78, 143-44, 222, 224) there is an example of using both a painting and a book to link inconsequential moments in several scenes. Harry is reminded of the painting *September Morn* when he sees Stella naked and shivering after they made love in London and mentions it to her as a joke. She considers the painting “kitsch” but says there is a print hanging in her family’s flat in Silesia. When Harry visits her in Breslau, then part of German Silesia, he sees the painting at a moment of family tension, and Stella relieves the tension with a glance that reminds him of their earlier joke. He also spots a small collection of English books which includes HG Wells’ *The History of Mr Polly*. He begins reading the book as he waits for Stella’s father to fall asleep so that he can creep into her room, but apparently doesn’t finish it. He sees it again in the ship’s library on his long sea voyage home from the war. In the 1950s, when Gus visits Stella in the renamed Wrocław, now part of Poland, Stella points out the painting and tells him Harry will remember it. Upon Gus’s return home (after receiving news of his mother’s death) he is looking for topics of conversation which might take Harry’s mind off his grief and asks Harry if he remembers the painting.
Harry does not, but then asks “with an unexpected burst of coherence … ‘And Mr Polly? Did you read Mr Polly at all?’”

**Television**

Mount also makes numerous references to television which is rarely acknowledged to exist in Powell’s books, most of which take place before TV was widely available. But Mount uses these in the same way as Powell used the references to other media popular in his day such as the music hall. My favorites are the name applied to the bleak Essex wilderness off the North Circular Road to which Tony Allenby is relegated – Trotters Corner – where liquidated goods are auctioned off. In *Heads* (215) the company takes its employees on a paint ball war game, and Gus plays along except for refusing to apply camouflage makeup. Jade tells him not to be “such a Meldrew. Your great pink face will be visible for miles if you don’t”. In *Asthma* (320), Gus sees Richard Shay being interviewed on TV by an unnamed man in a bush-jacket walking up a stony hill, turning now and then to the camera as he explained where he was heading in an only slightly out-of-breath voice.  

**Food**

There are other seemingly minor details used by both writers to define an otherwise inconsequential moment. For example, in both series, hardly a meal is eaten without identifying what is being served. In *Dance* one of the most memorable meals is the cold mutton, beetroot and beer offered by Audrey Maclintick to Nick and Moreland on Nick’s first visit to the Maclinticks’ Pimlico flat (CCR, 113-16). In *Fairness* (116), Mount combines several details in one moment when Bobs Moonman, so distraught over his love affair with Helen that he could hardly walk, “stumbled over a box of leaflets for Bulgaria The Unusual Destination. In one hand he picked up a Styrofoam cup of potato and chive salad, which [Gus] hadn’t noticed on his desk”. In both cases the details of seemingly uninteresting food lock the moment in the imagination. Whether or not it was Proust who started this trend with his cookie could be debated, but Powell and Mount certainly carry on the tradition.

**Books and Writers**

Both cycles refer frequently to other writers and books, although Powell does this somewhat more than Mount. These references include both real and imaginary writers and writings. Because this sort of reference in Powell’s books has already been indexed in *Spurling*, what follows will primarily consider those in Mount’s novels.

Both writers refer frequently to Shakespeare, but Mount refers with equal frequency to Dickens, to whom Powell refers only sporadically. This is probably
due to the similarity of Mount’s major themes such as business corruption and even criminality to those which pervade many of Dickens’ books. In Heads Mount uses John Buchan’s novel *Sick Heart River* (about an adventure undertaken by a man who knows it will be his last) as a recurring reference point for the last adventure on which Gus and Joe embark. This is similar to Powell’s use of Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* in *HSH*.

There are fewer fictitious writers in Mount’s work and none that rise to the level of importance of Powell’s X Trapnel, but there are several who make an important contribution to the story. *Selkirk* contains an epigraph from a poem of TF Sturgis (and even a note of gratitude to his publishers for permission to quote). That poem (“Dead Ground”) is quoted several times along with another unnamed poem that has a “lavatorial theme” and is recited by both Alan Breck Stewart and Willie Sturgis, nephew of the poet and one of the editors of *Frag*. It turns out that the poet Sturgis, who wrote in the interwar period, was a colleague of Breck Stewart’s in the thirties when they were leftist homosexuals together.

Two fictitious writers are also introduced as characters in *Asthma* when Joe and Gus meet them on an excursion from the sanatorium. Richard Shay (“Rickshaw”) is a travel writer and storyteller who has traveled extensively and distinguished himself in WWII by riding a bicycle behind enemy lines on Crete. He sounds very much like Patrick Leigh Fermor, who was an acquaintance of Mount’s parents. Rickshaw reappears in *Liquidator* where, as noted above, he contributes to the narrative. The second writer is Rickshaw’s friend and sometime navigator, Keith Trull, who began by writing a peculiar sort of ghostly gothic tales which eventually develops into a new form of science fiction combined with time travel (“magifiction”); for example, a “whodunit set on a Viking longboat in the eighth century,” and titles such as *Cybertyphoon* and *One-eyed Dwarf* (*Asthma*, 300-01; *Heads*, 36). He reappears in *Heads* where he is one of Joe’s principal partners in his business adventure after serving prison time for importation of endangered butterflies and drugs.

WR Scrannel is a fictional Oxford philosophy don who hosts social gatherings similar to those of Sillery in *Dance*. Scrannel’s lectures and writings are admired and frequently quoted by Gus. In his memoirs, Mount tells us that Scrannel is based on the Oxford philosopher, JL Austin (1911-60), under whom Mount studied (*Cold Cream*, 178-79). In *Fairness*, when Gus is asked by Helen’s father for references to works of contemporary philosophy which he might read to bring himself up to date, Gus offers a reading list containing works by both Scrannel (*The Truffles in the Wood*) and JL Austin (*Sense and Sensibilia*). This would be something like a music programme in *Dance* containing both Moreland’s *Tone Poème Vieux Port* and Lambert’s *The Rio Grande*.

Scrannel, unlike Sillery, is married and has a daughter, Felicia (“Fisha”) who also takes up writing after treatment for manic depression. Gus turns up at the launch party for her first book (*Up Piggotts*) held in Trull’s London flat.²² Fisha’s
publishing career is short-lived, however, as her subsequent volumes, *The Bypassed Village* and *Best End of Neck*, do not live up to the expectations created by the success of *Up Piggotts*. Both Mount and Powell obviously enjoy making up titles for fictitious books. In *Asthma* (182-84) when Joe returns from the US, he urges Gus to read some of the books in the rugged individualist tradition which have helped him succeed as an entrepreneur; in addition to Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged* these include *Erickson of Idaho*, *The Waters Parted* and *Rock Standish*, *Brain Surgeon*. In *BFDR* Powell introduces many similarly ironic book titles, not to mention the oeuvre of St John Clarke.

Mount also introduces actual cameo appearances of real authors or their works. For example, Evelyn Waugh appears briefly in *Ampersand* (195, 199-200) where he visits Harry Cotton in North Africa during WWII after the latter’s hospitalization for TB. There is also, in *Selkirk* (29), a “quote” of Waugh’s description of the fictional Selkirk Strip (“this is a dreadful place. The mosquitoes live longer than the natives who are mostly sodomites”). Descriptions by Joseph Conrad and Graham Greene are also quoted. This is similar to the quote from Pepys’ Diary recounting his visit to Dogdene that appears in Powell’s *LM*. In the Prologue to *Asthma* (xiii), Gus wonders whether “an ordinary person would write twelve volumes, twelve in the old Chatto & Windus edition anyway, to witness the fact that people age, but works of art do not, or not so fast”. Does he have some real author in mind here, I wonder?

In *Liquidator* (55-70,100,103,168) Mount introduces a comic theme based on the Biblical story of Mary Magdalene. She first appears as a character in the musical play *Up Lazarus* in which Tony Allenby has the part of Lazarus. In the play, Judas is cross because spikenard was used for anointment of Jesus by Mary Magdalene when a cheaper oil could have been substituted. After seeing the play, Gus becomes somewhat obsessed with spikenard. He looks for it all over London and finally runs down a supply in the shop of G Clapp, where the *Frag* offices are located. Later he learns that Mary Magdalene is buried in the Church of the Second Redemption (from afar it appears as “little white domes sitting in a grove of silvery cypresses”; on closer inspection it becomes “the sweet old domes, those creamy chubby comforting eggtops”). This is located in the unnamed Middle Eastern family seat of the Halabis who are in charge of the phony miracle in which spikenard flows from her tomb at ten-year intervals on her feast day. This is similar to Powell’s use in *TK* of the fictional painting by the real artist Tiepolo of *Candaules and Gyges* based on a story from Herodotus. In both cases the combination of the fictitious with the factual creates such an appearance of reality that one is tempted to look up the references to see what part is real and what part imagined. Although there is such a thing as spikenard, the story of Mary Magdalene’s burial and miracle in a Church of the Second Redemption has no more basis in fact than does Tiepolo’s painting.
Writing

Mount attributes the success of Powell’s humour in part to his writing style.

Powell is certainly not averse to the one-liner that tickles you in the ribs, but he specializes in the slowly building comic crescendo, in which the absurdity of the action and its baroque elaboration on the page can leave you brimming with laughter.

Both writers also use unattributed dialogue which can require some effort to sort out who is speaking, but this usually contributes to its intended comic effect. In Mount’s work these dialogues occur most frequently in Ampersand but are scattered throughout the other volumes.

In one of the better examples of Mount’s comic prowess from Ampersand (73-4) he combines unattributed dialogue with the slow building comic crescendo much like that employed by Powell. In this scene, Harry is discussing his current tax bill with an Inland Revenue officer (having discovered that Inland Revenue will prepare a tax return free of charge) and hoping to throw him off the scent of his much delayed tax returns for several previous years. After making queries about school fees (not deductible) and school expenses (equally nondeductible), Harry turns the conversation to other subjects:

“You have no children yourself?” [Harry]
“Unfortunately not.” [Inland Revenue officer]
“Quite right. The expense is appalling.”
“It wasn’t really a question of choice. My wife’s health did not permit.”
“I’m very sorry.”
“She is much better now.”
“That’s good.”
“We play a lot of golf together.”
“Do you now?”
“For her health really.”
“You don’t care for it yourself?”
“At Tenby. The sea air.”
“I know Tenby. Very pretty place …”
“Of course I don’t like everything about golf, I must admit. Some of the people are, well, rather loud, if you’ll excuse me saying so.”
“I know just what you mean.”
“My wife says I shouldn’t mind. But I do … I don’t like going into the clubhouse … [S]uppose one of those men at the bar – you know they call the bar ‘the nineteenth hole’, you knew that? – suppose he makes a joke about his bladder.”
“His bladder?”
“My wife has just had her gall bladder removed. But you couldn’t be expected to know that.”
“No.”
“It’s the sort of joke they might make, though.”
“Exactly.”
“And it could be awkward. Perhaps I’m oversensitive, in fact I know I am, but I can’t be dealing with people who think that money’s everything.”
“Nor can I.”

My father relaxed. He had his man. I could already see him forming his judgment: “very nice chap, the bloodsucker, wanders from the point a bit, but awfully helpful and friendly.”

Another example of the slow build occurs in Selkirk (67-68). This is an interior monologue in which Gus offers a sort of disquisition on time spent in lavatories. It begins in the lav on the attic floor of the Frag offices which was

covered with photographs and captions cut from newspapers; a picture … of a pretty blonde labeled ‘the dynamic new management at the London Rubber Company’ and old snaps, curling at the corners now, of Nixon eating a plate of spaghetti, mouth slobbering around the strands, and Ford stumbling on the steps of an aircraft … [T]here were photographs of famous men; Steve McQueen, Samuel Beckett, John Betjeman and a fat man with a beard and crinkly eyes who looked as if he might be connected with nature conservation.

Gus then describes how he managed longer stays in the lavatory at home by taking with him a book, which he seldom read, but which provided cover when his mother questioned why his lavatorial sessions were taking so long: “‘reading, mum,’ was an answer that aroused some respect”. At his government office Gus

sought out a distant retreat between the broom cupboard and the stores, equally distant from the camaraderie of the canteen washroom and from the refinements of the facilities designated for senior staff only. In this lone lavatory, intended presumably for some storekeeper caught short or installed simply because the soil pipe passed that way and it was a pity to waste the opportunity, I could pass a half-hour undisturbed. There had been a brief period of tension when a security guard of Polish descent took to using it. I glared at him when he came in or I came out. After a couple of weeks … he switched his custom and I was undisputed sovereign again. Whenever I saw him in the street, magnanimous in victory, I gave him a broad smile which he didn’t return.

In Fairness (177) Gus provides a “baroque elaboration” in the Powell style of his feelings for Helen over the years as she gets up to leave from their last meeting prior to his posting to the US:

And once again I had the same feeling I had for her ever since we first met, which was not at all like the feeling I have had for anyone else.
before or since, not desire exactly, though not unmixed with desire, but a sense that she was at the centre of life, or of what life ought to be, not because she was a moral example (I could think of several cases where I couldn’t say she had done the right thing) but because she had a moral seriousness attached to her in some way, not as a weight or a burden, more like a fragrance. Could seriousness be a fragrance? What was seriousness anyway? Going on at things seemed to be the way most people thought of it, not holding back or stopping half-way for second thoughts or a cigarette. Was that always so admirable? Somehow it wasn’t a topic I could discuss with Helen. I actually thought how much I would have liked to see her father again and have this sort of conversation with him.

