



## Mountaineering

Felice Benuzzi

NO PICNIC ON MOUNT KENYA

320pp. MacLehose Press. £14.99.

978 0 85705 376 3

The story of an ascent in 1943 of Mount Kenya by three escaped Italian prisoners was first published in Italian in 1948 and in English four years later. A minor classic of twentieth-century mountaineering literature, it has been reissued by the MacLehose Press in this handsomely illustrated edition, with Felice Benuzzi's own beautifully executed sketches supplemented by photos of Mount Kenya and diagrams of the party's route to the summit.

Benuzzi, captured in 1941 while working for the Italian diplomatic service in Abyssinia, opens with an impressionistic account of the lassitude and depression of life in his Kenyan prison camp. Glimpsing Africa's second-highest mountain (5,199 metres) through a break in the clouds, he and his two companions came up with the outrageous notion of escaping to climb the "massive blue-black tooth of sheer rock, inlaid with azure glaciers". After forging makeshift ice axes from stolen hammers, crampons from the running boards and mudguards of a scrapped car, and horribly inadequate sisal ropes from the material used to fasten nets to bunk beds, they managed to slip out of the camp, only to endure considerable hardship and danger even before their real mountaineering challenge began. On the face of it, their mission to climb a technically demanding summit at an altitude higher than Mont Blanc appears impossible, if not downright suicidal, being made on inadequate rations by escapees whose bodies were already suffering from the privations of POW life. Yet after eight months of secret preparation and two weeks of trekking and climbing, they succeeded in reaching the 4,985 metres peak of Lenana – not the mountain's highest point, but an extraordinary achievement under the circumstances. Exhausted and desperately short of food after returning from the summit, they trekked back to the camp and actually managed to slip inside before being detected.

Benuzzi, who died in 1988 after a long career in the diplomatic service, has a light, engaging prose style that blends a compelling narrative and moments of comedy with a keen eye for Kenya's flora, fauna and landscape, a prisoner's sensuous appreciation of food and drink, and a sense of awe and wonder that evidently stayed with him years after the ascent. The escapade, he writes, was "a reaction against the sluggish life in a POW camp, an act of will amidst all that inertia". His concluding chapter outlines the story of previous ascents of Mount Kenya – a history almost unknown to the party when they hatched their plans. The mountain was thus "virgin terri-

tory" to Benuzzi and his companions. "For us", he writes, "it had just been created."

ALAN MCNEE

## Portuguese Poetry

Richard Zenith, editor

28 PORTUGUESE POETS

A bilingual edition

Translated by Richard Zenith and Alexis Levitin

320pp. Dedalus. Paperback, £12.50 (€14.99).

978 1 9102510 0 3

Richard Zenith, the editor and co-translator with Alexis Levitin of *28 Portuguese Poets*, is well equipped for his task, having already translated most of the figures represented in this anthology. He is especially knowledgeable about Fernando Pessoa. Noting the variety of Pessoa's many faces, Zenith has boldly and rightly chosen to separate the three main heteronyms – Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos – adopted by Pessoa himself, making these the first names in the volume.

Pessoa, "a hard act to follow", in Zenith's words, seems to shadow most of the featured poets, even though the selection reflects the many directions in which Portuguese poetry has evolved since Pessoa's death in 1935. A prime illustration of this flowering is Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen, as well as many poets of her generation present here, including Eugénio de Andrade, Jorge de Sena and Mário Cesariny. A different kind of idiom was developed by Herberto Helder, the "most influential Portuguese poet after Pessoa", according to Zenith. The attention paid to Helder's work in the poetry world after his death last year seems

to confirm the epithet. Both Andresen, with her light and luminous touch, where each word is carefully placed in a poem, and Helder, with his torrential alchemic verses teeming with images, seem to be Pessoa's heirs.

Anthologies have their limitations, a point Zenith knows well. His exclusions are readily justified either by the fact that a given figure hasn't been translated satisfyingly enough (the case for Vitorino Nemésio), or by his own personal taste. We can naturally grant him that, especially as *28 Portuguese Poets* isn't just well conceived, but also at times surprising in the best of ways – for example, by the inclusion of Florbela Espanca, Ardlia Lopes and Daniel Faria. Inevitably, some will disagree about a number of choices in particular. The translations, on the other hand, largely work well in English, even though they are sometimes uneven. What we can all agree on and salute is the attentive work of Zenith, introducing to a wider English-reading audience a golden century of poetry in Portuguese.

RICARDO MARQUES

## Russian Fiction

Sasha Sokolov

A SCHOOL FOR FOOLS

Translated by Alexander Boguslawski

288pp. NYRB. Paperback, £8.99 (US \$14.95).

