Make the way clear for Keir

“socialism is the language of priorities” – goes a long way.

Unless the next Labour leader gets a grip on policy, she or he will soon be a prisoner of the unelectable left, whatever their initial appeal.

Enter Sir Keir Starmer, the one obviously electable leader. On the face of it, Starmer has to climb both Everest and the Himalayas. The first to get elected as Labour leader, the second to win a general election from a position of 162 seats fewer than the Tories.

He has an initial advantage. He is heading up from base camp after a decade of leaders heading down. He showed this as shadow Brexit secretary. Doggedly, a crux here and a pic axe there, he got to the right policy of a second referendum with an option to remain. This would have given Labour a winning message with a leader who believed in it and developed a strategy to win.

Starmer has done a big national job with distinction and is obviously fit to be prime minister. Just as I found almost no-one on the doorstep at the election who thought Corbyn was fit to be prime minister, I found almost no-one who thought Starmer was unfit, and many said they would have voted Labour with him as leader.

Starmer’s lack of sparkling oratory may not matter either. He exudes the integrity and judgement which Johnson so obviously lacks. A kind of inverted chariana which could be more powerful than the usual thing.

His problem comes back to policy. How does he shed the unelectable 2019 manifesto while being fresh, compelling, relevant and radical? The first step, I suggest, is to find a single authentic theme and hammer away at it incessantly. For Harold Wilson it was technology. For Tony Blair it was the education. After Blair made his “education, education, education” speech, he was the coming leader. John Major said he had the same priorities but not necessarily in the same order. He was playing catch up with Blair from the start.

What is the point of Starmer? This is the big question which now needs an answer. If he identifies one, maybe it doesn’t require Everest and the Himalayas. But rather what Tony Blair said to me was the ‘lion king’ test of winning an election.

Lion king? You just have to run away from the lion faster than the other guy. And if that guy is first Long Bailey, then Boris Johnson, you may not, after all, need to be Usain Bolt.

At last I have discovered an index on which Jeremy Corbyn is mainstream. He survived nearly five years as leader of the Labour Party, which is the average for its leaders since Ramsay MacDonald.

Only Labour leaders who have lasted much longer are the few who won elections: Blair and Wilson, 13 years each, and Attlee, who served an extraordinary 20 years, although that included the war and a decade when the House of Commons was frozen without an election. MacDonald also won two elections, but he in effect defected to the Tories while in office in 1851, so his leadership was terminated unexpectedly.

I say this as a warning to the next Labour leader. You don’t have long to make your mark. Unless you look electable within a year or two, you will be out within five. And most Labour leaders are out by then. Against the four who have won elections in the last century, 11 have lost or not even survived to fight one.

Labour’s default is losing elections and staying in opposition, just as the Tories are winning them and governing.

Labour chooses its leaders accordingly. Of its 15 leaders in the last century, more than half, from Milliband and Corbyn to Lansbury and Henderson, were almost certain losers even when they were chosen, but were put there for other reasons. Labour is only intermittently interested in power.

The candidates coming forward for the current vacancy should be seen in this light. Ian Lavery and Rebecca Long-Bailey are obviously Corbyn Continuity losers. But they have powerful Labour promoters among those whose party and union jobs and power depend upon the far left faction retaining the leadership, led by Len McCluskey of Unite. And they may get enough support from party members who think the 2019 manifesto was wonderful, if only Jeremy hadn’t been trashed by the Tory media.

Frankness interlude… The 2019 manifesto was not wonderful. It was a Christmas tree of irrelevant and unaffordable commitments, including mass nationalisation and free broadband, which were never taken seriously, even by most Labour candidates, let alone voters. Oh, and the four day week, which appeared from left field as a whim of John McDonnell’s which virtually no-one thought practical. A little bit of Bevan –
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Under Vladimir Putin, Russia’s greatest exports are corruption and thuggery. PAUL KNOTT reports on the regime’s destabilising designs around the globe for the year ahead.

Imagine (with apologies to John Lennon) if Russia had continued down a democratic path based on the rule of law over the past two decades.

It isn’t hard to do – because most of its eastern European neighbours such as Poland and Estonia have followed exactly that route since the fall of the Soviet bloc. This choice has produced peaceful lives of growing prosperity for many of their people.

Sadly most Russians would say you were a dreamer if you suggested that they could have the same opportunities. Instead, Russia has long been hijacked by Vladimir Putin and his cabal of corrupt oligarchs and ex-KGB cronies.

Their rule has led to the country being dubbed the “racketeer with rockets” by the respected (and brave) Moscow-based professor Sergei Medvedev in his new book *The Return of the Russian Leviathan*.

This characterisation encapsulates both the immense corruption of Putin’s regime and its thuggery, from the brutal assassination of opponents on the streets of Britain and Germany to the invasion of Ukraine and deliberate bombing of Syrian schools and hospitals in support of president Assad.

These latter high-profile acts of military aggression do at least bear enough resemblance to previous misconduct by states around the world for the Kremlin’s propaganda machine to claim they are being pursued in Russia’s national interest.

This claim is, of course, questionable, at best. The unprovoked assault on Ukraine has turned a once friendly neighbour into an implacable foe. And it remains to be seen whether acquiring a reputation as a brutal backer of the world’s worst dictators will benefit Russia much in the long run.