In *Heads* (143-49), Gus is enlisted by Pam Riley-Jones to find her husband, Ian, Gus’s civil service colleague, after he goes missing. He begins by sneaking as a guest into Riley-Jones’ club, the Jordan (“named after William IV’s mistress, [it] lurked apart from the rest of the clubs, in a backstreet behind Hanover Square”) to see what he might find out. Three of the members (only one of whom is identified by name – Grimwade), a bit curious as to the presence of an unknown guest, take him aside and, after being told that he is waiting for Riley-Jones, offer him a drink and, needing a fourth, a game of bridge:

“He doesn’t owe you money, does he?” [Grimwade]
“Good Lord, no.” [Gus]
“Because that’s a lost cause.”
“Why, did he owe you?”
“No, not a penny. But getting money back from him, you might as well …” He paused, looking for a simile strong enough.
“Getting money back from whom?” said the cadaverous man with a good deal of lip pressure on the whom.
“Riley-Jones, fellow who hasn’t turned up.”
“Oh, him.”
“A legend for it was he?” I pursued.
“What, who?”
“Riley-Jones, borrowing money and not paying it back.”
“Oh, yes, yes, one diamond, I think”. Grimwade’s bald head was deep in his cards.
“You understand that as a Grimwade Diamond?” enquired the fourth man turning to me.
“Um. I’m not sure what a Grimwade Diamond is,” I said. “I thought we weren’t playing any conventions.”
“It’s not a convention as such. He just plays it, nobody else does.” Grimwade looked immensely pleased with himself.
“Well what is it exactly?”
“I couldn’t possibly comment.”
And so forth for another half page until, after losing the hand, Grimwade sums things up:

“I mean you come in here, you’re not a member, and you say you’re meeting a chap to play bridge and he doesn’t show up and you can’t play bridge and you start asking all these questions.”
“You should have told him about your Diamond,” the fourth man said, mildly.
“It didn’t arise. We weren’t vulnerable.”

Not quite as good, perhaps, as “Please amplify,” but very close.

In Mount’s novels similar passages of heightened comedy can be predicted to occur in any scene in which Hilary Puttock (civil servant) or Sir Wilfred (the Minister of something whose surname is never revealed) appears. Similarly, any gathering of the Frag staff can be counted on for humour. But aside from those scenes of predictable laughter, the comedy can occur at the most unlikely times – for example, in Asthma after discovering the rather grim details of the kidnapping of Joe and Gillian, Gus is interviewed by Jervoise, the investigator assigned to the case, in what turns out to be one of the funniest dialogues in the book; in Liquidator where the visit of a blind piano tuner interrupts Richard Shay’s narration of Tony Allenby’s death; or in Fairness where Gus takes his meals at the Edgbaston College of Food and Domestic Arts (Hotel and Catering Dept) and discusses with Brian, a student and waiter, the finer points of both food and the miners’ strike. Likewise, tragedy can strike following a sustained bout of comedy, such as the apotheosis of Peter Dudgeon in the Mariner’s Rest following the argument over an Italian pastry’s proper identification (which recalls the similar death scene of X Trapnel in TK) and the suicide of Martin Hardress in Fairness following the annual ball of the sound engineers.

Both writers also rely on social events to bring characters together. In Mount’s books these occur with about the same frequency as they do in Powell’s but they tend to be shorter and more focused. Moreover, except in Ampersand, there seem to be fewer coincidental meetings between characters attending Mount’s social gatherings than is the case in Powell. In those relatively rare instances where a long-absent character appears by surprise, an explanation for his presence is usually provided. For example, in the case of the law student who used to be a squatter next to the tennis club at the start of Liquidator and who appears at Geoffrey Pagan-Jones’ retirement party several years later, a perfectly logical explanation is provided – he is now a solicitor working on the redevelopment of the tennis club into an executive housing estate. When Gus and Joe are reunited in Ireland, the meeting is arranged by a third party Gus is visiting, but Gus, having checked his host’s location, anticipated the possibility of (but hoped to avoid) the reunion because he knew Joe lived nearby. In the case of Jade Treviso’s inclusion as a partner in the headhunting firm, there seems more of an opportunity for a coincidence, since she had no obvious connection with the partners other than
Gus (who plays no role in partner selection), until her mother tells Gus that Jade knew Trull because they were in therapy together. Of course, their happening to have been in the same therapy sessions would qualify as a coincidence but somehow at one remove from those that bring Powell’s characters together. Indeed, it seems as if Mount is practicing some form of coincidence avoidance in order to forestall the charges often brought against Powell that he is overly dependent on that device.

**Conclusion**

Although both novel cycles are written in the same comic satirical tradition of 20th century English literature, one should not assume that reading Mount’s novels will be a matter of Powell (or Waugh) revisited. There is a lot more going on. For example, there is a stronger (and darker) Dickensian strand throughout Mount’s novels. There are characters such as bookies, smugglers, street market traders, business fraudsters, horse race fixers, ex-cons, philandering clergymen, a stalker, etc., as well as do-gooders comparable to Mrs Jellaby or the Cheeryble Brothers, who would not be comfortable mixing with the characters on the pages of Powell’s novels. There is even a little of Trollope’s Mr Melmotte in Joe, perhaps more than a little. These Dickensian or Trollopian themes become stronger in the last two novels but never totally suppress the comedy.

What is important for the lovers of comic novels such as these is how the comedy is presented. And in both Powell and Mount, it is quite similar and hovers throughout. Even in the darkest passages, comedy is ever ready to manifest itself and offer some relief. There is always an edge of irony over which the narrative is likely to flow. Moreover, there is the risk that reading these books will produce uncontrolled laughter, sometimes without warning.

There are other differences between Mount’s novels and those of Powell. These do not necessarily make them less interesting for Powell fans and, in a certain sense, open up possibilities that could have been tried to good effect by Powell. For example, Mount introduces themes involving a wider world. Gus and his father travel to Ireland and over the course of the novels this Irish theme offers a small insight into the changes that have taken place in that country over the period of the narrative. Gus also travels several times to the US and makes trips to Southern Africa and Poland, as well. His father is visiting Nazi Germany at the time of Kristallnacht and experiences WWII action in North Africa. A substantial part of Liquidator takes place in the Middle East, even if Gus himself doesn’t travel there. Powell’s narrator, on the other hand, spends most of the time in England. Indeed, even within England, Mount’s narrator moves further afield than does Powell’s, with considerable time spent in the City and East End of London and even Essex, well beyond the City, and he makes forays into the North and East Midlands, as well as a trip beyond English borders to South Wales. Aside from his time in the Army, Nick rarely ranges further east than St.Paul’s or further north than Oxford and makes only two recorded trips to the Continent.
Moreover, philosophy, politics and economics and the world of commerce play a somewhat larger role in Mount’s novels than they do in Powell’s, which is not surprising given Mount’s lengthy career with the Conservative Party and Thatcher government. The political satire extends beyond the meetings of civil servants. In Selkirk, for example, Gus attends a reception of the “Cubitarians” who are said to be connected to the conservative Chicago School of economics, and he refers to the fictional economists associated with this group (e.g. George Elbow) in later novels. In Fairness, Gus addresses a similar gathering while on his posting to the US in the Reagan years. Gus also refers throughout the novels to the philosophy of Scrannel (which I am assuming to be similar to that of JL Austin), although in that case there is, perhaps, a counterpart in Powell’s novels based on Nick’s frequent references to Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy and Vigny’s military treatise. And while Peter Templer and the Donners-Brebner connections bring the commercial world into Dance, that theme is less developed than it is in Modern Twilight, particularly the last four volumes.

It is disappointing that Mount’s books have not received more attention. The books are not an easy read, and it takes some patience to develop a concerted interest. But the same could be said of Dance. It helps to keep a pencil at the ready, as there is no equivalent to Spurling. And, as with Dance, Mount’s novels produce more rewards from each subsequent reading, or they have in my case at least. By then, one knows the story and the major characters and can concentrate on the thousands of details in which can be found the nuggets of ironic humour that may have been missed the first time around. The comedy that proceeds from the minor characters, moments and places that hang from the structure of the life and times of Gus Cotton are what makes worthwhile and enjoyable the reading of Mount’s six-volume description of 20th century life.

Appendix 1. Bibliography

Publication Details of First London Editions and Approximate Chronology of Novels in F Mount’s A Chronicle of Modern Twilight

Other Works Consulted
F Mount, Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes (London: Bloomsbury, 2008)
F Mount, “A Military Philosopher”, reprinted in Seeing Secret Harmonies: 
Pictures of Anthony Powell (London: TLS/The Wallace Collection, 2005)


**Note on citations.** Page cites and quotations are from London first editions except for Ampersand and Asthma where London paperbacks of 2001 (Vintage) and 1992 (Mandarin), respectively, are used. For page cites to Powell’s works, London first editions are used; for cites not otherwise noted, refer to Spurling.

**Appendix 2. List of Characters Mentioned in Article “His Shadow Behind Me”**

Characters are listed alphabetically by first name as they appear in the text. The list does not include those characters mentioned only once or twice whose relevant identifying features are recited where they appear in the text.

**Alan Breck Stewart.** Elderly cousin of Gus’s wife Eleanor. Must be well into his 60s by 1982 when he appears in Selkirk. Named for character in RL Stevenson’s Kidnapped. Attends public school in the Northwest housed on a former Navy training vessel. Bullied. Homosexual. Left-wing in ’30s. Takes part in Pyke Survey of German public opinion just before the war. Worked on eccentric projects during war such as ships made of ice (“Habakkuk Project”) and something called “Breck’s broomstick,” a collapsible aluminium device intended to self-propel user along railroad track or up a cliff-face. Working for FAO in 1980s when he visits Gus and Eleanor on way back to Rome after attending his mother’s funeral. Has homosexual encounter with one of Gus’s friends and seduces a babysitter, Thérèse, another of Eleanor’s cousins, who becomes pregnant. Suspected of having leaked position of British troops to foreign invaders of Selkirk Strip during visit for FAO; this becomes a cause célèbre in British press. Does a bunk from London but Gus tracks him down in North where he commits suicide.

**Aldous Cotton.** See Gus Cotton.


**Eleanor Cotton (née Dudgeon-Stewart).** Wife of Gus who pursues a career as a population historian. Edits 15th century Crupper Diaries and is working on diaries of her ancestor, Scorpe Dudgeon. While researching the latter, has affair with her assistant, the librarian Chris Allison (“The Bug”) but she breaks it off when she realises he won’t leave his family.
Elizabeth (Beatha) Allenby. Grandmother of Tony Allenby. Anglican missionary in Middle East where she meets Michel Halabi (qv) whom she later marries in England. In her old age she lives next to the house of Richard Shay’s mother where she tells the story of her life with Michel Halabi which is recounted in *Liquidator*.

G Clapp. Owner of shop off the Tottenham Court Road which is also location of *Frag* offices. Among articles for sale are those dealing with the occult and the ointment spikenard mentioned in the Bible. Also caters *Frag* lunches and party for the Cubitarians.

Geoffrey Pagan-Jones. Director of firm of bankruptcy liquidators in City as well as tennis club in North London to which Gus belongs. Employer of Tony Allenby and looks favourably on Tony Allenby’s courtship of his daughter Josie until Tony mishandles repossession in Dagenham. Retires from firm and tennis club only to arrange for club’s conversion into executive flats.

Gerald Moonman. Editor and co-founder of *Frag* magazine. Son of clergyman from village adjacent to one where Gus spends childhood. Fond of cycling the countryside in search of Saxon churches. Private life something of a mystery but wife drops him to run off with someone in BBC Current Affairs, after which he himself runs off with his brother’s wife, the former Helen Hardress, and her 5-year old child, Beryl. Ultimately returns to his wife.


Helen Hardress. Born 1942. Educated as science concentrator probably Cambridge or redbrick university. Meets Gus in France in early ’60s where both are babysitters. Has science-related jobs in London after graduation and meets
Gus from time to time but rejects his advances. Starts up affairs with unsavoury characters such as ex-con in Essex and Waldo Wilmot (qv) while working for his mining company in Africa. Leaves that job during African visit by Gus when they discover what is being mined is contraband weapon-grade material. Upon return to England starts up affair with Bobs Moonman who was introduced to her by Gus thinking rather campish Bobs of no likely romantic interest to her. While Gus is on assignment in the US she becomes engaged to Bobs and later marries him. Takes up social work after marriage. Has child and later runs off with Bobs’ brother Gerald (qv). Meets Gus again when she testifies before a government commission he is assigned to that is investigating child abuse in the Northeast. Testimony helps solve case. Elevated to peerage as Baroness Hardress of Minnow Island in 1989. Marries Hilary Puttock (qv).

**Hilary Puttock.** Civil servant. Supervisor of Gus Cotton in virtually every civil service position he mentions. At one time known as “Puttock of the Home Office”. Vacillates in supporting military option in Selkirk Strip crisis; demoted but rises again to supervise Gus at time of both their retirements in 1998. Marries Helen Hardress (second marriage for both) in 1980s.

**Ian Riley-Jones.** Colleague of Gus, rival for promotion in civil service, shares Gus’s stand-offish attitudes to his superiors. Married to Pam and lives in Much Benham (“at the expiring Hertfordshire end of the Chilterns”) where they raise flat-haired retrievers. Childless. Suffers seizure at Gus’s retirement party but recovers after own retirement, only to dump Pam and run off to start restaurant with his boyfriend in South Wales where Gus runs him down at Pam’s request. Returns to Pam after boyfriend commits suicide.

