



# The admirable Criterion

BY THEODORE DALRYMPLE

**The Fortunes of Permanence: Culture and Anarchy in an Age of Amnesia**  
By Roger Kimball  
St Augustine's Press, 360pp, £22/ebook £11

There is a second-hand bookshop in Shrewsbury on whose fourth floor moulder—or used to moulder, until I bought them—volumes of essays by such as Walter Bagehot, Augustine Birrell, Leslie Stephen and Solomon Eagle (J.C. Squire). I don't suppose many people read them any more, but they ought to do so, both for their content and style. None of these men was an academic, and all would have disdained to write a sentence which it was necessary to read a dozen times to perceive a faint glimmer of meaning, as so many literary academics now habitually do with pride in their own obscurity; they had the knack of extracting the significance from the lives and works of the authors whom they read, and conveying it with elegance and precision. They were also very funny; I had rather supposed that Bagehot in particular was dour, dry and dull, as befits the founder of the *Economist*, until I read his wonderful literary criticism.

It seems to me that Roger Kimball is of this, to me, exalted company. He is, like them, a man of parts, the editor of a distinguished cultural review that has just celebrated its 30th anniversary (the *New Criterion*), and that exerts an influence far beyond its faithful and discriminating subscribers; he also runs a publishing house. Yet he also writes elegant essays of literary and cultural criticism, of which this book is a further collection (he has published several others), which show broad interests, wide reading and deep understanding. He examines everything from a definite but not rigid philosophical standpoint; this enables him to discuss a wide range of topics, from John Buchan to an exhibition of architectural drawings by two contrasting contemporary architects, from G.K. Chesterton to an art museum at Bard College, without the reader feeling that he has a mere miscellany in his hand.

Kimball's viewpoint—which I freely admit is mine—is that there are constants in human existence which it is vain and indeed dangerous to deny, and that the task of ▶

The Victorians were uncomfortable with this romantic Spenser, and created one more suited to their moral earnestness. Ruskin identified Spenser's "grotesque idealism" as the medium through which the most appalling and eventful truth has been wisely conveyed since the beginnings of Western literature—"no element of imagination has a wider range, a more magnificent use, or so colossal a grasp of sacred truth".

In our own day, yet another Spenser has come to the fore. Recent scholars have been freshly excited by the fact that Spenser spent much of his adult life in Ireland as a colonial administrator, and was associated with some harsh episodes of repression. His unflinchingly severe manual on how Ireland might be reduced into subjection, the posthumously published *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, suddenly became a key text. Its bitter remedies were read back into *The Faerie Queene*, and this had the effect of raising dramatically the stock of the previously neglected Book V, which now emerged as an idealised (from an English perspective) allegory of colonial subjugation.

When the biographical tradition surrounding a writer shows such extreme variety, one reason is normally that the documentary record is meagre. Fewness of authentic life-records translates readily into greater scope for biographical interpretation. This is certainly the case with

Spenser—we have no personal letters, no major literary manuscripts in his own hand, and even the documentary trail which his official life in Ireland would have produced was destroyed in the troubles of the early 20th century. But it is also the case with Spenser—and Hadfield brings this out very well—that the relationship between the life and work is teasing and oblique. The man slips easily away from the pages of his poems.

Hadfield's biography assembles everything we know, and perhaps are ever likely to know, about Spenser. It is lavishly footnoted, so those readers who are minded to do so can trace the questions which Hadfield summarises back to their source. There are some nice, vivid touches—for instance, the findings of recent archaeological work on the site of Spenser's Irish residence, Kilcolman, are well exploited. There are also a few slips—it undermines the reader's confidence to be told that the Greek writer Lucian is "one of the most humorous and witty of Latin authors". But the main problem is that Hadfield produces no clear picture of Spenser. He discusses the impediments to the creation of such an image with candour. But this smacks of trying to pass off the restatement of a problem as its solution. This book is perhaps best regarded as a storehouse or a quarry of materials for the life of Spenser, which will await a future biographer of greater imaginative power.

*Edmund Spenser: Enigmatic and elusive*



## Pandora's books

BY SUSAN HERTOOG

### The Woman Reader

By Belinda Jack  
Yale, 336pp, £20

The thesis of Belinda Jack's book can be summed up in one sentence. Reading is power; men had it and women wanted it. In around 300 pages, she presents a chronological and thematic narrative that scans 32 millennia, beginning in the skeleton-laden burial caves of southwestern France, and ending in the traffic-jammed streets of modern Tehran. While academic critics, women and men, have commented that Jack has not broken new ground, for non-academic readers with a passion for social and literary history, among whom I count myself, her book constitutes a revelation. But be forewarned: it's neither a beach book nor a run-in-the-park iPod download, but an easy-chair-near-a-roaring-fire-on-a-winter's-day kind of read.