The national interest argument is undermined further by Russia’s extensive and unprecedented use of so-called ‘private military contractors’. In reality, these groups largely consist of ‘former’ Russian soldiers armed with high-tech weaponry provided by state-owned Russian arms manufacturers.

They are often linked to the GRU military intelligence division and directed by people close to Putin. Their creation and deployment enables the Kremlin, somewhat implausibly, to deny knowledge of their actions and evade responsibility for breaking international law.

The price these Russian ‘private military contractors’ usually extract for propping up a struggling despot or supporting one side in a civil conflict is control of some of the host country’s natural resources.

By far the most prominent of these shady outfits is the Wagner Group. Wagner is allegedly owned and directed by the immensely wealthy Yevgeny Prigozhin, a close associate of the Russian president. Towards the end of the Soviet era, Prigozhin served nine years in jail for robbery. On his release he opened a hot dog stand. His subsequent meteoric rise has led to him being nicknamed ‘Putin’s chef’, because his restaurant business is the preferred caterer for state functions and holds a number of other lucrative government food and beverage contracts.

In addition to Syria and Ukraine, Wagner’s forces are increasingly active in Libya. There they are supporting the warlord field marshal Khalifa Haftar and his rebel Libyan National Army (LNA) in their fight to seize the country from the UN-recognised government.

Haftar’s stronghold is in eastern Libya, where much of the country’s bountiful oil infrastructure is located.

Empowered by their experiences, Russia’s ‘mafia state’ godfathers are now expanding their model to places where Russia’s geopolitical interests are minimal. In numerous, weaker countries in the developing world, Russian state and military might seems increasingly to be deployed solely in pursuit of personal financial gain by Putin’s associates.

This development perhaps first became apparent in the mineral-rich but conflict torn Central African Republic (CAR), where Wagner Group ‘mercenaries’ provide protection for both the president Faustin-Archange Touadéra and the CAR’s diamond mines. In July 2018, three Russian journalists were ambushed and killed just days after arriving in the CAR to investigate Wagner’s activities there.

In Guinea, president Alpha Condé is attempting to change the constitution to allow him to retain power for a third term. Widespread public protests against this step are being met with extreme force and at least 11 protesters have already been killed by the authorities. As the risk of civil war rises, Russia has expressed its support for Condé and the presence of operatives from Russian ‘security companies’ is being reported in the capital, Conakry.

Guinea contains about half of the world’s total supply of bauxite plus substantial quantities of high-grade iron ore, gold and diamonds. A significant proportion of the bauxite is mined in a joint venture between the government of Guinea and Russian company RUSAL, which was founded and is co-owned by Oleg Deripaska.

Of all the major Russian oligarchs, Deripaska is particularly close to Putin. He was also a close associate of the now-jailed former head of Donald Trump’s presidential campaign, Paul Manafort. Deripaska has previously had his US visa revoked and is currently under US sanctions because, according to the US Treasury Department, he has “been accused of threatening the lives of business rivals, illegally wiretapping a government official, and taking part in extortion and racketeering”.

Perhaps the boldest and most overt recent example of Russian interference came in Madagascar in 2018. As an in-depth investigation in the *New York Times* reported in November, Russian operatives backed by intimidating armed guards swept through the country in
PUTIN’S CHEF

Yevgeny Prigozhin made his fortune running catering businesses in the 1990s. He joined Putin’s circle when the Russian leader began dining at his floating restaurant in St Petersburg, called New Island, in 2001. Prigozhin has since branched out into various businesses and investigations by Western journalists and think tanks have linked him to the Wagner mercenary group, accused of pursuing Russian state interests in war-torn Syria and Libya, as well as hotspots in sub-Saharan Africa. He has denied the Western allegations, but his ventures remain very opaque.

The US government has slapped up sanctions against him and his businesses because of his alleged meddling in US elections.

Farcically, this programme of interference was carried out incompetently to generate sufficient backing for the chronically unpopular Rajoianamipianina. This flog only briefly derailed the Russians. Unencumbered by scruples or ideology, they belatedly switched their support to the eventual winner Andry Rajoelina. His government subsequently confirmed the extension of a chromium mining contract with the Wagner Group, which appears to have been what the Russians were seeking all along.

The free world should not complacently turn a blind eye to this illicit Russian activity or write it off as taking place in far-away places of which we know little. As well as corrupting and destabilising large parts of the world, such interference increases the wealth and power of Putin and his associates. This in turn strengthens them in their concerted attempts to undermine Western democracy.

In the close-knit, corrupt circles of the Kremlin, everything, and everyone, is connected to everything else. Prigozhin, for example, is not only involved in dubious conduct in distant locales. Western security services are confident that he also funded and ran the notorious St Petersburg troll farm that was central to the Russian campaign of interference in the 2016 US election won by president Trump.

The division that Trump has subsequently sewn in the US and the extent to which his scandal-plagued presidency has weakened American influence around the world will have delighted Putin. It is a near certainty that the Russians will now try to compound the damage by launching a renewed destabilisation campaign in the run-up to the 2020 US presidential election. Imagine that.