**Jade Treviso (née Beryl Moonman).** Born c. 1972. Daughter of Bobs and Helen Hardress Moonman. Intelligent and well-educated (University of London). Becomes involved with drugs and fraud after marriage to Andrew Treviso with whom founds software company, Blotting Paper. Convicted of business fraud but reformed after rehab and joins as partner in Heads You Win. Flirtatious relationship with Joe Follows broken off to marry photographer (some say paparazzo), xandre.

**Joe Dudgeon Follows.** British entrepreneur. Born 1941. Son of Anthony and Rhoda “Monkey” Follows. Educated Oxford. Asthma sufferer from childhood. Lived in US 3 years in 1960s. Returned to England to acquire or found several businesses which went bust in property crash of 1974. Married Gillian. Moved to Drishill, Cockburnstown, Ireland after collapse of businesses. Returned to England 1998 to found executive search firm Heads You Win from which resigned in 1999. Has a habit of slightly mispronouncing words (eg. *Guns of Navalone* for *Guns of Navarone*) and anticipates clichés by using them before they achieve currency (eg. he used the words “Brit” and “supportive” before they became fashionable). “He naturally absorbed the new, sometimes not getting it quite right, but never offering any resistance. He was verbal flypaper” (*Asthma,*
25-26; 132). Even though his group of 25 or so companies goes under in 1974, Gus notices later that many are revived by new owners who bought them on the cheap, convincing Gus that Joe’s businesses contained “some vital spark which needed only a following wind to fan it into flame” (*Asthma*, 228, 314-16).

**Keith Trull.** Knowledgeable sailor and navigator. Accompanies Richard Shay on travels. Writer of gothic stories and later science fiction. Starts butterfly farm but is arrested and jailed for importing endangered species as well as drugs from South American sources. While in prison studies psychotherapy and becomes associated with evangelical group that meets at Church of St Thomas Didymus in Docklands. One of partners in Heads You Win. Hedges right way against stock price and saves enough to buy out the company after market for stock collapses.


**Onora.** Blond beauty with artistic talent. Contemporary of Joe and Gus. Started life as plain Nora in Nottingham. Works as beach umbrella attendant, companion to Joe’s uncle, Peter Dudgeon, briefly at BOAC and then founds her own company, onora designs (“hates capital letters”). Strong-willed, becomes single mother after multiple affairs (with, *inter alia*, Joe) for whom she designed Shorewinds Restaurant in London.

**Peter Dudgeon.** Uncle of Joe. Lives in Devon near the asthma clinic where meets Joe and Gus. Argumentative. Wrote satire “*a la Juvenal*” about his chums that did not go down well. Dies of seizure in pub arguing point of proper name and ingredients of pastry (*mandorlati*) described in *The Leopard*.

**Pod Pease.** East End street trader specializing in furniture. Married with two children in Walthamstow. Has street fight with Joe over affections of Onora.

**Richard Shay.** Known to friends as “Rickshaw”. Travel writer and spinner of tales. Served in Crete behind German lines in WWII. Lives in Battersea with his mother and suffers breakdown after her death. Helps Gus narrate story in *The Liquidator*.

**Stella Slonimski.** Silesian girl friend of Harry Cotton with excellent singing voice. Visited in Breslau, Germany, in late 1930s by Harry who unsuccessfully tries to get her to leave because of Jewish ancestry on her father’s side. Survives war by marrying Pole. Visited again by Gus as schoolboy in what is by then Wroclaw, Poland.

**Tony Allenby.** Friend of Gus at North London tennis club. Worked as executive in City bankruptcy liquidation firm of Pagan, Jones & Co. Transferred to
subsidiary auction firm in South Essex where cocks up a repossession and is dismissed. Marries director’s daughter Josie Pagan-Jones (whom Gus also admires) over her father’s objection. Appears in provincial theatourals; good singing voice, indifferent actor. Works in Colchester for unemployment services. Two children. Inheritd fortune from Middle Eastern relatives. Moves to homeland where he changes his name to Antoine Halabi. Assassinated in communal violence in late 1980s.

**Waldo Wilmot.** American entrepreneur specializing in mining industry. Meets Gus and Helen in France. Hires Helen in Africa as lab technician and they have affair. Grotesquely fat. Rough wit, not much irony, interested in naval history. Gus visits his Virginia estate while on US assignment and delivers address on UK economy to group of Reaganite economists, politicians and businessmen. Swindles owners of Heads You Win after their stock flotation by selling them US companies with serious undisclosed flaws. Destroys value of Heads You Win shares he took in payment by shorting them on London market. Not your average nice guy.

**Willie Sturgis.** Editor of *Frag*. Nephew of poet TF Sturgis and source of knowledge about his 1930s connection with Alan Breck Stewart. Uncovers and publishes story of Breck Stewart as source of leak to invaders regarding British troop positions in Selkirk Strip.

**Notes**


2. Brief descriptions of the characters such as Gus Cotton who are referred to more than once are provided in Appendix 2 to avoid repetition in the text.

3. The first printing of *A Question of Upbringing* does not bear any series title, although there is a reference to “succeeding volumes” on the dust wrapper. Powell considered this a misprint and directed that the second printing contain *The Music of Time* on a half-title page with a single asterisk underneath to indicate that this was the first volume *Faces*, 215).

4. The *Modern Twilight* title for the series may just be another example of Mount’s self-deprecating humour which permeates Gus’s narrative. If so, the joke’s on Mount since it seems a rather poor choice from either a marketing or a literary perspective.

5. Powell describes Robin Mount, on whom Harry was based, as “not well adapted to earning a living” (*Faces*, 15). It has been suggested that Robin Mount contributed to the character of Dicky Umfraville. While it is true that both were accomplished horsemen, inclined to melancholy and may have some physical resemblance to each other, Umfraville was older and shorter, and unlike Robin Mount, was serially divorced, spent a considerable time in Africa, and had to work for a living, holding several different jobs. His last was land agent at Thrubworth, and Ferdinand suggests that his father considered that form of employment after the war but never actually took it up. So, yes, he may have made some contribution to Umfraville, but
others, such as Patrick Tritton, seem to have chipped in rather more. See AP Society website (www.anthonypowell.org): “Character Models Used in Dance”.

6 Gus’s first person narrative of Modern Twilight extends from Gus’s childhood in WWII (he remembers D-Day) until 1999, say 56 years (not including the third-person vignettes as written by Gus describing his father’s pre-war life), while Nick’s narrative of Dance covers 57 years from 1914 to 1971.

7 See Appendix 1 for an approximation of the start and finish of each of Mount’s narrative periods.

8 Fission began publication in October 1946 and Nick says it had a two-year run. But when Nick visits his old school at the end of BFDR, it is autumn 1947, and Fission has already shut down.

9 In Heads, Helen’s daughter Jade is said to be 26 in 1998, which means she was born in 1972. But in the earlier novel Fairness, Jade was born after Helen marries Bobs Moonman which took place sometime following the miners’ strike in 1974. This is similar to Powell’s referring to Moreland’s death as having occurred in about 1950 based on the opening scene in CCR, as is convincingly argued by John Gould, only to decide later to keep him alive until 1959 when he dies in TK. So, glitches happen. See John Gould, “A Mural to Music, and the Time to Come: The Future in A Dance to the Music of Time”, Proceedings of the First Biennial Anthony Powell Conference (Greenford, 2001), 124.

10 Both writers graduated from Eton and Oxford. According to their memoirs, Powell’s parents were upper middle class while Mount’s were both from upper class families. Mount’s upper class parentage did not, however, bring with it titles or substantial income, but only rather miserly trust funds that gave the family just enough to live modestly and get by. In economic terms, they were probably less well off than the Powells. Mount has now inherited the baronetcy that eluded his father but doesn’t use it. The family estate in West Berkshire has passed to a female cousin through some sort of trust.

11 This seemingly gratuitous change in birth date may have been used to provide the basis for a joke. Harry Cotton chose the name Aldous for his son because he was reading Brave New World on a hospital ship returning him from military duty in North Africa when he received news of Gus’s birth in 1941 (Asthma, 202-04). In fact, a similar incident dictated the naming of Mount’s sister, who was born in 1941, as Frances Leone Mount, when Robin Mount learned of her birth while his ship was docked off Freetown, Sierra Leone Cold Cream, 125).

12 It may also be the case that Mount created a wholly fictional location for these scenes by combining elements of the Brick Lane area with those of the London “garment district” north of Oxford Street where many shop fronts display “Trade Only” signs in the windows.

13 Although Gus doesn’t write for Frag, he is a friend of the editors Gerald Moonman (who grew up in the next village and is the older brother of Bobs) and Willie Sturgis (nephew of the interwar poet, TF Sturgis), and he frequently attends lunches at their offices. From the sound of them, these lunches are quite like those held at the offices of Private Eye.

14 In many ways Breck Stewart (and the narrator’s attitude towards him) reminds one more of Apthorpe in Waugh’s Men at Arms than of any particular character in Dance. But then Apthorpe would have been right at home in Dance as well, at least in the war trilogy.

15 Mount also follows Powell’s practice of adopting a description of a character based on his or her physical resemblance to an animal or some other characteristic and then mentioning that resemblance whenever the character appears. For example, Helen’s mother reminds Gus of a squirrel, Michel Halabi of a vole, and Geoffrey Pagan-Jones of a tortoise; and Keith Trull has a mouth shaped like a cupid’s bow.

16 Others include Hilary Puttock, Ian Riley-Jones, G Clapp and the editors of Frag.
In his *Journals*, Powell identifies CL, a rather imperious woman horse owner, as Dorothy Paget (1906-60) for whom his own cook, Doris Mears, used to work (*J82*-86, 11). The real life Ampersand is probably her horse Golden Miller which won the Cheltenham Gold Cup five times (1932-36). See also *Cold Cream* (54) where Mount confirms that his father once rode on this horse.

Jean Duport in *Dance* was similarly but less severely afflicted since she would recognise *God Save the King* only because everyone stood up (*MP*, 190).

The Trotters are the brothers Derek and Rodney, market traders in South London dealing in goods of questionable provenance in *Only Fools and Horses* (BBC, 1981-2003). Meldrew is the irascible and totally bald Victor Meldrew played by Richard Wilson in *One Foot in the Grave* (BBC, 1990-2000) and the interviewer is, of course, David Attenborough (b. 1926).

At the end of *Heads*, in the scene described above under *MUSIC*, the French accordion tune is heard emanating from a coffee and baguette place decorated in the French tricolours just after Gus had passed a Kentucky Fried Chicken stall.

Mount also uses plants as marking details, especially in *Selkirk, Fairness* and *Liquidator*. Powell seems to have little interest in plant life.

*Asthma* 258-66. Her title is a reference to the fictitious Piggot’s Hill on the outskirts of Oxford where she lived with her family and where Joe maintained lodgings outside of college to facilitate his active love life with, *inter alia*, Fisha.

Mount includes Pepys as a character in his historical novel *Jem (and Sam)* (London, 1998) which consists of the autobiographical writings of his fictitious ancestor Jeremiah Mount who was an acquaintance and rival of Pepys.

Michel Halabi points out that, although the family role is popularly described as liquidator, in fact it should be liquefactor.

F Mount, “A Time to Dance”, *op cit.*, 85, fn 1.

This description of the lavatory collage may even be inspired by Powell’s own extensive collage of similar cuttings on the lavatory walls (as well as other walls and ceilings) in Powell’s basement boiler room at the Chantry where Mount was a frequent visitor. See for example *Cold Cream*, 70 (“the walls of the basement [were] covered with a scrap mural of almost Sistine Chapel proportions”).

Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now* Waldo Wilmot, the shady American entrepreneur in *Fairness* and *Heads*, has an even stronger resemblance to Melmotte, right down to his physical appearance and rhyming surname. There is also an American character in *Asthma* who might be called “The Man Who Read Trollope”. This is Ed who lives in the same Footprint trailer park as Joe and claims to have read all of Trollope. He comes to a bad end, after raping Joe’s girlfriend of the time and then blowing his brains out.
Powell on Nicolas Poussin’s *A Dance to the Music of Time*

*By DN DeLuna*

I’ve always been very keen on painting, and known a lot of painters at one time or another and so on.¹

Anthony Powell in his memoirs relates that he undertook his novel *A Dance to the Music of Time* after drawing up a mental balance-sheet on the venture, with much tallying on the negative side. Just one of the negatives, he recalls, was the daunting task of making decisions on technical matters immediately and once and for all – notwithstanding his headway already made on the choice of narrative mode:

An essential point to decide, from the opening sentence, was whether to use a first-person or third-person narrative … I concluded that the first-person narrative was preferable in dodging the artificiality of the invented ‘hero’, who speaks for the author.²

Another negative, although one not explicitly noted, was the risk of inadequately translating his Poussinian vision into narrative fiction. We hear:

I found myself in the Wallace Collection, standing in front of Nicolas Poussin’s picture there given the title *A Dance to the Music of Time*. An almost hypnotic spell seems cast by this masterpiece on the beholder. I knew all at once that Poussin had expressed at least one important aspect of what the novel must be.³

But Powell wasted no time in rising to this challenge of translation, as we know. Taking the direct approach of representing Poussin’s painting in opening pages of his novel, he through his avatar Nicholas Jenkins in *A Question of Upbringing*, even employs arresting lyrical prose to simulate the painting’s spell-binding effect. In “Poussin’s scene” Nick recollects:

the Seasons, hand in hand and facing outward, tread in rhythm to the notes of the lyre that the winged and naked greybeard plays. The image of Time brought thoughts of mortality: of human beings, facing outward like the Seasons, moving hand in hand in intricate measure: stepping slowly, methodically, sometimes, a trifle awkwardly, in evolutions that take recognizable shape: or breaking into seemingly meaningless gyrations, while partners disappear only to reappear again, once more giving pattern to the spectacle: unable to control the melody, unable, perhaps, to control the dance.⁴

Yet now Powell incurred further risk. For no good translation of Poussin’s picture could be accomplished without correctly interpreting its iconographic art. Did Nick Jenkins, “who speaks for the author”, get it right? Does the picture indeed
have as its subject the four ages of man as reflected in the motive of the Dance of the Seasons, who move to the music of Time? (Fig 1).

