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Veteran historian Peter Hennessy’s history of Britain c. 1960-65 is readable and authoritative yet also misleadingly labelled. For this book would be more aptly subtitled ‘Whitehall in the Early Sixties’, ‘The British Establishment in the Early Sixties’ or - to employ a phrase of Hennessy’s - ‘A *Certain Idea* of Britain in the Early Sixties’. The *certain idea* of Britain that Hennessy presents is resolutely and unapologetically Boys’ Stuff: dominated by government ministers, spies, secret nuclear bunkers, ruddy cheeked old men, ripping yarns, and the troubled life and times of Prime Minister Harold MacMillan’s prostate gland.

As a high political history it provides precious few glimpses of the decade-defining social and cultural transitions of the time; to cite just one example, the advent of the contraceptive pill gets barely half a page. While Hennessy masterfully captures the ups and downs of MacMillan’s Conservative Government and culminates in the ascent of Wilsonian meritocracy in 1964, this picture of the demise of the Keynesian-Beveridgian British postwar New Deal at times resembles a narrow portrait of the book’s presiding figure, Harold MacMillan, and therefore the requisite broader canvas feels conspicuously absent. It is also beset by too much whatiffery; a cloying monarchist sycophancy; anglocentrism; and over-indulgent memoir. While the extent of the author’s political connections might make this latter trait bearable, less forgivable is the faint but unmistakable whiff of post-imperial nostalgia and an oddly belligerent British nationalism.

On this note, and to return to the book’s title, the chapter dealing with the implications of MacMillan’s famous 1960 ‘Winds of Change’ speech is the most disappointing. Hennessy captures the pace and magnitude of decolonisation well: in 1945, 630 million people live in territories ruled by the British Crown, by 1961 this figure was just 23 million. The fate of Commonwealth immigrants to Britain in the Sixties, however, is completely overshadowed by nostalgising for the dutiful gin-and-sun-soaked former colonial administrators who used to rule over them. This comes in the form of a rose-tinted aside about an occasion when the author addressed the Overseas Service Pensioners’ Association alongside the Prince of Wales. This is a typical example of the self-indulgence that pock-marks this work. Writing yourself into history is a theme which Hennessy has explored before, in a previous book entitled ‘Writing the History of One’s Own Times’; this is one of the numbers in a weighty back catalogue that looms over this book in the form of at least 43 references to his previous works. ‘Britain in the Early Sixties’ is part of a postwar Britain series (previous instalments ‘Never Again’ and ‘Having it So Good’) which the footnotes and text continuously refer back to. Particularly niggling are the number of footnotes citing merely ‘private information’: although the reader might feel they’ve gained access to the private member’s club, the doors are still firmly closed. And then there’s the trains. Lots of trains. Lots of railway-based memoir: drinking oxtail soup on the footplate of a steam locomotive with the ’choo choo’ ringing in your ears, and such like. As with much history, this is an old white man writing about himself and other old white men.

If you can put up with the style and focus, though, you should persist with this book because of its wit and political insight.

There’s a genuinely quaint charm in some of the humour surrounding Britain’s nuclear disaster planning of the time. If Armageddon came with prior warning, the British government and a skeleton staff would have made it to the safety of a bunker deep beneath the Cotswolds. A stiff directive informed the chosen few civil servants that they may adopt an ‘informal’ dress code when in the bunker but that HM Government could not provide a packed lunch for the journey there and they should bring ‘a book or so’ since entertainment in the bunker would be ‘limited’. And while the heads of the Cold War superpowers possessed a permanent staff armed with nuclear retaliation codes, British mandarins fretted over whether the PM’s drivers should be provided the requisite four pennies to make a phone call from a GPO phone box if Doomsday arrived while he was away from Downing Street, or whether they should just request a ‘reverse charges’ call.

One wonders whether this book might have functioned better as a biography of Harold MacMillan. Hennessy’s characterisation of the man as avuncular, bewhiskered old bibliophile is superb. As the construction of the Berlin Wall began, he was tucked up in bed in his country pile after finally finishing Trollope’s Barchester series; during the Cuban Missile Crisis frail old ‘Supermac’ was plagued by explosive bouts of diarrhoea. A survivor of the Somme, he grudgingly respected the ‘Napoleonic’ Charles de Gaulle but genuinely hated the Germans, the large piece of Krupp steel still painfully embedded in his thigh acting as a constant reminder of the fact.

De Gaulle, who would be the great frustrator of British attempts to enter the EEC, was invited to dinner at Chez MacMillan in November 1961 and Wodehousian humour soon took over. Lady Dorothy MacMillan was quite put out by the pints of the General’s blood that the French entourage insisted be placed in the fridge should an assassination attempt on him take place, her carefully prepared luncheon haddock now having to compete for space. MacMillan saw de Gaulle’s anglophobia as recidivist, ‘like a dog returning to his vomit’. Outside, as gendarmes and the Sussex constabulary swarmed, the canine theme continued with the Daily Mail reporter bitten on the bottom by an Alsatian.

Which brings us to Brexit or, if you will, the recent revenge of the Daily Mail. While excessive presentism is never a good look for an historian neither, on the other hand, is the pretence to an objectivity completely immune to the here and now. Hennessy clearly concluded that a lengthy discussion of British relations with Europe in the Sixties could not but mention Brexit and therefore strikes a judicious balance between the two extremes, referring to it sparingly but pointedly. The British dilemma of whether to augment or weaken Europe while simultaneously wooing the Americans and remaining a nuclear power is conveyed brilliantly by the author, whose use of private diaries and cabinet minutes largely reinforces Gaulle’s 1969 verdict: ‘England’s tragedy is to be compelled to choose between the remnants of empire at the cost of American supremacy, and fair play towards the continent of Europe’. It is in weighing the political minutiae of Britain’s initial application to the EEC against Britain’s longer term ‘aggregate emotional deficit with Europe’ that Hennessy shows his strongest suit. With memorable turns of phrase, he brings across an overriding sense of paradox. It is in the witty teasing out of this paradox, in the capturing of the mood of a Tory ruling class at the end of empire spirit of the age, that this otherwise idiosyncratic book finds its real value.