JAMES BALL’S DECONSTRUCTED

Hack attacks on their way

Russia very likely interfered in the UK’s 2019 general election, and virtually no-one cares.

The documents which Labour used to suggest the Conservatives had a secret plan to put the NHS “on the table” in trade talks with the USA had been hacked and posted to Reddit in a manner which independent journalists and Reddit itself said were consistent with previous state-sponsored hacking by Russia.

There is no suggestion Labour had any knowing collaboration or collusion with Moscow to do this, but intent matters – no-one would seriously believe Russia would engage in such activities because of its concerns for Britain’s health service. Indeed, it is doing what it has done across the world for years – playing on our divisions, deepening them, and driving us apart.

Five of us seem to care about the trade talks hack because the emergence of the documents suits the politics of many of us. We reason that if they are genuine – even if they don’t actually reveal anything that hadn’t already been publicly reported – then what’s the problem? But this was not the argument we made when the Trump campaign made gleeeful use of material hacked from the email accounts of the Democratic National Committee and a Hillary Clinton aide before the US election in 2016.

What the more recent incident especially highlights is the need to move beyond a belief that Russia is promoting specific goals or specific politics – especially the belief that has become relatively widespread among Remainers that Russia interfered in the 2016 referendum because it was desperate to see Brexit happen.

The reality is more complex. When it comes to activity by bots and similar accounts, Brexit-related content was fairly minimal in the run-up to that vote. Russia’s political elite was itself fairly divided on Brexit. While a vote to leave could disrupt and distract the UK (which Russia sees as an end in itself), a Euro sceptic UK staying in the EU would lower down and disrupt that country’s decision-making. It was finely balanced.

Things changed after the vote, especially given the divisiveness the result caused. Russia suddenly became far more active in pushing out messages promoting Brexit – but also, and this is less appreciated, egging on Remainers to feel furious about the result, and to lose faith in the democratic process.

Russian interference isn’t something that happens only to one side, or only to people we disagree with. Their efforts – often fairly unsophisticated and low-key, as the UK is far from Russia’s top priority – are instead pushing on all sides, encouraging anger and division.

This stems from Vladimir Putin’s longstanding zero-sum view of international relations: Anything that harms or hampers its adversaries must be good for Russia.

Paradoxically, this means that even raising the alarm about Russian interference can itself serve Russian ends. If we are all angrily accusing one another of being Russian bots, we can hardly have a constructive debate – and it is genuinely difficult to distinguish an angry keyboard warrior from a Russian bot in this online era.

What does that mean for the year ahead? Moscow’s primary hacking target for 2020 is obvious. If Russia’s goal is to destabilise its biggest adversary, sow division, and even militarily damage Ukraine, with whom it is still at war, it can hope for no better than the re-election of Donald Trump as US president this autumn, and will doubtless go all out to help secure this.

But we can expect activity closer to home. Brexit is now a certainty – the first phase will pass less than a month from now. But the big stakes are only just beginning.

Boris Johnson has given himself just 11 months to negotiate the future relationship between the UK and the EU, a decision that will affect millions of people’s lives and livelihoods.

Simultaneously, he will try to agree trade deals with the US and other nations – a process many fear could lead to drastic changes in food or safety standards, or risk higher drug prices or other disruption to public services. We will need sustained accountability journalism and be organised to push back where needed.

But while there will likely be many real and legitimate grounds for anger, we need to inoculate ourselves against attempts to divide us for Russian or others’ ends.

We need to try to care about the sources of information, and to only mobilise for real issues, and not fake news.

One thing the government could do to make hacks and information dumps irrelevant is to drop the outdated idea of doing trade talks in secret – if it pledges to publish its materials, aims, and scope of talks (as others do already), the true and accurate information is out there and secrecy can’t be used to foster doubt and alarmism.

In reality, it seems unlikely this will happen. That puts the onus on us to try to guard ourselves against people who would use us as puppets in a doped geopolitical game.

We should try to find the real facts, and the sources of information before we act on it. We should try to occasionally extend the benefit of doubt to our opponents. We should try to focus our attention where we can get real results that benefit us. It’s going to be a tough year. Let’s not make it worse than it has to be.
Tables turned?

The politics of diplomacy have changed, but have the fundamentals? JOHN KAMPFNER looks at how Britain’s relationship with Europe will develop

A golden rule of diplomacy is you don’t choose who you deal with. For almost all European leaders, Boris Johnson would be just about the last person they would want to face across the table. But that’s who they’ve got.

A man previously known as a buffoon and a charmer has just secured a mandate that most of his interlocutors would die for. He is going nowhere for at least five years. He will use his majority to embed a populist government in his name and a Brexit that will bear little resemblance to the relationship they enjoyed with Britain.

It is a distasteful and unhappy state of affairs. But they will have to get used to it.

Signs are that they already are. The first clue (or rather lumbering clue) from the prime minister was his decision to enshrine into law the UK’s final departure from the EU on December 31, 2020. It won’t be a full exit. It will encompass just the bare bones of the areas previously covered by the EU, but for domestic political reasons that’s all he wants.

“We are well advised to take seriously that the UK does not intend to go for an extension of the transition, and we need to be prepared for that,” acknowledged Sabine Weyand, the director general of the EU’s trade department. “That means in the negotiations we have to look at those issues where failing to reach an agreement by 2020 would lead to another cliff-edge situation.”