When *A Question of Upbringing* was published in 1951, it is unlikely that this risk of misinterpreting Poussin’s masterpiece would have seemed as considerable to Powell as it would have a decade or so later, when an academic revolution in Poussin studies embraced what might be referred to as the ‘economic interpretation’ of the work.\(^5\) On this view, Poussin’s four dancers are allegorical depictions of Poverty, Labour, Wealth and Luxury (or Pleasure), and their round dance to the music of Time is a symbolic expression of mutable economic consignments in society. This interpretation – first advanced by Poussin’s friend and biographer Pietro Bellori – was accepted and embellished in modern times by Erwin Panofsky, then by a number of distinguished art historians, notably Anthony Blunt and Walter Friedlaender, during the so-called Poussin renaissance of the 1960s.\(^6\) Consequently, from that moment on, the interpretation of the painting so famously described by Powell was largely dismissed in the academy. And for some decades now, the economic interpretation has prevailed in learned precincts.\(^7\)

In this essay, I recover Powell’s own efforts to defend his seasonal interpretation of the painting, both in subsequent portions of his *Dance* and in his memoirs. I also make some attempt to assess the validity of his defence. As we will see, Powell made a strong case for his reading of the picture, and he managed, at all events, to demonstrate the inferiority of the economic interpretation.

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Powell, it seems, ever believed in the correctness of his reading of Poussin’s masterpiece on display in *A Question of Upbringing*. This can be gleaned, to begin with, later on in his novel. In *Temporary Kings* (1973), Nick Jenkins claims Poussin for one of his most admired painters. In *Hearing Secret Harmonies* (1975), he refers to Poussin’s “picture where the Seasons dance, while Time plucks his lyre to provide the music” and he entertains the notion that Widmerpool’s naked ritual dance may be a perverted rendition of “the Seasons’ dance” in Poussin’s painting. Then there is the final sentence of the novel: “Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence”\(^8\).

Nick, with this subjective re-description of the painting, responds both to the dissolution of his familiar world, captured throughout Powell’s last trilogy of volumes, as well as to the news he has so recently heard of the death of Kenneth Widmerpool. Nick here is behaving in character, employing wry hyperbole that is an expression of his stoic composure.

But too, let us see, Nick’s statement is laden with dramatic irony, which is tied to an attempt by Powell to corroborate his reading of Poussin’s picture by adding more detailed interpretive work. Indeed, Powell hereby strengthened his case, but his means were subtle: into Nick’s final allusion to Poussin’s painting, Powell in effect embeds another allusion to the painting, one that is prepared by couching
Fig 1. Nicolas Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*. The Wallace Collection. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the Wallace Collection.
Fig 2. Detail from Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*

Fig 3. Cosmographic icons in early European occult literature.
(a) From French copy of Bartholomaeus Anglicanus, *De proprietatibus rerum* (circa 1230-40).
(b) From Robert Fludd, *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica* (Oppenheim, 1617).
(c) From Stefan Michelspacher, *Cabala* (Augsburg, 1615).
(d) From Mylius, *Opus medico chemicum* (Frankfurt, 1618).
astrological symbolism in final pages. This reference is not directly focused on Poussin’s four dancers and Old Time, though. Rather, it concerns Poussin’s icon featuring the sun-god Apollo, who appears in the upper middle of the composition riding his chariot on a cloud formation.

In this space aloft in Poussin’s picture, Apollo Helios faces outward holding spread-eagle the hoop of the zodiac, within which he is almost fully encircled (Fig 2). This icon is a diagrammatic description of the celestial girdle of the universe divided into the four seasons of the year. The seasons are marked suggestively by the cross-like splay of Apollo’s body, by the twisted angles of the ecliptic at the left and right sides of the band, and by effects of chiaroscuro. The quarter-points on the horizontal axis thus represent the spring and fall equinoxes, at the left and right respectively. The vertical quarter-points mark the solstices of summer, at the band’s zenith, and winter, at its nadir. These cardinal coordinates are further signposted on the zodiacal hoop by the discernible glyphs of the constellations Gemini and Cancer at the 10 and 11 o’clock positions, which render by inference the stellar constellations identified with the equinoxes and solstices of ancient days: Taurus at 9 o’clock, in the spring equinox; Leo at 12 o’clock, in the summer solstice; Scorpio at 3 o’clock, in the fall equinox; Aquarius at 6 o’clock, in the winter solstice. Here was an icon created by Poussin to hint at the archetypal design of the round dance beneath it in the composition – namely, the design of a Providentially regulated order of sublunary nature. Its genre would have been familiar to contemporary readers of early European occult literature (Fig 3).

Powell, to be sure, was equipped to easily recognize its meaning and function by virtue of his early work on John Aubrey, that 17th century English man of letters and astrological virtuoso. In the last sentence of his Dance, dramatic irony results from Nick’s lack of awareness that the “formal measure” of Poussin’s Seasons – which seems to him now disrupted by the pathetic suspension of the music of Time – in effect contains Powell’s allusion to the quintessential calculus for which Poussin’s icon stands: that calculus which structures from on high the cycle of the seasons and its corollary the ages of man. Needless to say, Nick is unaware of Powell’s astrological symbolism by which this submerged allusion is activated.

Powell, in employing astrological symbolism in the final pages, tapped into astrological thought with which Poussin’s image is pregnant. Herein he was selective, however, since this material needed to be put in sync with the events and reflections of Nick’s story. Accordingly, Powell’s symbolism, together with its borrowed theoretical underpinnings, concentrates on the subject of the turn from autumn to winter, with its metaphorical freight. In Poussin’s icon, this seasonal cusp is mapped at the dark lower right quadrant of the intersected hoop, in the area bounded by Apollo’s left arm and left frontal loin.
At the very close of Nick’s narrative, as throughout the novel’s final trilogy, old age and death is upon him and his generation, while outside autumn has given way to winter. The scenario is poetically condensed in his description of the turning-point reached when he steps out of the Barnabas Henderson Gallery, where he has just heard the news of Widmerpool’s death:

> It was getting dark outside, and much colder. A snowflake fell. At first that seemed a chance descent. Now others followed in a leisurely way.\(^\text{12}\)

Another version of this scenario is rendered through Powell’s lamination of astrological symbolism at three moments in Nick’s narrative. The setting and action of the first such moment is Nick sitting alone with the aged Henderson, who has newly set up his gallery after managing to break out of the bizarre spiritualist cult led by Scorpio Murtlock at Widmerpool’s house. He listens to Henderson tell of the power struggle in the cult waged against “Scorp” by Widmerpool, who coveted that messianic role (\textit{HSH}, 260). Here Powell obliquely calls forth a graphic, often used in old astrological charts, of the turn from October to November: showing the centaur Sagittarius, with his bow and arrow, squaring off in battle with the stinging Scorpio. For this, Powell has exploited figurative associations available in the name ‘Scorpio Murtlock.’ And he has cast the preternaturally opportunistic Widmerpool in the role of Sagittarius by capitalizing on the familiar characterization of centaurs as creatures of primal will. Not accidentally, moreover, Widmerpool’s astrological sign is that of his benign twin Nick, who identifies himself as “the Archer” to Mrs Erdleigh in \textit{Acceptance World},\(^\text{13}\) and so is a Sagittarius.\(^\text{14}\)

Powell’s second superimposition occurs when Nick is still inside the gallery. Henderson’s conversation is interrupted by the arrival of the news carried by Bithel of Widmerpool’s death, the details of which concern Widmerpool’s fatal collapse during the ritual naked jog of the cult members before dawn. Here Powell has Widmerpool indeed succeed Scorp by cosmic design. Widmerpool, operating like his ambitious and swift-footed centaur of the zodiac, gallops ahead of Scorp and his pack, shouting in the end “I’m leading, I’m leading now” (\textit{HSH}, 269). His demise, too, proceeds according to the grand plan, since Widmerpool now takes on the Archer’s role of harbinger of winter, that season of death under the sign of Capricorn.

Powell’s third stroke of symbolic layering concerns the ascendancy of the horned goat Capricorn and the beginning rise of Aquarius in the House of Saturn. Nick in the wake of his visit to the Henderson Art Gallery stands before the bonfire at his home and envisages a scene of Saturnalia. He recalls a typical “torrential” passage from Robert Burton’s \textit{An Anatomy of Melancholy} on the “vast confusion” of human worldly affairs of the hour, “tempestuous times … now comical then tragical matters”. And he pictures anew the winter set-piece of men huddled around a fire, with which the novel began (\textit{HSH}, 271-72).\(^\text{15}\) Significantly, this
very day that he stands before the pyre appears to coincide with the immediate aftermath of the mid-December revelry of Saturnalia, when Capricorn passes beyond full ascendancy, to be superseded by Aquarius. For, we hear that, not more than “a week or two” has passed since his visit to Henderson’s gallery; that winter has fully set in, “The day was not cold for the season, but an autumnal spell of mild weather – short, though notably warm that year – was now over” (HSH, 243-44); and that a scenario as turbid as it was cacophonous is now remote,

The thudding sound … ceased altogether at the long drawn wail of a hooter – the distant pounding of centaurs’ hoofs dying away, as the last note of their conch trumpeted out over hyperborean seas. (HSH, 272)

Powell even adds a humorous apocalyptic note by having the description of the Saturnalian revelry in retreat look like a thematic mirroring in obverse of mythical figures and scenic contexts in great paintings of the cosmogonic arrival of the marine Venus.

When Nick then states “Even the formal measure of the Seasons seemed suspended in the wintry silence” he does not realize that his remark is deeply ironic in more than one sense. He is unwittingly wrong and right. Wrong because oblivious to the meaning of Poussin’s icon, which intimates that any disruption of the transcendental measure of the round dance is impossible. Right because Poussin’s icon, and the round dance to which it is keyed, do not project “wintry silence” as a philosophic measure, but instead sunlight and animated cheer. In cosmological terms, this implied order of things can hardly reckon with the mythic partial impotence of Apollo Helios, whose descent into the lower hemisphere which ushers in the winter season of darkness and death is therefore given slight emphasis in the picture.

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Some five years after completing his Dance, Powell defended his seasonal interpretation of Poussin’s painting in argumentative prose. This was in the third instalment of his memoirs, published in 1980, where he tells of his vision

in the Wallace Collection, standing in front of Nicolas Poussin’s picture there given the title A Dance to the Music of Time. An almost hypnotic spell seems cast by this masterpiece on the beholder.

To which he adds:

The precise allegory which Poussin’s composition adumbrates is disputed. I have accepted the view that the dancing figures (three female, one male) are the Seasons, though some suppose they represent the Destiny of Man, as conditioned by Pleasure and Riches, Poverty and Work, an explanation perhaps now more fashionable. The young man, lightly clad, wears a crown of laurel, so he may be Fame. Wealth (if she
is Wealth), in a yellow petticoat, does no more than touch the wrist of her sister, Poverty (if she is Poverty), whose head is crowned with a turban. Phoebus drives his horses across the heavens; Time plucks the strings of his lyre. There is no doubt a case for asserting that the dancers are not easily identifiable as Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. They seem no less ambiguous as Pleasure, Riches, Poverty, Work, or perhaps Fame.17

Powell’s commentary looks like nothing more than a pithy afterword to his reading of the painting set forth in QU, wherein he remarks critically on the rise to prominence of the rival economic interpretation of the picture. But Powell is, as well, replying to a recent article on the painting by Anthony Blunt, published in The Burlington Magazine in 1976. Entitled “Poussin’s ‘Dance to the Music of Time’ Revealed” Blunt in this piece proclaimed the validity of the economic interpretation in the light of two new discoveries. One, that the biographer André Félibien, who in 1688 tendered a description of the painting closely based on Bellori’s account, nevertheless re-identified the dancer on the left with a floral wreath – said by Bellori to personify Luxury – as Pleasure. Two, that, while the figures of the round dance have been identified as four females in all descriptions of the painting to-date, scrutiny of the dancer whose back faces the viewer reveals this figure to be a lithe young male.18

Blunt believed that these finds bolstered the economic interpretation. In his view, Félibien’s re-identification of the dancer as Pleasure greatly improves on Bellori’s description. It is, he suggests, more iconographically apposite; “why should Lusso have no attribute beyond a wreath of roses in her hair?” And it reads out of the round dance a more logical circuit of socioeconomic fortune; to wit,

[p]overty is converted to riches by work and riches lead to pleasure, which however can again lead to poverty if indulged to excess.

