

it is OK to say ‘no’”. What was that discussion’s outcome?

In the chapter on collegiality and community, the authors cede that “community is intangible and fluid, making it much more difficult to offer practical solutions”. Yet the very absence of how-to lists and bullet-pointed programmes shows the authors’ honest dislike of one-size-fits-all solutions. Despite the predominant language of crisis in this field, Berg and Seeber stress their belief that “resistance is alive and well. We envisage Slow Professors acting purposefully, cultivating emotional and intellectual resilience”. It is a welcome part of a crucial conversation.

RACHEL HADAS

Politics

Andrew S. Crines and Kevin Hickson,
editors

HAROLD WILSON

The unprincipled Prime Minister?

352pp. Biteback. £20.

978 1 78590 031 0

For twenty years after his resignation in 1976, Harold Wilson was vilified on the Left and the Right of the Labour Party. Both factions viewed the former Prime Minister as devious, untrustworthy and devoid of political principle. His governments were a source of dashed hopes and bitter disappointment, despite the optimistic mood that greeted Labour’s victory in 1964. Wilson had promised so much with his rhetoric of a new socialism propelled by the “white heat of technology”, appealing to the emerging class of white collar and technical workers. His vision had been undermined within three years as economic growth scarcely improved; the Treasury was then compelled to sacrifice the Government’s National Plan in defending the plummeting pound. David Marquand writes that the Wilson years were regarded as “an era of lost innocence, of hopes betrayed”, his governments derailed by the “atmosphere of shabby expediency”.

In the mid-1990s, the tide began to turn on Wilson’s reputation, marked by the publication of Ben Pimlott’s seminal biography. This more recent collection of essays, *Harold Wilson: The unprincipled Prime Minister?*, merely affirms the posthumous rehabilitation of Wilson as a Labour politician and Prime Minister. Like many edited books on post-war political history, the chapters encompass an eclectic range of academic and political contributors. The authors make a convincing case for the substantive achievements of Wilson’s governments. Jim Tomlinson’s incisive chapter on economic policy argues that Labour’s approach helped to arrest industrial decline while ensuring the burden of structural change did not fall wholly on the manual working class. Similarly, Robert Page is excellent on the scope of social policy particularly during the 1964–70 governments, demonstrating that improvements in the welfare state were achieved as economic inequalities narrowed. There are compelling chapters on education, liberalization, Europe and constitutional reform, as well as on sports policy.

The achievements were not down to Wilson alone. One angle less developed is the dynamic relationship between Wilson and his ministers. Despite glaring ideological differences, Wilson

cultivated a respectful partnership with Roy Jenkins, enabling the latter to achieve a sweep of path-breaking reforms at the Home Office. Wilson’s relationship with James Callaghan, in contrast, was more circumspect despite the fact that both men had been instinctively sympathetic to the Labour movement’s cloth-cap image. This effort at reappraisal is a constructive contribution to the historical literature on the Wilson years; that said, we are scarcely much closer to understanding Wilson’s notoriously complex, elusive personality.

PATRICK DIAMOND

History

Lauren Johnson

SO GREAT A PRINCE

England and the accession of Henry VIII

352pp. Head of Zeus. £20.

978 1 781 85985 8

The political transition of 1509, when a glowing Henry VIII succeeded his withered, grasping father Henry VII, has become a hot topic. First David Starkey spotlighted the new king in *Henry: Virtuous prince* (2008), then Thomas Penn dissected the old in *Winter King* (2011). Now Lauren Johnson has focused on the year 1509 itself. Her book takes the year as contemporaries would have measured it, from one Lady Day (March 25) to the next, and moves from season to season, following events at court and linking them to the lives of the wider population.

The device is ingenious and largely successful. The political narrative is crisp and leaves room for a portrait of English life across a wide social and geographical range. Easter is used to describe religion, St George’s Day and Henry’s accession to consider education and apprenticeship. May Day and the marriage of Henry to Catherine of Aragon open a discussion of weddings, and Midsummer serves for mystery plays. Halloween brings on death and disease, and Christmas fasting, feasting and food. Plough Monday and the assembly of Henry’s first parliament provide an opportunity to discuss the legal system. The court pageantry of Shrovetide with its exotic costumes introduces England’s contacts with the wider world. Lady Day 1510 and the aftermath of Catherine’s first miscarriage bring in sex and childbirth. Only occasionally do these links seem too contrived, as when the movement of herds at Lammas is likened to the flocking of petitioners to the commissions investigating the misdeeds of Henry VII’s ministers.

The book draws on a wide range of research and makes vivid use of biographical studies to conjure up individuals, from the disgruntled magnate Edward Stafford, Duke of Buckingham, and the Cheshire gentleman Humphrey Newton to the printer John Rastell and the London businesswoman Thomasine Percyval. It adds to its immediacy by liberal quotation from primary sources, wills and court cases as well as the surviving letter collections of the usual suspects, the Pastons, Plumpton and Lisles. It makes lively use of drama, but is patchier in its attention to material culture. Clothes are prominent, but the great surviving buildings of the age are strangely invisible: the lavish parish churches of Lavenham or Louth, Oxburgh Hall or Thornbury Castle, Henry VII’s chapel at Westminster. There are some exaggerations

or fudged technicalities, but in general this is an assured and eye-opening introduction to the England of 1509.