It is not just the limited scope of future cooperation that is concerning. It is the tone and manner. As Leo Varadkar, the Irish Taoiseach, pointed out, Johnson looked set on a “harder Brexit than we anticipated”. The UK, he said, appeared to want to undercut the EU on food, health and product safety.

The Brits don’t bother to hide it. Presenting his EU Withdrawal Bill to the new and pliant House of Commons before Christmas, Johnson said it “paves the way for a new agreement on our future relationship with our European neighbours, based on an ambitious free trade agreement. This will be with no alignment on EU rules, but instead with control of our own laws, and close and friendly relations”.

Downing Street’s calculation is that the more it alarms Europe, the more concessions it will extract. At the same time, they want to relegate the negotiations to a lower level of priority for parliament. After all, trade talks around the world are supposed to be dull.

The EU is quite happy for the negotiations to be unexciting. It has been less than impressed by the British grandstanding over the past three-and-a-half years, the finger wagging, the rudeness, the lack of preparedness seen as symptomatic of a political culture that prizes rhetoric over hard graft and good sense.

They know that the closer the negotiations get to next autumn’s deadline the more Johnson will play to Britain’s Dad’s Army stereotype. The fastest trade deal the EU has secured was with South Korea. That was concluded in 2009 after more than two years of often difficult talks. It took another two years to come into force.

They also know that he will have to choose between two options. It is binary. Any duty-free, quota-free deal would need to contain guarantees of a level playing
Mandake
Tim Walker

Dread for Dacre’s valediction

Paul Dacre’s intermento attack on Geordie Greig – he said his successor as editor of the Daily Mail had been “economical with the actualité” – has led to a sense of dread among senior executives at the newspaper group about the publication of his forthcoming autobiography.

“The plan is for it to come out when his Channel 4 series The World According to Paul Dacre is aired in around 12 months and no one is expecting either endeavour to help the Mail in its quest to attract a younger audience,” says my man at Northcliffe House. “This will be Victor Meldrew shouting ‘I don’t believe it’ two last times.”

The veteran Brexiteer has already sprayed ink about sculling his memoirs A Dish Best Eaten [sic] Cold, which suggests he may yet launch another broadside against Greig and others who have displeased him over the years such as David Cameron, Alan Rusbridger, Stephen Fry and Melvyn Bragg.

I hear Dacre, pictured, been getting up first thing in the morning to write the book, which he’s signed up Natasha Fairweather – Boris Johnson’s literary agent – to help him sell. Mandake wonders if the book will include any criticism, too, of Lady Rothesmerie, who is credited with pushing for Greig to replace him as editor of the Daily Mail. Before Christmas, her ladyship got all the female luminaries of her husband’s newspaper – including Sarah Vine, Amanda Platell, Maggie O’Riordan and Liz Hunt – together for a “brainstorming” meeting to see how best to make the title more attractive to women readers.

Neil’s fortune

Cammy Andrew Neil has built up an £8.5 million fortune in his private firm Glenburn Enterprises, which he set up in 1990 as an “artistic creation” business. His latest accounts for the year to December 31, 2018, show the firm held £8.7m in fixed asset investments and £560,000 in cash, with a further £1.2m in tangible assets.

These assets are offset by costs of £1.1m which leaves the company with a net worth of £6.5m, £200,000 up on the £3.8m his business was worth at the end of 2017. No word on Neil’s pay from the firm, which the latest figures show employed three members of staff, down one on the number employed the year before.

Labour pain

With Labour still blaming the electorate rather than itself for what went wrong in the general election, it’s perhaps not so surprising it’s turning to Rosie Duffield, pictured, went on ITV’s Peston show on the eve of the election and correctly predicted a Tory majority.

“How this was supposed to help secure a Labour government, let alone stop a hard Brexit, is hard to imagine,” Hickman wailed.

He was also livid that she had advocated tactical voting, but, during the campaign, he’d managed to bite his lip “to allow us the best chance of winning locally.” He now wants her conduct to be “addressed.”

Knight error

Furious that this typically incompetent government briefly and wholly put online his home address when they published the New Year’s honours list, Iain Duncan Smith has never really recovered from the humiliation of seeing an online petition gathering momentum to call for his knighthood to be withdrawn.

“Even Boris Johnson could see that it isn’t an honour for Duncan Smith – the architect of the cruel Universal Credit system – wasn’t going to be popular, but Duncan Smith made it clear to him that he owed him,” whispers my man in Whitehall. “It was the usual thing about ‘it’s not that it matters to me, but it would just mean the world to my wife to be made a Lady’. The plain fact is Johnson is scared of Duncan Smith.”