As for the male dancer, whom Blunt still identifies as Poverty, he proposes that “Poussin may have intended an allusion to the poverty which is often the lot of the poet or the artist,” since this figure wears a laurel crown.19

Powell’s commentary of reply is strategically primed. It casts the history of interpretive uptake on the painting wider and longer than that forged by 20th century academic specialists on Poussin like Blunt. Additionally, Powell bandies Blunt’s own revelations, because, as he sees it, they tend to discredit rather than support the economic interpretation. Thus Powell sought to hoist the assertive Blunt, and his academic fellows who subscribe to that interpretation, by their own petard.

Throughout, Powell adopts a method of covert polemic against Blunt, making no overt mention of him or his recent piece. But, straightaway he speaks of the “almost hypnotic spell cast” by the painting on its viewers. And in so doing he recalls and revises – with an intent to expose continued over-reliance on Bellori in
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academic quarters – Blunt’s statement in his article that, in interpreting the painting, “modern writers on Poussin – including myself – have been so hypnotized by the authority of Bellori’s description”20. Powell, keeping to his procedural strategy, notes the true genders of Poussin’s four dancers (“one male”) without acknowledging a debt to Blunt for this. Herein he does not even digress to confess that he himself had gone on record, in an interview for the BBC in 1975, describing Poussin’s picture of “the Four Seasons … with these rather jolly girls dancing round”.21

In Powell’s commentary, there is, too, sharp-witted polemic which underlies his bland statements that the difficult symbolism of Poussin’s painting is disputed and he is of the view that the four dancers are the Seasons. Powell is, for one thing, intervening to count in his own contribution to iconographic study of the painting, by stating “I have accepted the view that the dancing figures (three female, one male) are the Seasons” [my stress]. Blunt had drastically narrowed the field of relevant interpreters, only recognizing the work of those “modern writers on Poussin – including myself” who have fixated on Bellori’s description. Powell is also interjecting the reminder that his view and the economic interpretation are at the centre of a long history of unresolved interpretive conflict over the work. Blunt had reduced the dispute to modern readings guided by Bellori and the derivative Félibien, that is, to only versions of the economic interpretation. In thus exclusively valorising “an explanation perhaps more fashionable” Blunt can be seen promoting a mere academic fad, Powell suggests.

Powell illustrates his point about the longstanding interpretive dispute over the painting by telescoping that history into the story of its current title in the Wallace Collection. His reference to “Poussin’s picture there [in the Wallace Collection] given the title A Dance to the Music of Time” not only indicates his awareness that iconographic disputes in art history are in part waged through, no less than reflected in, the titles created for works. It comes charged with his more particular knowledge of this phenomenon in the case of Poussin’s painting, some of the details of which could have come through his friendship with Sir Francis Watson, director of the Wallace Collection from 1963 to 1974.22 Poussin’s picture had been known by many different titles prior to its acquisition by Sir Richard Wallace as “A Dance of the Seasons” in 1870. Among the titles in the camp of the economic interpreters were “Il Ballo della Vita Humana” (1672), “L’Image de la Vie Humaine”, “[L]e Ballet de la vie humaine” (1853), “The Image of Human Life, or Pleasure, Labour, Riches, and Poverty, dancing to the sound of a Lyre, played on by Time” (1820), and “An Allegory of Human Life” (1837). Titles that expressed the seasonal interpretation included “4 stagione che ballano al suono del Tempo” (1713), “[L]a vie humaine oer des saisons” (1769), “Die Vier Jahrzeiten” (1787), and “La Danse des Saisons ou l’Image de la vie humaine” (1844).23 In the Wallace Collection, the painting was called “A Dance of the Seasons” when the collection was opened to the public in 1900. Then in 1909 this title was expanded to “The Dance of the Seasons to the Music of Time”.

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Fig 4. Detail from Poussin, *A Dance to the Music of Time*.

Fig 5. Poussin, *Hercules between Virtue and Vice*, Stourhead.
Just later, in 1913, an archivist persuaded by the economic interpretation catalogued it as “A Dance to the Music of Time,” the title by which it has been known in the Wallace Collection ever since. Powell goes on to represent Blunt’s new version of the economic interpretation, but he does so neither faithfully nor in good faith. True enough, he reduplicates the substitution made by Blunt – who takes his cue from Félibien – of Pleasure for the figure identified by Bellori as Luxury, and he now recognizes that the figure at back centre is a young male. Yet he reverses the figures assigned by Blunt to Poverty and Labour, and he adds the suggestion that the male dancer with a laurel crown may represent Fame, if not Labour. Powell hereby reproduces Blunt’s version of the economic interpretation, but, with subversive intent, he intrudes what only seem to be minor alterations.

By switching the particularized identifications, Powell exposes Blunt’s source in Félibien as a most unreliable authority on the painting. Blunt in his piece touts Félibien as an “authority, almost as respectable as Bellori … who [ie. Félibien] no doubt examined the picture when he was in Rome in the 1740s”. Nevertheless, in Félibien’s description, Poussin’s dancer on the right wearing a turban, whom he identifies as Labour, is apt to be confused with the dancer at back centre, identified as Poverty. For Félibien writes, surprisingly, that this figure on the right has thin and pallid arms (“les bras décharnez & san couleur”), and a tired body she seems to exhibit to Poverty, to whom she looks with an expression of misery (“Cette femme regarde la Pouvreté, & semble lui [sic] montrer qu’elle a le corps las, & tout abbatu de misere”). In Poussin’s picture (Fig 4), both the turbaned dancer and the male dancer have arms which are muscled-ripped, not thin. His arms are thinner and more wiry than hers, although they are not paler. And whereas her head and upper torso are turned away from him, he looks sideways toward her, while his arm stretches out and upward in the same direction and grasps her hand at head-level.

Powell’s suggestion that this epicene male may represent Fame extends Blunt’s own notion that he wears a laurel crown that may be the reward of his exalted labour in the visual or poetic arts. However, as Powell and every Etonian taught about the Choice of Hercules realized, Fame and Pleasure would not belong together (and especially not dancing in lockstep, paired side by side) in an allegorical round dance that symbolized a circuit of human destinies, socio-economic or otherwise. They constituted divergent trajectories. In Poussin’s Hercules between Virtue and Vice at Stourhead, for example, the antithetical paths are sublime glory after apotheosis and a terrestrial good life in the here and now (Fig 5). In this work, a female pedagogue confronts Hercules, who appears with a wife-like attendant and child, clearly modelled on Venus and Cupid. The instructress looks ethereal and points her hand upward toward beams of celestial light which are just visible beyond craggy cliffs. Poussin’s treatment of the Herculean topos is only unique in the degree of emphasis placed on the lack of
any intersection between the courses of Virtue and Vice, or more particularly in this case, Glory and Pleasure.\(^2\)

What is more, Powell in his commentary holds a brief against the economic interpretation in general by insisting on the superiority of the seasonal interpretation on grounds of iconographic consistency. Repeatedly he rehearses (with the subversive tweaking) Blunt’s rendition of the putative circuit of economic consignments in which the symbolic dancers are supposedly caught up, each time however narrating the scheme in a way that is literally contrary to its logical sequence but consistent with the actual counter-clockwise movement of Poussin’s dancers. In Blunt’s account, the logic of the economic circuit consists of Poverty leading to Wealth by way of Labour, and Wealth leading to Pleasure that, if overindulged, leads back to Poverty. Like all other accounts of the logical flow of this so-called “wheel of fortune scheme”\(^2\) this one fails to register that Poussin’s four dancers move in an opposite direction. So when Powell states,

> There is no doubt a case for asserting that the dancers are not easily identifiable as Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. They seem no less ambiguous as Pleasure, Riches, Poverty, Work, or perhaps Fame,

he tacitly puts the case that, unless Poussin is to be accused of gross iconographic incompetence, a reading of his round dance which takes it for the Wheel of the Seasons is “no doubt” superior.

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Some years after completing his memoirs, Powell in an entry of his journals for 1988 records being at The Chantry “[g]lancing at a couple of works on Poussin” while “running through all the art books, taking each as it comes in the shelf”. He is struck by learning that “The Music of Time (if you prefer, Dance of Human Life)” may have been just one of the Poussin paintings commissioned by Cardinal Rospigliosi, later Clement IX; and he reflects fancifully that he seems to have shared in common with Rospigliosi a taste for copious and difficult pictorial symbolism.\(^3\) There is nothing in this entry to indicate Powell’s active engagement with scholarship on Poussin – which I however have sought to record in detail. For, taken together with his interpretive work on Poussin’s masterpiece in his great novel, this contribution to art history deserves to be factored into assessments of the achievement of his own _Dance_. ■

### Notes

2. _Faces_, 213.
3. _Faces_, 214.
4. _QU_, 2.
5. I thank Perry Anderson for suggesting this label.


8 *TK*, 43; *HSH*, 33.

9 Also discernible, though barely, is Pisces at 7 o’clock.

10 Contemporary and near-contemporary astrological professionals that figure in Powell’ *John Aubrey and His Friends* (1948) include William Lilly, John Dee, Henry Coley and John Gadbury.


12 *HSH*, 271. Further citations to this volume are given parenthetically in the text.

13 *AW*, 9.

14 As was Powell himself, born 21 December 1905.

15 Indeed, construction workers gathered about a bucket of burning coke reappear outside the gallery.


18 Anthony Blunt, “Poussin’s ‘Dance to the Music of Time’ Revealed” *The Burlington Magazine* 118 (1976), 845-48. On the male gender of the dancer at back center, Blunt points out: “Both Bellori and Félibien describe the four figures as all being women, but it seems clear from the painting itself that Poverty is a man”; “the actual musculation and the features of the face seem to point definitely to the fact that the figure is a man” (848n).


Interestingly enough, Blunt on Félibien was echoing a remark by Powell himself that the painting “has a curious hypnotic feeling”. Powell made this remark at the time he spoke of Poussin’s four dancers as “rather jolly girls” – in the BBC interview, “Anthony Powell’s Dreams – An Interview with Julian Jebb”, The Listener, 11 September 1975, 247. I am grateful to Rod Hamilton at the BBC sound-archive in The British Library for retrieving this piece for me.


For details, see Beresford, 53.

In performing these manipulations, Powell’s imagination may have been stirred by the description of the allegorical figures of Poussin’s round dance in the Fesch sale catalogue of 1844, in which a double allegorical scheme is advanced: “Le Printemps, l’Été, l’Automne et l’Hiver, sont représentés sous la figure de quatre jeunes beautés dont le costume autant que l’expression des traits rappellent encore les diverses conditions humaines: l’Opulence, la Pauvreté, le Plaisir et la Gloire” (George, Commissaire-Expert, Galerie de Feu SE Le Cardinal Fesch, 61).

Blunt, “Poussin’s ‘Dance’”, 847.


Blunt, “Poussin’s ‘Dance’”, 847. Blunt here follows Panofsky, who first suggested that Poussin’s round dance was a symbolic image of an economic “wheel of fortune”; see his Et in Arcadia Ego”, 241-42 – despite the absence of Fortuna in the picture.

J87-89, 129-30. The context is Powell’s transaction with a bookseller, who is about to visit to collect books Powell has sold him.
Kenneth Widmerpool: A Jaundiced View

By Bernard Stacey

One of the 20th century’s most individual characters of fiction – recently come to more public renown since the televisation of the novels in which he appears – is Kenneth Widmerpool, the pompous, lone, enigmatic figure-of-fun and power-broker in Anthony Powell’s series of twelve books A Dance to the Music of Time.

An awkward schoolboy when first encountered, a deranged peer by the end, he appears at regular intervals throughout the narrative, which covers over half a century. A singular figure, in both meanings of the word, from relatively early on in life he suffers a series of spells of jaundice and dyspepsia necessitating dietary restrictions. Further than this however, details of his treatments are never given other than mention of a visit to a clinic for some days of rest. This article considers the possible causes for his ailments, including gallstones, autoimmune hepatitis, the viral hepatitides, miscellaneous infections, drug reactions, haemolytic anaemias and others.

Firstly, let us consider Widmerpool’s lifestyle. As far as we know he was born and brought up in a respectable family in England and schooled at Eton with no period of residence abroad thus making tropical infestations unlikely. Indeed the only records of his leaving the country are to Egypt during the war and, later to various Eastern Bloc countries and, briefly, to Venice – all of these trips occurring well after the start of his medical complaints. His father dies whilst Widmerpool is only in his late teens but we are not told the condition. As a young man attending dances in London however, he becomes embroiled with the morally dubious Miss Gypsy Jones, the affair having to end by Widmerpool paying for a backstreet abortion and becoming excessively irritated by this.

Throughout the pre-war years he is troubled by episodes of jaundice, on one occasion needing a bland diet and on another occasion he has to attend a clinic for a few days of rest to recover from overwork and sort out some “troublesome boils”. During the war he spends most of his time in London, spending occasional evenings with local prostitutes (“plenty of pretty little bits in the black-out”) and makes one excursion to Egypt, a trip marked mainly by an indiscretion in a night club. No immediate harm seems to come of this and the next two decades are marked by no particular medical trouble other than steady weight gain. After his elevation to the peerage he becomes a more and more eccentric character, culminating in his association with Scorp Murtlock and the incorporation into his cult. Here he gladly suffers indignities suggesting an advanced mental disorder and his death is precipitated by a spectacular naked run through the woods ending in a collapse.