978 1 59017 846 1

An enchanting, tragic, and touching "book" – such was Vladimir Nabokov's opinion of Sasha Sokolov's debut novel *A School for Fools*. It isn't difficult to see why Nabokov's appraisal was so uncharacteristically favourable: the entomological details, the fascination with time's fabric, the

unflinchingly individualistic conception of art. Yet it is probably what results from the third of these reasons – the author's unique style, which defies classification – that gives Sokolov his enduring appeal, as the arrival of this new translation by Alexander Boguslawski attests. Written in a haunting, lyric, stream-of-consciousness mode, *A School for Fools* delves into the memories of its two narrators (a student at the titular "special school", and his double, the incarnation of his split personality), in a quest to probe the nature of personal and artistic freedom, and the transcendent power of language.

By turns philosophical, prophetic, tragic and allegorical, Sokolov's polyphonic novel was so antithetical to the Soviet doctrine of Socialist Realism that it was initially impossible to publish. First circulated in samizdat in the USSR, Sokolov took the novel with him when he emigrated in 1975, and published it with Ardis in an English translation by Carl Proffer a year later. As Boguslawski points out in his introduction to this new edition, the quick turn-around meant that Proffer's "worthy and readable" translation "was produced rapidly and contained some serious misinterpretations and mistakes". To say that Sokolov's new translator has merely corrected these, however, would be a vast understatement. Boguslawski's assiduous devotion to the text has meant that not only are Sokolov's many rhythmic and rhymed passages beautifully restored, but also many of the subtler intertextual allusions missed by Proffer are revealed to the English reader for the first time.

This handsome new edition is marred only by the occasional heavy-handed editorial note and a few minor Russianisms that have crept into the text – "comrades" instead of "classmates" (*tovarishchi*), "how many years we've been sitting in the special school" instead of "how many years we've spent" (*prosideli*). Such minor points, however, cannot detract from the overall power of the translation. One can only hope to see more of Sokolov in Boguslawski's stylish translation.

BRYAN KARETNYK

## Technology

Paul Levinson

MCLUHAN IN AN AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

16pp. Connected Editions (Kindle Edition).

£1.99.

Social media – one of the defining phenomena of our digital age – transmogrifies continually, challenging anyone seeking to understand how our use of it shapes our world. As the media academic Paul Levinson puts it, Facebook and the ever-growing list of rivals, along with the smart devices that constantly connect us to them, are "evolving so rapidly as to make any printed essay . . . about them likely obsolete the day it was published". In this arresting, if occasionally truncated, essay Levinson sidesteps the problem by applying "poetic, controversial" concepts forged by the cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan in the last century to our online lives. Although McLuhan died in 1980 just before the personal computer revolution, his ideas "have even greater applicability to the media of today, which turns all of us into producers . . .".

Exemplifying this point, Levinson has published this essay himself via Amazon, as a new

chapter in his 1999 book *Digital McLuhan*, which used McLuhan's theories such as the global village to illuminate the emerging internet. Here he focuses on recent developments; for example, the selfie. By using McLuhan's tetrad – four questions that form “a way of mapping the . . . interconnections of technologies across time” – Levinson situates smartphone self-portraiture in a provocative historical context. These images amplify “the merging of photographer and subject”, obsolesce “the world as our tableau”, and retrieve “looking at our own reflection in the pool of water”. For Levinson the “entrée to the future” is the tetrad's last question – “what does the new medium, when pushed to its limits . . . flip into?” The flip of the photograph, the selfie in turn flips in to “Snapchat, which invites dissemination of images . . . that disappear” within seconds.

The flip that excites Levinson most is the book into ebook, which has “spearheaded a profound revolution in the gatekeeping of media” that McLuhan anticipated in 1977: “the Xerox makes everyone a publisher”. Levinson argues persuasively that the digital age should rehabilitate McLuhan, whose ideas some have dismissed as anachronistic. Social media echoes McLuhan's own “attempt to break through the regimented strictures of traditional print media”. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), McLuhan replaced chapter titles with glosses reminiscent of Twitter's 140-character communications, showing that his “modes of expression were not odd . . . but fundamentally human”. Promising to update his essay online as new patterns of media usage emerge, Levinson's work is as interesting for how it is published as for what it says.