The petition was set up by Dr Mona Kamal Ahmed, an NHS psychiatrist who says she has frequently seen people with chronic mental illness experiencing panic attacks caused by the assessments claimants put through and over potentially losing welfare payments.
AGENDA

The glorious resolutions

MICHAEL WHITE

DON’T EXPECT SUNLIT UPLANDS, BUT START THE NEW YEAR WITH RESOLVE

When I noticed on my Twitter feed that the litigious Remain barrister, Jolyon Maugham QC, had just admitted clubbing a fox to death with a baseball bat (“How’s your Boxing Day going?”) I made a mental note to add Twitter Danger to my New Year resolutions, along with drinking more water and getting back to walking 10,000 steps a day. “That might cause him trouble, I wonder why he did it,” I mused. Next day the details were all over the Daily Brute. Explaining that the fox had been trapped in his wife’s London hen house Maugham admitted he’d been hung over and wearing his kimono at the time. Candour only served to fuel the frenzy. That well-known animal rights blogger Guido Fawkes, launched a fund to promote a private prosecution. Hey ho, it’s always a slow news week.

Would the outrage have been so great if Maugham QC had not been a Gina Miller ally in the High Court? Neither side is devoid of blood sport instincts and some disappointed Remain voters joined the condemnation of thisHard Fox. Even predatory urban foxes attract sympathy. But the image of a Remainner clubbing a fox in the hen house is obviously sensitive to Brexit champions. They still fear persecution by the forces of pro-Europeanism, despite last month’s confirmation that they have got clean away with the Brexit chickens. Burglar Boris assures us all they are oven-ready. What could go wrong?

But Brexit-related New Year resolutions? That must be a good idea. In the Queen’s Christmas message she urged us to take “small steps” towards being kinder in 2020. Archbishop Welby led faith leaders the same way. So did ex-speaker, John (“Step outside!”) Bercow. Even Burglar Boris suggests that we all put Brexit behind us: “Stop using the B-word,” he ordered staff. He wants to concentrate on great new trade deals on the way to a sunlit future. The World King and Queen Carrie showed what we can expect when they flew out to Mustique – from the French for mosquito – on a New Year, all-frills freebie. ‘Boris Island’ at last! Truly the People’s Government moves in mysterious ways. But not everyone is mean spirited just because they can’t afford a £200,000 gig too. On Twitter a self-styled “single mum” who sounded really nice came online to say the PM deserves a holiday because he’s worked so hard.

White’s resolution #2 is therefore is that we should all be pleased that wheelbarrows full of money are being promised to the Midlands and north. I’ve been shocked by disparities in infrastructure spending, most conspicuously on trains and buses. We can’t force industries or intellectual clusters to relocate to Helston, Huddersfield or Hartlepool – governments have tried that with mixed success since the 1990s. Communities and individuals must raise their game too. An entrepreneur told me the other day he’d advertised 20 skilled apprenticeships in a famous post-industrial town and got no local applicants, so the opportunities went to EU migrants. But we can encourage enterprise with both organic carrot and stick. Manchester’s Labour mayor, Andy Burnham, and

Action to stabilise the climate crisis is the overriding imperative of our time... The Scottish highlands have just had their hottest December day on record (16.9C) and they have had to import snow to Moscow – Moscow - to sustain the traditional New Year look

For Labour Remainers and the Lib Dems, resolution #4 is: Pick a new leader who can learn the right lessons from another defeat, but don’t expect miracles. The road back to power will be long and hard, even if we get to where both parties were in 2017, by late 2007 for Labour or 2010 for the Lib Dems when Nick Clegg let his Ashdown-Kennedy inheritance be squandered in a heady whirlwind romance with David Cameron. Jo Swinson-Losesome (Private Eye’s joke) past a high personal price for her provocative revote strategy which appealed more to true believers than to potential switchers. Her party is left with just 11 MPs, the only two of whom you’ve probably heard of are hell-bent to lobby leader (Tim Farron) or try to be (Ed Davey). Not an easy choice, but the Lib Dems are less important to the good workings of government than Labour, which is paid to provide effective opposition. Current signs that lessons may be learned are mixed. An inquiry into last month’s disaster that is led by Ed Miliband – accidental co-author of the Corbyn Project via his £3 membership scheme – is a bad sign, as ousted MPs protested at the weekend. Against which, I sense that Keir Starmer is easing aside Emily Thornberry to become the normalisation candidate of the soft left and moderates. He has also been the most actively pro-European too, though that definitive image may belong to a middle-class North London lawyer is still a big jump for activists still seeking Croyogenic Corbynism.

Birmingham’s Tory, Andy Street, are right to demand more powers as well as more money. God alone knows where that money will come from since most economic pundits don’t share the breezy Boris optimism that gets reported on page one. But if Germaine Cummings makes good half of the puppet’s promise to Labour’s red wall deserters we should applaud. It would be one good outcome from all this angry, divisive impasse since 2016.

For Tory Remainers the message of resolution #5 is: We’re definitely leaving the EU in 2020; you don’t have to ‘get over it’ but you do have to adjust to the new reality, as old lags like Ken Clarke did last year, but Michael Heseltine – still fighting the Revolve A50 battle – has not. Politics is a long game. Survivors of the Johnson Purge, those who have not thrown in the towel, would be wise to sit out this fragile administration, serve constructively on exile on select committees and bide their time.

Brexit is unlikely to be as bad as your worst nightmares, but a good deal harsher than Brexit Kool-Aid kids dream. The agenda will move on, allowing MPs with useful things to say about education or health care, the case for northern rail networks vs HS2, to command an audience, as the Kool-Aid kids will not.