In essence therefore he suffers recurrent jaundice, frequent dyspeptic pains, an episode of boils and, later, a mental disorder with florid disinhibitory signs on the background of an eccentric personality, dying after an exertional collapse.
Recurrent jaundice and dyspepsia in an overweight person inevitably makes one think of gallstones. He is however rather young at first presentation (in his twenties) for this to be attributed to dietary indiscretions alone, and furthermore gallstones in the young are less likely to present as duct stones than in the elderly, so other causes of cholelithiasis must be considered. Widmerpool volunteers the information that the jaundice occurs at times of stress. Hereditary spherocytosis is the commonest inherited haemolytic anaemia in Northern Europeans and may cause a low grade anaemia with mild jaundice that may be exacerbated in times of stress and is associated with a normal lifespan. It also causes pigment gallstones and 10-20% of these can enter the common bile duct causing obstructive jaundice. Splenomegaly is an inevitable consequence and may help to explain Widmerpool’s impressive abdominal girth in later life. Although the “boils he suffers around the age of thirty”, never further explained, are likely to be simple Staphylococcal infections an intriguing possible unifying diagnosis is a rare complication of hereditary spherocytosis – tropical pyomyositis, which can occur in temperate climates.

Using Gilbert’s syndrome – benign isolated hyperbilirubinaemia – as an explanation for his jaundice is less satisfactory as this is usually not associated with symptoms, though it does remit and relapse throughout life, especially during periods of stress.

Turning towards Widmerpool’s sexual adventures as a possible cause for his ailments let us first consider the hepatitis viruses. Hepatitis B is a highly infectious, sexually transmissible disease. The period of jaundice occurs 2-4 months after exposure and this does not quite fit temporally with what we are told about Widmerpool’s exploits (though there may of course be unmentioned encounters). Those patients who do not recover fully go on to develop chronic hepatitis and, around thirty years later, hepatocellular carcinoma and this again does not fit with the image we have of the overweight but active lord at the end. Although less sexually contagious hepatitis C can be transmitted via this route but it is usually only the complications that are symptomatic and jaundice early on is rare. Chlamydia trachomatis has been described with jaundice in up to 15% of cases but this is primarily in children.

More pertinently, we should consider syphilis. This was a common disease in the 1920s and 1930s before the advent of penicillin and ties in with many of the symptoms about which we are told. Widmerpool’s extreme irritation at the unplanned pregnancy of Miss Jones and his having to pay for a termination may have had less to do with the cost – working as he was at the time for a large industrial concern (the Donners-Brebner Corporation) and driving a car in the pre-war era he must have been fairly well off – and more to do with what he sustained: possibly a primary chancre. The rash of secondary syphilis is florid and probably too extreme to account for the episode of the boils – the narrator would surely have commented upon a facial rash although this may be absent along with all other characteristic signs. However, syphilis has been well
described in conjunction with up to 10% of chronic liver disease\textsuperscript{12, 13, 14} as it may cause granulomata (solid focal liver lesions). Gumma may form in the liver parenchyma ("hepar lobatum"), both causing jaundice.\textsuperscript{15} More significantly in the context of his eventual demise, it would go a long way towards explaining his bizarre behaviour towards the end if one were to invoke tertiary syphilitic general paresis of the insane (GPI). This accounted for 10% of psychiatric admissions in the pre-antibiotic era as 25\% of patients have spirochaetal invasion of the CSF during secondary syphilis.\textsuperscript{16} The symptoms of GPI occur in approximately 50\% of patients with neurosyphilis, more commonly men, and develop twenty to thirty years after the primary infection. Death occurs about three years after symptoms appear. Patients may become euphoric, develop delusions and become careless about dress and personal appearance \textsuperscript{17} – in later life Widmerpool forsakes suit and tie for the more casual polo-neck pullover and later still, whilst with the cult, wore only overalls or crude robes. Although, as its name suggests, a mental slowing and eventual “paresis” is more common in tertiary syphilis, the type of symptoms developed depend in part on the pre-morbid personality of the patient and Widmerpool is undoubtedly eccentric.

Aortitis is often present in these patients.\textsuperscript{17} Once accounting for 5-10\% of all cardiovascular deaths the cardiovascular complications of tertiary syphilis occur in 10\% of untreated cases and occur in four main forms: uncomplicated aortitis, ascending aortic aneurysm, aortic valvulitis (leading to aortic regurgitation) and coronary ostial stenosis.\textsuperscript{18} One third of patients are asymptomatic. The latent period from first infection is approximately the same as for neurosyphilis: 15-20 years. Acute rupture of an aneurysm may explain his sudden collapse whilst running through the woods – unaccustomed exertion for him – although one can naturally just postulate a simple myocardial infarction in one of his age and previous lifestyle. Even this would be more likely if there were ostial narrowing from syphilitic involvement. In any event the disease reminds us of the adage: “For one pleasure, a thousand pains”.\textsuperscript{19}

The next group of disorders to consider is the porphyrias. This is a group of inborn errors or abnormalities of the enzymes involved in the biosynthesis of haem. The cardinal features of this group of disorders are intermittently abnormal liver function, abdominal pain, polyneuropathy, tachycardia, hypertension, neuropsychiatric problems including frank psychosis in up to 50\%.\textsuperscript{20, 21} and in the case of porphyria cutanea tarda, a bullous skin eruption on exposure to sunlight. Acute attacks are triggered by alcohol or a wide variety of drugs, which makes this a less attractive cause of Widmerpool’s problems but the associated features are certainly suggestive. It would however be very unusual for the jaundice and the psychiatric manifestations to be so far apart in time for they are usually seen in conjunction with one another. They have been described in association with lupus\textsuperscript{22} and hepatitis C.\textsuperscript{23}
Autoimmune disease itself is a less attractive explanation for the symptoms as, although it does cause remitting and relapsing liver disease, this is usually only a biochemical phenomenon and the development of jaundice is a late stage event. Nevertheless neurological symptoms have been described as part of a multi-system disorder with autoimmune liver disease present and would in this respect be compatible with Widmerpool’s mental decline. Alcoholic liver disease on the other hand may have periods of jaundice associated with excess alcoholic intake, though again this is indicative of advanced disease. At no time are we led to believe that Widmerpool’s lifestyle is anything other than temperate, whatever his other vices. This makes alcohol an unlikely cause. Likewise other causes of chronic liver disease such as haemochromatosis are unlikely, as we are not told of any skin discoloration, which the narrator would surely have noticed, seeing Widmerpool at such infrequent intervals. Wilson’s disease (hepatolenticular degeneration), although combining neurological or psychiatric manifestations with a progressive hepatitis, usually presents with the neurological signs early on – in the teens or twenties – long before a significant degree of liver damage. It is however also known that disorders of copper metabolism may have cardiac manifestations.

We are not told that Widmerpool is on any regular medication. Minocycline was only introduced long after the time of the novels but has been associated with a hepatitis and folliculitis. A drug reaction is a remote possibility but the number of drugs available at the time of his youth was very limited.

In conclusion therefore, although the pragmatist will insist that Widmerpool suffered gallstones, dyspepsia, boils, mania and a myocardial infarct (“common things occur commonly”) this article puts the case for hereditary spherocytosis (with gallstones) and a possibly associated folliculitis/myositis, tertiary neurosyphilis and death from an acute aortic rupture. He was an exotic figure – let us accord him a less than conventional medical record.

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From an engraving from 1659-1663 by Jacques Laniet.


BOOK REVIEW

DJ Taylor

Bright Young People: the Rise and Fall of a Generation, 1918-1940
Chatto & Windus; 2007; 322 pages; £20; ISBN 0701177543

Reviewed by Stephen Holden

The Bright Young People (or “BYP”) of the 1920s and 1930s must be one of the most well-chronicled groups of people of the last century. Famous for being famous, they filled the gossip columns of the day and were fictionalised by Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford, photographed by Cecil Beaton, and painted by Rex Whistler and Edward Burra. DJ Taylor has produced an interesting history of this “lost generation”, using not only the usual sources (Waugh’s and Beaton’s diaries, novels of the period such as Vile Bodies and Afternoon Men) but also secondary sources, such as magazines and newspapers of the day. Elizabeth Ponsonby – whose story forms a central strand of this book – was one of the prime movers in the BYP, and Taylor has also had access to her long-suffering parents’ diaries.

Taylor says of the BYP that as a group they defy instant analysis. Some “became successful writers, journalists or artists, while others plumbed the depths of drink, drugs and disappointment”. Nor is it possible to write off the BYP as a bunch of “gilded triflers” since the society they moved in produced so many leading writers and artists. But DJ Taylor covers the failures as well as the successes. There’s a particularly good chapter comparing two of Powell’s Eton contemporaries, Brian Howard (failure) and Robert Byron (success).

Anthony Powell features heavily in Taylor’s book, not just as a participant in the jollities but also as a chronicler of them. Taylor quotes Powell on many of the main characters of the time – Robert Byron, Harold Acton, Brian Howard, Henry Green, Evelyn Waugh, etc. He also sees Afternoon Men and From a View to a Death as particular “party” novels of the time. Taylor also identifies Powell’s role as an influential man behind the scenes, because through his job at Duckworth’s he managed to get published early works by Waugh, Byron and Inez Holden, among others.

Taylor has also had access to the letters Powell wrote to Henry Yorke (Henry Green) in 1927-1928, when Powell was working in London and Yorke at the family manufacturing firm, Pontifex, in Birmingham. Powell reports on the progress of his social life and the activities of mutual friends, while Yorke is increasingly aware of his detachment from that life. Several of Powell’s letters mention the Biddulph sisters, Mary and Adelaide (known as “Dig”), to whom both Powell and Yorke were romantically attracted. In 1928 Powell wrote to Yorke:
The more one sees of the Biddulphs, the more one learns. I’m at a loss to know why they tolerate one at all. Mary, describing a dinner party at the Russells at which we had both been present, said with extraordinary venom: “and they talked about Oxford the whole time and all the books everyone had written there”.

DJ Taylor surmises that “the faint air of coldness that infected their relationship” when Henry Yorke married Dig in 1929 had two sources. On the one hand Powell felt that his rejection as a suitor was because of his inferior social status (son of an army officer competing with son of a wealthy industrialist), and on the other hand that Yorke had somehow behaved disingenuously in the whole matter.

In his conclusion, Taylor says of the BYP that

like many a youth movement they began unobtrusively, found themselves seized upon by a grateful media and were rapidly converted into a stylised and decadent version of their original form.

Like many other youth movements the BYP “carried with them the cause of their future destruction”, ending up in pursuit of spectacle for its own sake. Going back to the BYP’s “successes”, Taylor notes that for some people, “mostly ambitious young men from middle-class backgrounds, this milieu offered a springboard for international success”. He cites in particular Waugh and Beaton as finding the milieu they inhabited as offering them “both a subject and a range of connections from which they could forge durable careers”.

Taylor’s book finishes at the start of World War II, with the publication of Yorke’s Party Going (a novel that is seen as a kind of coda to the whole BYP whirl), and the death from drink of Elizabeth Ponsonby (in many ways the central character of Taylor’s book) in 1941.

Bright Young People is an excellent account of a fascinating period of English social life, and DJ Taylor, as usual, makes many perceptive comments about the era and its characters.
BOOK REVIEW

A Message in a Bottle from West Britain

Christopher Harvie

A Floating Commonwealth: Politics, Culture and Technology on Britain’s Atlantic Coast, 1860-1930

OUP; 2008; 284 pages; £58; ISBN 0198227833

Reviewed by Arthur Aughey

GM Trevelyan once described social history as “history with the politics left out”. Christopher Harvie’s A Floating Commonwealth could be described as British history with England left out. Or to put that more accurately, British history with London left out, for Bristol, Liverpool and Manchester get their proper due in this story of the industrial, commercial but above all, intellectual, intercourse across the Irish Sea and its Atlantic connections through the North and St George’s Channels. In the ecumenical spirit in which Harvie writes, where the British Isles has become (31) “These Islands” (which would probably mean, as Terence Brown observed, that when Harvie is in Tuebingen he should properly call them “Those Islands”) the possessive “Irish” should become, I suppose, “Our”. His extra-metropolitan focus does a great service and helps us to see the country as others, outside London, saw it. This sensitivity to the historical texture, vibrancy, energy, creativity and significance of the provincial world is Harvie’s great contribution to historical study.

Anthony Powell’s A Dance to the Music of Time gets a brief mention (16) and those familiar with the sequence may recall in volume 7 Jenkins’s posting to Northern Ireland (as a subaltern in a Welsh regiment) at the beginning of the war. The place is described there as a miserable, Godforsaken, alien, void where the locals (when they are allowed to speak – only once) speak with stage-Irish accents like characters in an English repertory company. The void, of course, is the absence of London and London is the centre of things (as in Harvie’s own book of the same name on British political literature). Harvie’s brilliant work shows that life was indeed elsewhere outside the Home Counties and it is a life where Belfast was not the dismal background for cultured melancholy but really was (to use that old Ulster Unionist, self-enhancing, phrase) the “heart of the British Empire”. Not only did the ships, ropes and engines of the city help pump the commercial lifeblood of that Empire but also the intellectual influences of the city contributed as much to the character of the country as did the playing fields of Eton. And for Belfast also read the other “provincial” cities of the United Kingdom from Glasgow to Swansea, from Hull to Hartlepool. Though Harvie describes Powell’s novels as an example of “obsessive genealogy” A Floating Commonwealth is itself a work of obsessive genealogy and one is sometimes overwhelmed by the cast of characters, their intellectual connections and their cultural and political influences. At times one longs for a Hilary Spurling-style companion as an aide.
memoire to their arrival and departure in the text. And like *Dance*, the characters keep re-appearing, if only because Harvie’s book has its own genealogy in papers delivered at academic seminars where the repetition of reflection is obvious. The breadth of his knowledge is impressive and his essayist’s style a delight (a style which the academic obsession with specialised journal articles is slowly killing off). By the end of the book, the characters of Carlyle, Geddes, Buchan, even Robert Tressell are as familiar to the reader as *Dance*’s Widmerpool, Stringham, Quiggin, even Dicky Umfraville. Here is an invitation to go back to those historical sources and to re-think the world that has gone as well as the one in the making.