STEVEN GUNN

Natural Science

Peter Marren

WHERE THE WILD THYME BLEW

Growing up with nature in the Fifties and Sixties

399pp. NatureBureau. £14.99.

Peter Marren is probably Britain’s most polymathic naturalist – or perhaps “natural historian” is a better description, invoking the older sense of that term to convey the distinctive range and character of his enquiries. He has published guides, encyclopedias, critical studies, monographs and meditations on everything from mushrooms, insects, conservation and wild flowers to (most recently) butterflies, along with various bibliographical surveys of natural history publishing; and for over twenty-five years he has written a monthly column that combines passionate concern, deep knowledge and testy political satire about the state of Britain’s wildlife. As a sort of restless sideline, he also publishes accounts of battlefields, stargazing, country life and postage stamp design. He has now produced a memoir of his early life, documenting, in remarkable and vividly remembered detail, the era and the circumstances that helped shape his later career.

The era, for those of a generation to remember the 1950s and 60s, is brilliantly evoked. Marren seems to have perfect recall and he conjures up for the rest of us all those deeply incised early memories of the particularities of childhood life, such as Spangles, Hopalong Cassidy (“Here he comes, here he comes!”), Brylcream, Lonnie Donegan (“a grinning, ferret-faced fellow”), 78s, the theme tune to *Dixon of Dock Green*, Fry’s Turkish Delight (“full of Eastern promise”), Meccano and Dinky toys (painted in cheerful primary colours, but chipped within minutes of excited use). Marren’s first Dinky was a disc harrow, a characteristically unusual choice – and perhaps an omen, since this was later to be the instrument of destruction for his beloved flower meadows.

But the story of his personal circumstances is more troubled. His father was in the RAF, so the family was constantly on the move. Young Peter suffered in one unsatisfactory school after another; he was short-sighted, “a gawky, weedy little kid” and felt excluded from some of the normal boyish activities, and was sometimes bullied for his eccentric interests. In reaction, he developed an independence, defiance and anger against authority that served first as a defence and later as a positive strain in his growing sense of identity. Much of this narrative is very funny, enlivened as it is by many revealing anecdotes, irreverent judgements and some splendidly unfashionable opinions.

One sees, too, how the natural historian he was to become evolved from this background. This was a different country, a world now long gone. Children roamed freely, without supervision or constraint. A solitary and observant boy like the young Marren could make wonderful discoveries on his wanderings through a countryside still rich in wildlife. But that story is maybe for another and more specific

book to come later. It could be partly extracted from this privately published one and then extended to include his later professional career as a conservationist and author. One would hope such a work might also engage polemically in current political debates about conservation issues, on which Marren, unlike some other participants, can speak with the authentic voice of direct experience. Meanwhile, we should be very grateful to have this nostalgic answer to the question Virginia Woolf once posed, “Why must they grow up and lose it all?”

JEREMY MYNOTT

Literary Criticism

Reginald Gibbons

HOW POEMS THINK

208pp. University of Chicago Press.

Paperback, £17.50 (US \$25).

978 0 226 27800 1

Reginald Gibbons is the product of an unusual intellectual coupling. He was taught at Stanford by Donald Davie, the Movement poet, critic of High Modernism and advocate of eighteenth-century verse; and Davie’s influence on Gibbons is matched only by that of Hélène Cixous, the French feminist theorist and writer of experimental fiction. Gibbons’s desire to attest the incongruous nature of his intellectual formation is, in many ways, the key to this rich, conversational and enjoyable book. Part autobiography, part poetic theory, part commonplace book, *How Poems Think* never quite provides the definitive account promised in its title. That is partly owing to the real difficulty of saying precisely what thinking itself is. But it is also revealing that “thinking” often becomes, in Gibbons’s account, “thinking and feeling”, or it is associated in the poetic context with the inevitably fugitive “unconscious” or a “phantom”. Perhaps his most successful attempts to tell us how poems think come when his attentive close readings and scrupulous marshalling of earlier poetic theory break out into emphatic statement, as when “thinking” is juxtaposed with “ornamenting”, or when he claims that “poetry thinks in simultaneities”, a claim that Gibbons puts revealingly to work in relation to a number of different poems.

How Poems Think is the record of a lifetime’s reading and reflecting on a vast array of poetry – from Classical Greek lyric to Soviet-era Russian poetry, Spanish and French Modernism, early modern English verse, and trends in contemporary American poetry. Gibbons’s experiences as a translator of some of this verse generate a number of significant insights, too. And, being well versed in the history of poetics, he usefully engages major figures such as Roman Jakobson, Calvert Watkins and Gregory Nagy, among others, but also shares personal communications with, in particular, Russian poets and translators. This book has its flaws – the baldness of the statement that eighteenth-century English poetry was “narrowly constrained” would surely have made Davie wince, and some of the chronological facts peddled in the discussion of early modern English verse seem like fillers – but it is nevertheless an insightful, sometimes moving reflection on poetry’s potential capacities.

ROSS WILSON