Stuff happens in government – just look at the accidental publication of New Year Honours addresses. That’s bad luck. Jennifer Arcuri’s expensive tech training and that suppressed Russian intelligence report are not bad luck, they’re bad behaviour: Even Kool-Aid newbies will start to grasp that Boris can’t chuckle his way through recurring floods just by donning wellie boots for the TV crews. Voters want action. It’s time for him to “stop campaigning and get on with governing,” says Clarke.

So #1 in White’s list of New Year resolutions for Remainers is: be kinder. Be especially nicer to people who voted Brexit for honest reasons you may disagree with. Our side got it wrong when we pitched the anti-Brexit campaign in terms of economic rationality, mutual European self-interest and GDP. Then-chancellor Osborne got it doubly wrong, warning of instant recession and much else in the dire department if the country dared vote Leave. So far the damage has proved more a slow puncture than a hurst tyre. I am still to be persuaded that the 85% of global commerce that now takes place outside the EU is gagging for us to join the party. But the economy is £900 billion smaller than it could have been on pre-bank crash trends and median wages are still 2% below their 2008 level. A lot of working families have been hurting, so Remain humility would be in order. Some ardent Remainers seem to have learned so little from their defeat in 2016 that they’d likely have managed to lobby People’s Vote if they ever got the chance, favourable polls or no.

In any case, many who voted to “take back control” did so for cultural or political reasons, national or regional identity, class even. Bloody Estonian elitists like Dave telling us what to do, eh? Immigration was a highly salient factor thanks to Farageism and those 75 million Turks at Calais, though it has since slipped back. Likewise, irritation at excessive Brussels regulation and EU judges’ mission creep. A friend of mine knows exemplary citizens in the West Country, a couple who take newly-released prisoners into their own home, who voted Leave because they felt oppressed by Brussels. Further down the social scale, voters felt excluded and neglected, especially in small towns and villages, far from good public transport and the hospital, even further from a decent internet connection. Across much of Europe and Trump heartlands it’s the same story, a failure of sympathetic imagination by a remote top-down technocracy – in most capitals, not just s...
Reeves and mayor Burnham seem to be wisely sitting this one out. Tom Watson has quit. Wrangling back control of the Labour machine from the hardliners, vicious even to each other, will be bloody. “Pure but impotent,” must be repudiated as a campaign slogan. It will take time.

The long view is never easy, but most political timeframes are embarrassingly short. So to ram its urgency home, resolutions #5 and #6 are that action to stabilise the climate crisis is the overriding imperative of our time, not Brexit – or “Taskforce Europe” as No.10 invites us to call it. The Scottish highlands have just had their hottest December day on record (16.9°C) and they have had to import snow to Moscow – to sustain the traditional New Year look. Australia is on fire. California will burn again after the winter rains stop because they’re draining the aquifers. Greenland’s ice is melting so fast that Donald Trump will soon cut the price he’s offering Denmark. Whaley Bridge’s dam is holding up, but the M25 to Gatwick has flooded and I’ve just seen my first ‘spring daffodils’ in the shops.

The good news takeaway from 2019 is that the urgency of the challenge seems finally to have impacted on public consciousness. Call it the Greta Effect, but the climate sceptics are now on the back foot where they say “Obviously, we have to do something, but let’s not panic. That’s progress and the UK election manifestos reflected it. The bad news remains that few of us have grasped the scale of what we’re going to have to change to prevent the next decade being the hottest on record (already too late?), as the current one has been. Recycling plastic won’t be quite enough, Mark Carney, the outgoing Bank of England governor, reminded everyone before jetting off to become a UN climate change campaigner. He’s had mixed success in persuading City institutions that their fossil fuel assets will be worthless if they don’t try harder: “We’re just not doing enough.”

If Boris Johnson could combine his humorously attractive optimism with realism – optimism is always more attractive than a puritanical beardedie – he could jolly voters into doing more in their own lives and the country’s to create a sustainable future. Germany just might – might – be gearing up to have a Green chancellor in its post-Merkel coalition. How cool is that? It will enrage populists of the right, most of whom are vocal climate change sceptics as well as Brexit nationalists: think Trump and Farage, think Jair Bolsonaro, Brazil’s presidential arsonist or hot Hungary’s Victor Orban. (With Poland and the Czech Republic he blocked an EU carbon-neutral-by-2050 target. Climate policy is the new divide inside the EU.)

That’s White’s resolution #7: Get behind climate change reform, whoever is proposing it. It’s a better focus for Remain campaign energy in 2020 and will annoy the right people. Cheer Good Boris through gritted teeth if it helps him ignore Bad Boris. A decent green strategy may also mend a few burned bridges in Europe in a negotiating year when he’s going to need them. Carrie and Govey would be pleased too.

White’s resolution #8 is: Don’t believe anyone who tries to tell you that illiberal populism – nationalist and authoritarian – has peaked in Europe, let alone beyond. It may just be getting started, and divided US Democrats, torn between the Corbynsim of Bernie and senator Warren, and the tired centrism of floating Joe Biden may give it rocket boosters by facilitating Trump Mk II. Narrower to home, Bad Boris is being encouraged to undermine the BBC for asserting its independence, albeit clumsily. Remainers should not succumb to the temptation to join the hail of brick-throwing from the right. Even more important is resolution #9, to defend the constitution and the Union from those who would casually damage both.