Harvie inserts us into what Michael Oakeshott would have called “a flow of sympathy” along the regions of this Atlantic Coast though the world he writes about is a world that has now passed, an industrial-commercial complex the character of which has been changed and changed utterly, territories of religious controversy and theological dispute, the substance of which controversy and dispute has been lost to our shopping, entertainment culture. The intellectual impact is probably incalculable. This is a transition which is noticeable throughout the United Kingdom, one representative example, perhaps, being the Woodstock Road in East Belfast, residence of those shipyard workers of Harland and Wolff and Workman and Clark about whose achievements Harvie is so eloquent. That street has a bookshop that formerly sold religious commentary, the immense dusty variety of which was shifted to the attic as the shop became a circulating library for the aristocracy of labour, dealing in popular novels but also books on history, arts and sciences, a localised version of Belfast’s famous and radical Linenhall Library. Slowly but surely the books began to disappear, like the shipyard itself, to be replaced mainly by videos, cds and dvds and with them, it seems, a whole mentalite (as Harvie would describe it). That this decay – of a spiritual life of religious, political and cultural ferment – represents a real loss is something which Harvie’s book recalls to mind. It is not, of course, confined to Belfast but is a loss which haunts all of the places described in the book, where the industrialised production that gave dignity as well as toil to the working class and its local bourgeoisie has given way to industrialised drinking, where the nonconformist chapel which gave moral fervour to political claims has given way to the lap dancing bar.

*A Floating Commonwealth* illustrates the historical diversity of the United Kingdom but also what that diversity shared and, I would argue, still shares in common. In her *Nationhood and Political Theory* (1996) Margaret Canovan used Hannah Arendt’s analogy of the public world as a table located between those who sit around it, one which relates and separates people at the same time, to convey philosophically the picture Harvie paints historically. What constitutes the political commonwealth is less the characteristics people possess as individuals than the inheritance they share as members. In short, she argued,
we are British not in virtue of conforming to some particularly British way of thinking but because (either by inheritance or adoption) we jointly own the complex legacy of the nation

and what unites is “shared ownership of something outside us”, not “similarities inside us”. The shared ownership Harvie examines was possibly best expressed by the Prime Minister of Northern Ireland Basil Brooke in 1950, who declared that (for Unionists at any rate)

the Crown has two meanings. It is the symbol of the unity of the British people, and it is the symbol which, in giving us a common allegiance, also gives strength and influence. As a single unit in the British Empire we should have comparatively little power and little authority, but with the unifying body of the Crown bringing the whole British Empire and British people together it is a force in the world.

Here was a concise expression of distinct identities; of the significance of political allegiance; of participation in a larger multinational association; and, of course, a lingering vision of the British imperial and civilising mission.

When the Troubles broke out again in the late 1960s it was this expression of allegiance and identity which caused difficulty for British Ministers, mainly because it was an embarrassing echo of a world which, in their modernising intent, they no longer recognised. It may be added that David Miller’s very influential reading of Ulster Unionism in Queen’s Rebels (1978) – that, unlike everyone else, Unionists had failed to develop a serviceable national identity and were mired in an old Scottish-derived, Covenanting tradition – misunderstood the relationship of British allegiance to Ulster identity. The particular and exclusive British world of Brooke is no more but I would argue that this covenanting understanding is possibly more relevant to the United Kingdom today than the modernist view. Moreover, it is a political disposition with which Harvie himself (if this does not embarrass him) might have some sympathy. Though Ulster Unionists get the accustomed bad press, the “geotechnic” of the Atlantic coast he describes shows more clearly than before how right they were to opt out of the Irish nationalist dream (see especially the lame argument of GB Shaw on page 173 that Ulster was needed to save the Irish nation from its own worst self). Times do change, though, and the reverse is now true (Harvie, like all Scottish nationalists, makes much of the experience of the Celtic Tiger). The Belfast Agreement of 1998, however, allows the citizens of the Irish republic to veto unification and if Ulster Unionists were not altruistic enough to sacrifice their interests for Irish unity at the beginning of the last century then the same is probably true of the Southern Irish at the beginning of this century.

Harvie concludes by arguing that “a sense of ‘world’ is required for the distinct parallel worlds of politics, business and culture” to work. The large implication, which is left unspoken, is that not only has the integrative world of the littoral floating commonwealth disintegrated but also that the Union “world” of Great
Britain and Northern Ireland is disintegrating too. Does modification, as JGA Pocock (*New Left Review*, No 5 (2000))\(^4\) once challenged Tom Nairn, necessarily mean disintegration? We can't know yet but this wonderful book provides historical depth for those wishing to argue either way.

This article was first published on Open Democracy News Analysis [http://www.opendemocracy.net](http://www.opendemocracy.net/blog/yes/arthur-aughey/2008/09/09/a-message-in-a-bottle-from-west-britain).

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BOOK REVIEW

Jane Stevenson
Edward Burra: Twentieth-Century Eye
Jonathan Cape; 2007; 496 pages; £30; ISBN 0224078755

Reviewed by David Butler

Jane Stevenson’s 2007 biography of the English modernist artist Edward Burra is a lucidly written and essentially sympathetic portrayal of the man. It contains some interesting material for those fascinated by the inter-war social world evoked by Anthony Powell in his memoirs, and the personalities who populate his journals. Characters such as Billy Chappell, Barbara Ker-Seymer and Constant Lambert touched both their lives and here can be seen from a different perspective. The book was originally published in hardback by Jonathan Cape in 2007 and a Pimlico paperback version appeared in November 2008.

Edward Burra was born in 1905 into a well-to-do banking family (“vaguely county”, in Anthony Powell’s evaluation) in Rye, East Sussex. Celibate, albeit of a camp demeanour, he never married and lived at the family home all his life, dying nearby in 1976. Childhood sickness precluded a public-school education but, as a teenager, Burra developed his artistic talents with the encouragement of his parents, and he went on to attend the Chelsea College of Art. At the College, Burra developed a circle of friends including Billy Chappell the ballet dancer and choreographer, sometime photographer Barbara Ker-Seymer, and “Bumble” Dawson. Chappell was a lifelong confidant and companion of the artist. It is Burra’s relationship and correspondence with this coterie which forms much of the fabric of the book. Although always based in Rye, Burra undertook periodic trips abroad, drawing inspiration from visits to Spain, France, Mexico and the USA, and travelled (often with his sister Anne) extensively through the UK and Ireland. His achievements are all the more remarkable given chronic arthritic and anaemic complaints with which he had to contend.

This biography draws extensively on Burra’s correspondence and on the recollections of his friends and associates, including the memoirs of Anthony Powell. Burra and Powell knew each other and had several friends, such as Barbara Ker-Seymer, in common and their pre-war social circles were interwoven. Although not a great party-goer, Burra was in attendance at the infamous 1929 party given by Anthony Powell and Constant Lambert at Tavistock Square, when problems in the marriage of the Evelyn Waugh’s came publicly to light. They were also at Toulon together in 1928, an episode described by Powell in his memoirs, which includes a description of Burra’s working method.

As to Burra the artist, it is less possible to be definitive on this reading alone, since the book concentrates more on the “life and times” than on the work, and there is little emphasis on critical appraisal or placing into context his output. Rather sadly, there are no actual examples of his painting or drawing in the book,
except for a detail reproduced on the cover. Evidently his work, while influenced by the cross-currents of surrealism, remained resolutely figurative, and he was inspired in his pre-war work by the scenes of urban low-life and seedy dockside bars which he came across on his travels. Some works, such as the “Snack Bar” of 1930 which can be seen in Tate Modern, put one in mind of an Edward Hopper scene but with a much more grotesque treatment. Anthony Powell summarised his work as:

likely [in the 1930’s] to be brightly coloured grotesque images of Firbankian fantasy, often Negroid, the forerunners of those ‘bulging leathery shapes’ described by Wyndham Lewis in a much later critique. In middle age Burra was also to explore in his own disturbing fashion a very unnaturalistic English countryside; a sphere where he was perhaps finally at best.

He preferred to shun artistic movements of any kind, and publicity in general, but Stevenson refutes accusations of reclusiveness, pointing out that Burra’s chronic illnesses left him very little energy for the whirl of exhibitions, private viewings and arts world socialising. She demonstrates, though, that privately he gave and inspired large measures of loyalty and friendship. Successful and well-known in his lifetime, he nevertheless showed little interest in others’ interpretation of his painting, or in the fate of his completed works. However, he was commercially successful enough as oil painter, watercolourist and some time designer of ballets, settling, after the second world war, into a routine of biennial exhibitions run by the Lefevre Gallery in London which added to a modest private income from family funds. Professional acclaim ultimately came his way in the form of an invitation to become a Royal Academician in 1963, which he declined.

The absence of any reproductions of Burra’s paintings in the book is, as noted, a great pity. But your reviewer, who knew nothing of about Burra before embarking upon this book, was sufficiently inspired to investigate further and can report that two drawings and one painting by Burra presently hang in Tate Modern. You are well advised, however, not to try and find them without seeking help, as the gallery’s layout is far from intuitive.
William Donaldson was born in 1935, the son of a shipping magnate. He was educated at Winchester, where he discovered that he had lost the contest for the title of stupidest boy in the school when his competitor, an Earl, was advised to “try Eton” after just one term. Donaldson’s trouble started when he was fifteen and his indulgent parents took him to see the Folies Bergère. Immediately he developed a fixation for pornography and the company of “escort girls”. During his National Service as a submariner he raised eyebrows by addressing his fellow officers on “Ballet as a career for men” when called upon to give a lecture. At Cambridge he co-edited a respected literary magazine, *Gemini*, but gained the reputation of a moneyed gadabout. Upon graduating he hoped seriously to become a ballet critic. But then he joined the advertising company, Ogilvie and Mather, and did not bother turning up for work on his second day after being asked to write a commercial for Ovaltine.

Fortunately Donaldson’s father died, an alcoholic, in 1957, leaving him £175,000. Donaldson then bought a theatrical company – “in order to audition actresses” – and became an impresario. His was an initial success, co-producing *Beyond the Fringe* and dramatisations of JP Donleavy’s *The Ginger Man* and Spike Millington’s *The Bed-Sitting Room*.

He spent two years with the actress Miss Sarah Miles, who later complained of Donaldson “adjusting his cufflinks” as he seduced her.

In 1965, despite having lost a good deal of money in unwise theatrical ventures, Donaldson tried to put on *The Garden God* by Anthony Powell. As those Society members who attended the play’s reading at the College of Arms in 2005 will know, the theme of the play is that the Roman deity Priapus is disturbed by a group of archaeologists and returns to investigate, with some dissatisfaction, their sexual lives. Powell, through a mutual friend, Richard Schulman, had approached Donaldson who he described as “a pale, fair-haired young man of decidedly raffish appearance”. Donaldson liked the play and, despite the fact that he was now almost completely without funds, behaved as if a production could be mounted at any moment. “These lunches were thoroughly enjoyable”, Powell wrote in *Strangers*. Unfortunately there had been some unpleasant, unspecified business in Liverpool after which Donaldson had been obliged to go into hiding. “No one seemed to know where he had gone,” wrote Powell. “I never set eyes on him again in the flesh”.


Donaldson soon squandered his remaining theatrical profits on ladies and ill-conceived projects. Not even blackmailing a High Court judge (by whom he’d been seduced at Winchester) could stave off bankruptcy. In 1971 he fled his creditors and left for Ibiza, where he spent his last £2,000 on a glass-bottomed boat, hoping to make money out of tourists. By the end of the season, he had no money left and had to sell the boat for £250. He returned to London when he heard that a former girlfriend had gone on the game, so moved into her Chelsea brothel as her pimp. He used his experiences as the basis for his first book, *Both the Ladies and the Gentlemen* (1975).

In 1980 he published *The Henry Root Letters*, a collection of correspondence from a supposedly retired wet-fish merchant and bigot, Henry Root, whose deranged letters to the great and the good, often enclosing small sums of money, elicited some equally deranged and revealing responses. For example, he wrote to the young Harriet Harman (then at the National Council for Civil Liberties) and advised “a pretty girl like you” to read the news or go on stage, enclosing a pound note towards “a pretty dress”, and advised her to get in touch with his good friend Lord Delfont.

After a succession of “toilet books”, in 1994 Donaldson went bankrupt again. A girlfriend introduced him to crack cocaine and he became addicted. He pulled himself together enough in 2002 to produce the superb *Brewers Rogues, Villains and Eccentrics*, but died a few years later.