TRISTAN QUINN

## Literary Criticism

Nicola Wilson

HOME IN BRITISH WORKING-CLASS FICTION

252pp. Ashgate. £60.  
978 1 4094 3241 8

*Home in British Working-Class Fiction* turns away from a “masculinist, work-based understanding of class in favour of home, gender, domestic labour and the family kitchen”. Nicola Wilson's first full-length book is an ambitious and welcome addition to the few studies about the working class by the working class, which changes it from subject to experience. Wilson draws on an impressive range of sources to argue that there has been a tendency to ignore the importance of ideas and meanings of home as a key part of working-class writing. In this she has been strongly supported by Carolyn Steedman, Valerie Walkerdine and Joanna Bourke.

Wilson defines “working-class” broadly so as to include D. H. Lawrence, Ellen Wilkinson and Robert Tressell, as well as contemporary writers such as Janice Galloway, Livi Michael and James Kellaway. Pat Barker's first trilogy (*Union Street*, *Blow Your House Down* and *Liza's England*) provides her with a richly detailed view of home and a sense of self and place as inextricably linked. There are also a few exceptions: Elizabeth Gaskell and Nell Dunne, the author of *Poor Cow*. It is also good to see her acknowledge the achievements of working-class women writers who have too conveniently fallen into obscurity, such as

Ethel Carnie (1886–1962). (Wilson has produced an edition of Carnie's 1925 novel, *This Slavery*; I provided the introduction to the centenary edition of Carnie's first novel, the aptly titled *Miss Nobody*, also edited by Wilson.) Writing for the *Woman Worker* in 1909, Carnie sets a high bar when it comes to conveying the sacred space of home, and in challenging sentimental notions of home as place of tranquility:

You aristocrats . . . will never know the delight with which the toiler looks around his home on Sunday afternoon . . . You take all the shine and cleanliness for granted – servants have done it – and the labour of others has made you rich enough to obtain this lovely thing and that – but we know the price of our belongings, and scarcely get time to behold them.

Carnie's language is of its time, of course, but the anger is timeless – her voice provides Wilson's book with a roar of frustration that could never come from outside observers, whose voyeuristic portrayals of working-class homes can be so unsatisfactory. *Home in British Working-Class Fiction* will no doubt find itself at home in the humanities libraries of many universities, but if only – given its focus on “The Uprooted and the Anxious” and “Estates and the New Slum Life”, as two of its chapter titles put it – a few policy-makers and politicians could chance across it, too.

BELINDA WEBB

## Biography

Henry Hemming

THE INGENIOUS MR. PYKE

Inventor, fugitive, spy  
512pp. Public Affairs. \$26.99.  
978 1 61039 577 9

Geoffrey Pyke's variegated career included sneaking as a war correspondent into Kaiser Wilhelm's Germany during the First World War on an American passport, then being the first POW to escape the Reich – as well as becoming a pioneer in children's education, a wildly successful commodities investor, a sociologist of Nazi Germany, supporter of the Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and a military inventor. Despite all the efforts of British secret services spent tailing him, the one thing he wasn't, was a German – or was it Soviet – spy.

Aphorisms such as “The correct formulation of a problem is more than half-way to its solution” or “Everything is irrelevant till correlated with something else”, might sound vague, but as Henry Hemming shows in this fascinating book about what may be the last of the long line of brilliant British amateurs, they explain Pyke's method of thinking that allowed him to break down what management gurus today call “silos”. Take Pyke's and Teddy Falk's flight from Germany; reasoning that the Germans would expect them to head straight for the Dutch border after escaping from Ruhleben POW Camp, they headed deeper into Germany and, to further their disguises as outdoorsmen, went to Berlin's Wertheim's department store to purchase camping equipment. Or consider Pyke's arbitrage system (which focused not on the ups and downs of the price of tin but on the deviation between the two extremes). Pyke devised it in the mid-1920s, allowing him to all but corner the market in tin and provide funds for the Malting House, a liberal early-childhood

school, the example of which is still cited today. Pyke also dispatched correspondents into Nazi Germany – and, though a British Jew – entered the belly of the beast himself disguised as the leader of an English golf team to conduct Gallup-style polls designed to determine Hitler's actual support.

By far Pyke's most surprising career turn, however, was with Louis Mountbatten's Combined Operations, where he proposed the development of what became skidoos and conceived of the project code named *Habbakuk* (*sic*). Though rendered unnecessary by the launch of the Bogue-Class escort carriers, at the height of the Battle of the Atlantic this plan to create an unsinkable iceberg-cum-aircraft carrier made from what was called Pykrete, seized Winston Churchill's mind and for a time occupied military planners in the United States and test sites in the Canadian Rockies.