I know many people feel strongly about PR voting, an elected second chamber and other goals. But can we park them for now? An ambitious government seems to want to use its majority in a strikingly inexperienced Commons further to assert the executive’s already considerable power over the legislature and do the same to the Supreme Court. Such conduct also threatens the fragile union with Scotland, and Northern Ireland too, albeit by default. There is much here worth discussing, but it is populist, not Tory, to empower central government. Reforming electoral law to curb covert forms of spending, voter deregistration, targeted and unregulated internet campaigning, much of it inflammatory, laundered dirty money from god-knows-where and over-mighty lobbyists, are also urgent priorities.

Last but not least, resolution #10 must be to stay cheerful. There is much in our world to be optimistic about and research suggests that we are all happier when we compare our situation with those less fortunate than with the 1% perspiring on Mustique. By all means be kinder. But should “Common Sense” Rees-Mogg ever reappear from his Somerset coal cellar, you have my permission to make him an exception.
Amid all the excitement (sic) ahead of the election, I overlooked a request from the editor to contribute to the ‘book of the year’ feature in the Christmas special edition. Had it been a choice for the year ahead, I would probably have chosen Better to Live, a very personal, psychological and psychiatric account of a lifelong struggle with depression, which is out in May. I cannot recommend it highly enough though it may be that, as its author, I am somewhat biased.

Looking back on 2019, I have a shortlist of four, one fiction, three non-fiction. Partly inspired by Nicola Sturgeon, I intend to recalibrate my balance between fiction and non-fiction in 2020. When Scotland’s first minister disclosed her reading list for the year just gone, she revealed herself to be a major consumer of novels. I also noticed in a photograph taken at her home that authors are arranged alphabetically on her bookshelves. I find this curiously impressive.

As for the work of fiction that made my own shortlist, I came late to the party for Eleanor Oliphant is Completely Fine, but having done so, all I can say is that Gail Honeyman deserves all the awards and the sales, the fame, the fortune and the film rights that her debut novel has delivered since publication in 2017. I go even further back for the three non-fiction books on my shortlist. Indeed I was only three when, in 1960, American journalist William L. Shirer wrote his account of Nazi Germany, The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich. Though it is badly dated in parts – his views on homosexuals come as a bit of a shock to a modern reader – it is nonetheless an epic, and hard to read without seeing things that resonate today.

My second choice was written more recently, in 2018, but with similar themes updated for the modern world, Fascism: A Warning, by former US Secretary of state Madeleine Albright. If Shirer’s obsession was Hitler, Albright’s are leaders of today, including some in the great democracies, not least the US, who are busy undermining and undoing the institutions and the practices of democracy.

My winner, The Volunteer, by Jack Fairweather, was indeed written last year, though the remarkable story it tells also dates back to the Hitler era. I am somewhat ashamed to say I had never heard of the book’s hero – and hero is the right word – a Polish resistance agent named Witold Pilecki. The book’s title comes from the fact that Pilecki volunteered to get himself sent to the concentration camp at Auschwitz, to develop a resistance unit, and to gather intelligence in the hope that the realities of what was happening there could be communicated to the outside world, and provoke international outrage and action.

Though most of us know the outlines of the Auschwitz story, it is such an important one that there can never be too much detail when it comes to telling it. Fairweather’s is a great book not simply because at its heart is a great man, blessed with seemingly limitless courage, cunning and humanity, but also because of the often minute details recorded of everyday life during the two and a half years he was imprisoned, prior to his escape.

Page after page, you’re left asking not just how it came to be that such unspeakable inhumanity was normalised, but also how it took so long for the world to find out the full extent of what was going on there. And part of the answer, sad to say, was amid all the other challenges of wartime, indifference among the anti-German powers.

Though eventually they took the kind of interest Pilecki had been risking his life to generate, it was a long, slow story, and unimaginable suffering was inflicted in the meantime. The Shirer book focuses much more on the appeasement of Hitler by, not least, UK prime minister Neville Chamberlain. But it was by exploiting the very human desire in most people not to see or fear the worst that Hitler was able to get away with what was happening in Auschwitz for as long as he did.
ruined the nice, quiet, calm, post-Christmas, pre-New Year time we were having. “Oh my God,” is rarely a good sign as the first response. The reason was that the call was to tell her of the anti-Semitic graffiti which had been painted on Camden shops and a synagogue. No doubt “oh my God” is exactly the response that the hard-right, hard-left, or just plain hard-nasty anti-Semites responsible for this sort of thing must feel from a female, Jewish, Labour council leader like Georgia. But whether it is the action of a lone sado, or something more organised, being horrified is the right reaction. Is graffiti highlighting anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, or the anniversary of Kristallnacht, as horrifying as gas chambers, or people being forced to dig their own graves, or live and then die in the brutal slaughter outlined in the Snow White book? No, maybe not. But what all three of my non-fiction choices show is that fascists have a certain aptitude for grasping stories told in The Volunteer. It ends there. If it is allowed to. It is up to all of us, but especially political leaders, to make sure it doesn’t, not just by calling out anti-Semitism, and indeed any racism, wherever it shows itself. We – as we in the UK – are not in a good place on this. Football pundit Gary Neville was, if I may use a football pundit cliche, spot on to point out the possible link between a seeming revival of racist abuse inside football grounds, and the fact that we have just endured an election in which the two dominant figures, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn, have faced legitimate and disturbing questions about their and their parties’ attitudes with regard to race.