Erudite and provocative, *The Woman Reader* throws new light on some old questions. Are the distinctive inclinations and perceptions of men and women hard-wired or social constructs? Can raw determination override social dominance, or are we mere playthings of circumstance?

Many books have attempted to unravel this Gordian knot, but Ms Jack has boldly attempted to cut right through it. The book explodes with ideas, facts and images across recorded time, inconsistently arranged by theme and era, subjecting the reader to a dizzying onslaught of material that swings without warning back and forth in time. Yet *The Woman Reader* is a heroic attempt to uncover the convergent forces of technology, theology, economics, medicine, and human nature that thwart the quest for female enlightenment.

Literacy, Jack tells us, is purely an accident of birth—a fortunate mélange of historical moment, inherited wealth and leisure, the goodwill of powerful men and women, and proximity to a cosmopolitan city. The lucky few born into this web of riches, she writes, have a fighting chance to become readers and writers. But women, she writes, have been tossed about by the contortions of history. Disease, famine and war have been a boon to women readers, only to be followed by periods in which men reassert their dominance. After the Second World War, the women who worked in the

factories, while the men fought on the front, were quickly banished to kitchen and hearth, setting back women's entry into the marketplace for another decade.

Jack begins her narrative in southern Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC with the birth of standardised language, noting that it took more than a thousand years to produce the first recorded woman reader and author, Princess Enheduanna, daughter of Sargon of Akkad. It was Greece, however, with its more egalitarian laws and mores, that engendered the most famous woman reader and writer—the poetess Sappho, who composed her work in the company of women friends, inspiring them to read and write, earning her, perhaps, the distinction of founding the first female book club in human history.

And yet reading has its dangers. Ms Jack shows that the intrinsic pleasure of reading and its potential to stir erotic desire has doomed women to ridicule, alienation and even death. And who was the demonic culprit that set this “evil” into motion? Gutenberg and his “satanic” press.

Beginning in 1450, the dissemination of holy scripture across Europe, Britain, Asia and all points south and west gave birth to the Reformation, not only opening the portal to an unmediated relationship to God, but spawning individual engagement with the text, and the possibility of subjective interpretation, thereby scaring the living daylight out of the powers that be.

There is no better example than Henry VIII, who, breaking with the Catholic Church but not with its doctrines, succeeded in squelching his sixth and last wife Katherine Parr's desire to read with friends within the palace walls by burning one of them, Anne Askew, at the stake. Thankfully, Katherine got the final word, publishing her book *Lamentations* after Henry's death in 1547, which posits that personal engagement with holy Scripture is the hallmark of a good Christian life.

But it was the popularity of the novel in the 18th century that made possible the explosion in female literacy. Beginning on the continent, in France and Italy, but translated into the vernacular of England and the Americas, the romantic novel became the rage, evoking male moral disapproval even as its popularity rose. In a letter dated August 17, 1789, Anna Seward, British poet and correspondent, dubbed the novel “sweet poison”, one that corrupts the body as well as the spirit. And she wasn't alone. Yet canny male writers, such as Samuel Richardson, along with the burgeoning publishing industry, harnessed the trend, proving that women readers were a potent force in the literary mainstream.

Today, in the developed world, female lit-

culture is to examine the present with an eye to the eternal. Good cultural criticism, therefore, will remain of interest and value long after it was written, and I suspect that in a hundred years or more Kimball will unexpectedly delight someone as much as Bagehot or Birrell have delighted me.

He writes with clarity and wit, which perhaps explains his turning away from the academic life in the humanities to which, at a different time, he might have seemed suited; for example he writes of the supposed age of information in which we live, “Data, data everywhere, but no one knows a thing.” This is a characteristically witty but also highly suggestive formulation, for it reminds readers of the necessity for a framework into which factual knowledge can be put, of the vital need for intellectual and moral perspective, and so forth. One of the aims of culture is, or ought to be, to provide such a framework and perspective, which is why easy resort to an iPhone is no substitute for a deeply-ingrained apprehension that the Roman Empire came before the French Revolution, Exodus before the Rolling Stones, and that the past may illuminate the present as much as the present illuminates itself.

The extraction of the significance of authors or artists is a more intellectually exacting and worthwhile task than recording everything known or knowable about them, which is the favoured method of all too many biographers who seem to believe that all facts are created equal. Kimball performs the task with Somerset Maugham's trinity of the virtues of good prose: simplicity, lucidity and euphony.

# Books

*Roger Kimball: Man of parts (and an infinite variety of bow ties)*