Terence Blacker has written an excellent and sympathetic biography of a truly satiric writer, a man who “chose to portray himself as a reckless decadent, a corrupter of innocence, a moral bankrupt, a chancer, a squanderer of money, privilege and luck”. ■
Book Review

Allason: His Aim Is True

James Allason
(Foreword by Margaret Thatcher)

Ringside Seat: the Political and Wartime Memoirs of James Allason

Reviewed by B Douglas Russell

A life lived in rhythm to the music of time

I reflected, not for the first time, how mistaken it is to suppose there exists some ‘ordinary’ world into which it is possible at will to wander. All human beings, driven as they are at different speeds by the same Furies, are at close range equally extraordinary. (AW)

Memoirs come in a variety of shapes and sizes – and categories. They range from the dunghill to the cathedral, the frustratingly exiguous to the please-pass-the-razor voluminous, the utterly otiose to the absolutely essential.

Some recollections are written with a very specific purpose other than the mere cataloguing of a life: the hope of casting the mediocre or vile in a more favourable light, perhaps, or with the sole aim being the settling of scores. Still others are undertaken as a thinly veiled attempt to excuse the author from some public controversy or catastrophe the responsibility for which posterity has heretofore lain at his or her door. Memoirs have appeared at long last to act as an antidote to the poison of inaccuracies put forward in the guise of truth. Money is often a motivator, though equally so it would seem is delusion. Pressure to write can come from family and friends. Conversely, the desire to write can be for sake of family and friends.

So, why did James Allason write Ringside Seat: the Political and Wartime Memoirs of James Allason? A more apt question may be, why didn’t he write more? It was my first question upon finishing the slim volume (161 pages of actual memoir). The answer was immediate.

Now in his ninety-sixth year, James Allason has seen in no passive way the majority of the twentieth century and the record appears fuller for what he has decided to share. The book’s title is a bit of a misnomer as Baroness Thatcher points out in her foreword.

Rather than occupying a ringside seat, James Allason has more often than not been at the centre of the action, in a veritable hot seat. Fighting the Japanese, arguing with Mountbatten and Wingate, and serving Churchill in the Cabinet War Rooms, James was rarely just a spectator.
Readers will approach Allason’s work from many angles – familial, personal, social, professional, martial, political, and whether they know him well, vaguely, as a name on the news or in the papers, or not at all. Regardless of the path that brings one to this work, the reward, the work itself, is both rich and revealing – as far as it goes. Still, Allason is up front with the reader about the volume’s principle subject matter: his military and political careers.

That said, both the military planner and political strategist are in evidence as Allason divulges personal information to his readers on a “need to know” basis. He is like a person with whom one strikes up a friendship on board a cruise. Although many discussions ensue, information and anecdotes are shared, the essence of intimacy and confidence is felt, once parted one could be forgiven if tempted to conclude that, while one has indeed learned much on multiple subjects, one has not learned that much about one’s companion – a conclusion worthy of a caution.

While it is true, I would have preferred to hear more about, say, his family or beliefs, I cannot accurately say he has not been generous with what he has chosen to share. Again, probably owing to his military and political careers, he is a master at concision. Upon reflection, he is highly capable of conveying quite a lot in few words. And sometimes what he doesn’t say speaks volumes. For instance,

> The couple were blissfully happy for five years, but in 1913 my mother was carrying her baby upstairs when she tripped at the top of the stairs and fell headlong, ensuring only that she protected me. She was found dead at the foot of the stairs and I was saved.

Overall, the author is an amiable host. My subjective wishes aside, Allason’s memoirs are replete with incident, history, the famous and notorious, triumph, tragedy, humour and poignancy. He credits his audience with intelligence and takes for granted at times a command of subject his readers may not possess – to dual effect: simultaneously, one feels complimented and mildly frustrated. The wisdom of his years and experience are manifest throughout, as is his sense of the comic and ironic. One such incident involves the author, aged six, a lavatory skylight and his position on top of it at his older sister’s behest.

> She then instructed me to jump up and down. As a result I descended in a shower of glass upon my aunt, who was seated upon the throne below. It seemed to me unfair that it was I who was punished.

Another, Brigadier Mike Calvert, who upon learning the US had been credited with his brigade’s taking of the Burmese town of Mogaung from the Japanese, “signalled, ‘If the Americans have taken Mogaung, I have taken umbrage’, which had the Americans searching their maps”.

Of course one of the attractions of the book is finally hearing what Allason has to say about what has become know as “The Profumo Affair”: something about
which the author, who was Jack Profumo’s Parliamentary Private Secretary, and Profumo himself have remained silent; the latter taking his thoughts to the grave. Allason’s account of this dark time in British politics is extremely important and worthy of both scholarly and historical consideration given his ideal placement to interact with the players and personalities involved and take in events leading up to, during and after the “scandal”. Suffice it to say, there will be those who wish he had followed his boss’s example.

Without delving too deeply into the realm of party politics, Allason puts paid to the matinee villain Tory so frequently foisted upon the public, principally because he has consistently put humanity before politics. In fact, it is thanks to his concerted effort over many years that council house tenants in the UK have the right to buy their homes.

Fans of military history and the wartime and military fiction of Anthony Powell, Simon Raven, Paul Scott or Evelyn Waugh will find much to savour in Ringside Seat. Allason’s military career is followed from his education at the Haileybury and Imperial Service College and the Royal Military Academy, Woolwich, to his retirement from the service in 1954 as a Lieutenant Colonel, and takes in his service in India, Ceylon, Burma and London. He served in the Royal Artillery, before transferring to the 3rd Carabiniers in 1937. Worthy of the writers above, Allason treats his readers to a panoply of eccentric characters in extraordinary circumstances running the gamut from nearly shooting a village idiot in Kashmir, whom the villagers had said was a bear in an attempt to get compensation, to counselling Churchill in the Cabinet War Rooms, from keeping a baby panther as a pet and playing polo with maharajahs to helping to plan the Berlin airlift.

The time spent in India saw Allason promoted regimental adjutant, then squadron leader, before finding himself posted to the Joint Planning Staff at GHQ in Delhi. From there, he was off to Burma, where he was wounded, before touching down at South-East Asia Command in Ceylon. Lord Linlithgow, Louis Mountbatten, Orde Wingate, Gandhi, Peter Fleming, Enoch Powell and Dean Rusk, amongst others, are encountered with mixed results. Wingate brings to mind Waugh’s Ben Ritchie-Hook, only on steroids, as does his demise.

The parallels between Allason, Anthony Powell and Powell’s famous narrator Nicholas Jenkins are inescapable. Though Powell was Allason’s senior by nearly seven years, they have much between them including fathers who were career soldiers. Allason’s and Powell’s military careers eventually led them both to London, where Allason worked in military planning in the Cabinet War Rooms with Bill Cavendish-Bentinck, Chairman of the Joint Intelligence Committee, and boss to Denis Capel-Dunn, the quintessence who served to spawn Powell’s notorious creation, Kenneth Widmerpool. To this day, both Allason’s and Capel-Dunn’s names appear on the posted list of officers cleared for access to the Map Room in those historic rooms under the Office of Works building in Storey’s Gate. Having lived as proximate contemporaries, both nonagenarians traversed a
lot of the same turf and shared many mutual acquaintances, these latter serving as fuel for some of the character models for Powell’s twelve-volume opus: General Sir Mike West/General Liddament; Lord Louis Mountbatten/Buster Foxe the most obvious. Strangely, they never met. It is almost as if they went to the same school, but missed one another by a year. Nevertheless, the reader familiar with the memoirs of Powell or same’s A Dance to the Music of Time cycle will find the highly observant, personally temperate vein in Allason’s narrative comfortable.

One of the insipid criticisms of Powell’s Dance cycle is that the way in which characters reappear throughout the series is not true to life. The grousing of the myopic and static it has seemed to me. Ringside Seat firmly underpins that Powell’s approach is unequivocally rooted in the actual, for diverse people met in Allason’s memoirs resurface over its course in varying circumstances, loci and occupations.

To borrow from Monty Python, “And then there’s sport”. Allason is a polo, skiing, and motor racing practitioner and enthusiast. He is a devotee in the most positive sense of the word. His detailed knowledge and reminiscences of the matches, runs and races as well as those with whom he made them are a delight to read. We learn of his polo pony, Razzle, who won polo pony of the year honours in India. The genesis of his love affair with the Swiss ski resort of Davos is shared. Amazingly, Allason continued competing in the Anglo-Swiss MP race until he won the cup at eighty years of age.

It is in the realm of sport and in his writing about the opera and art that the author relaxes a bit and lets go. For me, one of the volume’s most moving moments had to do with the opera.

My last trip overseas was to New York, at the age of ninety and nearly blind. I used a wheelchair at the airports and stayed at a hotel close to the Metropolitan Opera. The purpose was to see Bellini’s Il Pirata, which is staged rarely. It was a magnificent treatment by the Met, including Renee Fleming at the height of her considerable powers. I flew back on the day-flight to Heathrow, and, economical as ever, took the Underground to Sloane Square. Unknown to me, I was shadowed by an official to ensure the poor old blind man got through. He introduced himself, however, and when he said he had been on the Berlin Airlift, I was able to share my part in organizing it from Whitehall.

After reading Ringside Seat, I found myself profoundly grateful for James Allason, and for the men and women like him, who live life fully yet to good purpose. I envied that official and wished I could have thanked the “poor blind man” for the part he has played in service to others and the example he has given of doing so with focus, energy, good grace and drollery.
In closing, a word about the paper and glue. Aesthetically, the book is attractive. Bibliophiles will be pleased with the bright, clean dust jacket, which is graced with a sobering photograph of the Map Room from the Cabinet War Rooms and a stunning portrait of the author. Published by Timewell Press Limited and printed in Malta, the overall quality is outstanding. The matte coated paper stock is elegant and holds the ink, whether for type or photograph, consistently throughout. My eyes found the serif font very readable.

If the book enjoys a second printing, and I hope it does, Timewell should give some attention to the index as there are a number of errors and omissions that could be easily fixed through searching the manuscript by word or name and amending the listings.

*A special price is available to Anthony Powell Society members: £15 inc P&P UK & Europe (RRP is £20) from The Blackthorn Group, PO Box 41, Wallingford, OX10 6TD.*
Notes on Contributors


Prof. Arthur Aughey is Professor of Politics at the University of Ulster. His recent publications include Politics of Northern Ireland: Beyond the Belfast Agreement (London, Routledge, 2005); The Politics of Englishness, (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007); Irish Civilisation (with John Oakland) (London, Routledge, expected 2009).

Dr Christine Berberich is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Portsmouth. Her research specialism focuses on Englishness and National Identity Construction but she also has a keen interest in trauma theory and post-memory. She has published widely on authors as diverse as Anthony Powell, Evelyn Waugh, Kazuo Ishiguro, George Orwell, Julian Barnes and WG Sebald. Her monograph The Image of the English Gentleman: Englishness and Nostalgia was published by Ashgate in 2007.


David Butler has been a member of the Anthony Powell Society since 2001. He works in the City of London and lives in London and Kent.

DN DeLuna is currently pursuing graduate work at University College London, and is a student of political history and European iconographic art of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries. She has written articles on the poetry and novels of Daniel Defoe.

Terry Empson was a Counsellor in the Diplomatic Service, having spent much of his life overseas until resigning in 1981 to become Director General of the Historic Houses Association. He read the early books of Dance in haphazard order, starting in the 1970s, the addiction growing gradually but taking a firm hold. In retirement he founded and remains the only member of the Widmerpool Defence League.

Stephen Holden is a senior administrator at the London College of Communication (formerly the London College of Printing). He is literary editor
(under the *nom de plume* “Lindsay Bagshaw”) of *The Chap* magazine, and edits the Anthony Powell Society Newsletter and Secret Harmonies.

**Dr Keith C Marshall** originally trained in spectroscopy but now works as an IT project manager. Introduced to *Dance* in the early ’80s he has been Hon. Secretary of the Anthony Powell Society since its inception. In his non-existent spare time he has wide-ranging interests including science, photography and family history. He lives in London with his wife, two cats and an uncountable number of books.

**Jeff Manley** lives in Bethesda, Maryland where he works as Senior Advisor – Regulatory Affairs for United Airlines, Inc. He graduated from Harvard University with degrees in law and Russian studies. He has been a member of the Anthony Powell Society since its inception and a trustee since 2007. He has been reading Powell's works since 1976.

**Laura Miller** is a Librarian and works for King's College London. She read History of Art at Cambridge and is currently completing postgraduate research into the book as an object in western art at City University.

**James Mitchum** is a freelance journalist based in London.

**B Douglas Russell** traverses the worlds of international print and broadcast media, press and public relations and the performing arts. Residing near the lip of the rabbit hole that is LA and working within it combine to give him an outsider's shrewdness and an insider's access to one of the planet's most satirically rich plots of earth. He has written reviews for the *Evelyn Waugh Newsletter and Studies* and the *Anthony Powell Society Newsletter*.

**Dr Bernard Stacey** is a consultant physician living in the New Forest who first encountered the *Dance* on a long haul flight to Australia twenty years ago and would not like to count the number of times he has dipped back into it. Outside medicine he also writes and has completed two novels, currently in the midst of a third. Powell aside, his literary addictions include Waugh, Buchan, Chesterton, Greene and Trollope, to name but a handful. Married with one daughter he is therefore the only cricket devotee in the household but clings on to this religion obstinately nonetheless. A slow left arm bowler of no repute he can still dream...
Society Merchandise

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Christine Berberich (ed.), *Writing about Anthony Powell: Perspectives on Writing about a Writer* (2005)

Jeffrey Manley *et. al.* (eds), *An Index to the Music in Anthony Powell’s A Dance to the Music of Time* (in preparation)

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