NATHAN M. GREENFIELD

## Anthologies

Kevin Barry and Olivia Smith, editors

WINTER PAGES

192pp. Curlew Editions. €40.  
978 0 9933029 0 9

*Winter Pages*, a new yearly anthology on the Irish arts, contains an array of short fiction, non-fiction and photography from a number of practitioners in literature, theatre, film and the visual arts. Mark O'Connell's essay follows the trials of faith facing a young Dublin priest, while the film and television writer John Butler contributes a lively piece describing the frantic lunacy of “pilot season” in Los Angeles, and Jon McGregor, during a cycle trip around the west of Ireland, reflects affectingly on a failed relationship. Claire Kilroy's “F for Phone” is a moving look back on her experience of pregnancy, motherhood and the effect these have had on her life as a writer – balancing the regret of lost professional time with feelings of gratitude and hope. The publication ends with an unsettling poem, “Corncrake and Curlew”, from Paul Muldoon (“The corncrake marvels at the land being green / although the hay's been saved. / The curlew knows the land's so green / because it's a mass grave”).

Elsewhere, there are well-crafted and compelling short stories, for example, “Plunkett Mundy woke up on a table in Pigalle” by John Kelly is a tale of obsession with a person that neither the reader (nor the narrator, Plunkett Mundy) ever sees or meets. Desmond Hogan's “The Metlar” is a loosely affiliative series of memories and happenings connected to the “Metal Bridge” that crosses the River Shannon as it flows out of Limerick city. Hogan's prose oscillates between what is real and unreal: “Traveller boy who lives in a Winnebago . . . swims naked at the Metal Bridge, blessing himself before swimming, slight, workhouse buttocks, pubes a fugitive chestnut, that of a squirrel running up a tree”.

This anthology pays attention to emerging, as well as established, writers from Ireland, alongside creatives in other disciplines. In one of the interviews that appear throughout the publication, Lenny Abrahamson, the director of the Oscar-nominated *Room* (2015), tells us about his process: from writing to casting and shooting, and how difficult it is to retain an open-ended sense of creativity within this linear progression of filmmaking. The journalist

Emer O'Toole interviews the activist and theatre director Grace Dyas about her trilogy of productions on the history of heroin in Ireland. So too Michele Horrigan, an artist and curator from rural Limerick, discusses intuitive crafting with a local walking-stick maker. In an interesting transcript of a conversation between an Irish stand-up comedian Tommy Tiernan and *Winter Pages*'s co-editor Kevin Barry, Barry brings up the subject of Protestant and Catholic types of Irish output, and if this links to a town-country divide (Tiernan suggests that Dublin writers have a “precise and forensic” style). The range of material in this anthology, however, counters whether such distinctions are relevant or helpful.

ADRIAN DUNCAN

## Cultural Studies

William Scott Wilson

WALKING THE KISO ROAD

A modern-day exploration of old Japan  
288pp. Shambhala. Paperback, £12.99.

978 1 61180 125 5

Japan is not all the neon flash and frantic buzz of Tokyo or Osaka; it is also tea and sweets at Mrs Yamaki's house and walking back through rice paddies perhaps to find a wild boar in your front room. Yet this Japan is a country that most visitors fail to reach, one that seems all but mythical after those rose-tinted Studio Ghibli films and the suburban sprawl which makes it feel impossible that one could go more than ten steps without running into a vending machine.

William Scott Wilson's Japan is that rarity: Japan as it is, an unpretentious mixture of ancient and modern, picturesque and pathetic. This is true of Wilson's writing as well. *Walking the Kiso Road* is a chronicle of his most recent and final trip down the Kiso Road, a famed thoroughfare which has been in use and popular with travellers since the eighth century, but which became a vital route for lords and samurai to the new capital of Edo (now Tokyo) in the seventeenth century. Wilson is a respected translator of samurai texts, and his erudition is what really elevates *Walking the Kiso Road*. Alongside memories of earlier journeys, complaints about the state of his feet, and details about his lodgings and dinners, he provides his own translations of travel guides and diaries about the same journey from centuries ago, and he includes choice poems about the landscape, the towns and the experience of travelling through the Kiso Valley written by some of Japan's most celebrated poets.

Wilson builds an image of quiet continuity throughout the ages and a strong argument for slow, considered travel. “Like Edo-period warlords, we ride along in modern-day palanquins, emerging at our destinations and missing everything in between”, he writes in the afterword. “But when we bypass the tiny tea-house selling rice cakes grilled with sweet miso sauce, we cheat ourselves of the taste of three centuries of travel in the Kiso.” Wilson's descriptions and quotations are so evocative and his tone so companionable that the reader feels transported to the calm of a grove, discussing local folklore and where to have our next meal. There are no blinking neon signs or salacious stories in this book, only the quiet pleasures of friendship, shared experiences and journeys for the sake of journeying.

MORGAN GILES