Mountaineering

Felice Benuzzi

NO PICNIC ON MOUNT KENYA
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 impressimistic 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 the “massive blue-black tooth of sheer rock, inlaid with azure glaciers”. After forging makeshift ice axes from stolen hammers, crampions from the running boards and mudguards of a scrapped car, and horribly inadequate sial 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 escapes 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 territory” to Benuzzi and his companions. “For us”, he writes, “it had just been created.”

Alan McNeely

Portuguese Poetry

Richard Zenith, editor

28 PORTUGUESE POETS
A bilingual edition
Translated by Richard Zenith and Alexis Levitin

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 boldly and rightly chooses 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 Ricardo Reis and Álvaro de Campos – adopted by Pessoa himself, making these the first names in the volume.

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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 smart- phone self-portraiture as a provocative historical context. These images amplify “the merging of photographer and subject, obses- ses “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 “looking at our own reflection in the pool of phone self-portraiture in a provocative way” – Levinson situates smart-mapping the interconnections of technology across time. Levinson situates smart-mapping the interconnections of technology across time. He “sets a new medium, when pushed to its limits…flip into?”. The flip of the photograph, the selfie in turn flips to “Snapchat, which invites dissemi- nation 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’s 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 now as 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. 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 Kelloway.

Patrick 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 intertextually 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 pro- duced 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 con- veying the sacred space of home, and in chal- lenging 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 method of thinking you rich enough to obtain this lovely thing and that—but we know the price of our belonging, and scarcely get 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 a home in the humanities library 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**


Geoffrey Pyke’s variegated career included sneaking as a war correspondent into Kaiso Winkle’s Geofroy 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 talking him, the one thing he wasn’t, was a German — or was it Soviet — spy.

Asphorisms such as “The correct formul- ation 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 ability to think that allowed him to break down what management gurus today call “silo”. Take Pyke’s and Teddy Falk’s flight from Germany; reasoning that the Germans would expect them to head south, Pyke suggests instead that they be sent back from Rublehen POW Camp. He headed deeper into Germany and, to further their disguises as outdoorsmen, went to Berlin’s Wer- them’s department store to purchase camping equipment. Or consider Pyke’s aritragne system (which focused not on the ups and downs of the price of tin but on the deviation of 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 to England, and through his Irish journal, _The Ingenuity and the Anxious_ – entered the belly of the beast himself dis- guised as the leader of an English golf team to conduct Gustle-style polls designed to deter- mine Hitler’s actual support.

By far Pyke’s most surprising career turn, however, was a visit by Louis Mountbatten’s Com- bined Operations, where he proposed the development of what became skidoos and con- ceived 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

**THE CULTURAL CRITIC EXAMINES THE THIRD WAVE**

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 affecting 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 unsetting poem, “Comercare and Curlew”, from Paul Muldoon (“The comercare 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 Fígáilé” by John Kelly is a tale of obsession with a person who 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. Although the bay’s been saved….The curlew knows the land’s so green / because it’s a mass grave”.

WINTER PAGES

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 yard. Yet this Japan is a country that most visitors fail to reach; it 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 thor- oughfare which has been in use and popular with travellers since the eighth century, but which became a vital route for lords and samu- rai to the new capital of Edo (now Tokyo) in the seventeenth century. Wilson is a respected translator of samurai texts, and his eradication 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 through this ancient land. We ride along in modern-day palan- quins, 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 glucose, 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, dis- cussing 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

**Emer O’Toole** interviews the activist and theatre director Grace Dysas about her trilogy of productions on the history of heroin in Ireland. So too Michele Horrigan, an artist and curator from rural Limerick, discusses intui- tive crafting with a local walking-stick maker. In an interesting transcript of a conversation between an Irish stand-up comedian Tommy Tiernan and a Japanese co-director, 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 sug- gests that Dublin writers have a “precise and forensic” style). The range of material in this anthology is challenging: one of the contributors argues the life and work of Beryl Bryden is a history of her country which he does not assert.

ADRIAN DUNCAN

**Cultural Studies**

William Scott Wilson

**WALKING THE KISO ROAD**


_In Brief_

IN BRIEF

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