Johnson needs to understand that the word of a prime minister carries a lot more weight than the word of a journalist. He needs to use his words a lot more carefully, and seek to curb his habit of pandering rather than challenging on race. And whoever finally follows Corbyn as Labour leader needs to show a far more robust and rigorous attitude to anti-Semitism in the party. British leaders, sadly, do not matter nearly as much as they did in the war years. In Shirer’s account, Hitler was obsessed with the views of “England”, and in Stachowicz’s, Pilecki was desperate for the realities of life in the camp to be presented to senior politicians in London. But they still matter a lot. And the very muddled nature of our politics right now is that all the leaders of all the main parties understand the risks attached to the rise of racism, and in word and deed work to halt it. The signs, thus far, are not great. But the risks are enormous.

I have written here about the parallels between the 1930s and today, and I hope my recommended reading list does not expose an unhealthy obsession.

But the reason I chose to write about my book choice two weeks after being asked to walk for a walk with Georgia Gould, daughter of my close friend and colleague Philipp Gould, who died nine years ago, and her fiancé, Alex Zatman. Georgia, leader of Camden Council, took a call which somewhat the first time I have ever been made to feel like an unwelcome dog. I know that man does not represent all of Britain. But he represents a part of the change that has occurred here. That post-Brexit night in Soho, I became a bloody foreigner.

The man I was seeing for a drink did little to help cheer me up. As I recounted to him what had just happened, he burst out laughing: “Here we go… you’re about to sing the usual Remainers’ song, that Brexit gives rise to racism.” Two rude Brits, just a few minutes apart. Two blows in quick succession. As we continued the conversation, I then found out that the guy, a former Remainer who used to be a New Labour supporter, applauded the victory of Boris Johnson, for whom he had just voted with no hesitation.

He said that Labour and the Remainers had been punished for staying in their own bubble – which I sense is partly true. But to see this brilliant writer so delighted with the triumph of a British populist, and so patronising about my post-Brexit misadventure was both depressing and instructive. Something has changed in Britain because of Brexit, definitely. Even within London’s elite bubble, of which this man was definitely a member. You can’t get through a three and a half hours hearing the music of nationalist campaign and be left untouched by any influence. Even beyond Britain, Johnson’s political landslide has been echoing in the United States and on the continent, fostering Donald Trump and the European nationalists.

I went to Dublin as part of the same trip. The Irish people I met seemed stunned and bewildered by what was happening in the UK, worrying for the future of the peace agreement, and the economic shock Brexit could deliver. The British people I met in London included people who had voted Labour all through their life and who claim themselves to be social democrats.

Interestingly, not one of them cast the same ballot, reflecting how far any opposition to a populist Tory leader has now exploded. The guy in the bar had turned full-on Johnsonian. A friend of mine, the son of a Jewish refugee, couldn’t vote for a Labour party so hopelessly complacent about anti-Semitism and switched to the Liberal Democrats. A member of the current Tony Blair team, who made me swear I would never tell anyone, confessed having voted for the Animal Welfare Party – which might be ironically the only party now to take us into consideration, we European dogs.

What a strange, unknown to was because of something that happened not in the 1930s, or 1940s, in Germany, but in London, not far from where I live, last weekend. My partner Fiona and I were out for a walk with Georgia Gould, daughter of my close friend and colleague Philipp Gould, who died nine years ago, and her fiancé, Alex Zatman. Georgia, leader of Camden Council, took a call which somewhat
After a decade of proliferation, memes have become an unstoppable cultural force. As they spill over into politics, ELLE HUNT asks how powerful they have really become.

In December 2013, Drew Scanlon had been shooting an episode of Unprofessional Fridays, a weekly show about gaming, where he worked as a producer. At some point in the two-hour live stream his colleague made an off-colour joke, and Scanlon’s reaction was captured on camera. It wasn’t until years later that he received a Twitter message from a stranger: “My mum just used an animated gif of you on Facebook.”

It was February 2017, and a second-long clip of his slow blink of disbelief had gone viral as an online expression of mild surprise. Soon Scanlon was known worldwide as “Blinking White Guy.”

He left the website shortly afterwards to work on his YouTube travel documentary series, but with just one gif of his face viewed nearly one billion times on the giphycom database, on the internet he remains, as a journalist put it recently, “pretty much the official face of ‘what the f**k?'”

Speaking over Skype from his home in San Francisco, a bearded Scanlon acknowledges that he is barely recognisable from the representation of his face routinely reached for online.

“The Internet is a very big place, and it’s not until something like this happens to you that you grasp that — but I also don’t feel any ownership over it. It is my face, but the internet is responsible for converting it into a meme.” Scanlon may have moved on, but the internet has not stopped this process of elevating — if only for a moment — fleeting, forgettable online ephemera, seemingly at random and at breakneck speed.

Memes, as most of us understand them today, started to emerge a little over a decade ago, as mostly images with captions in bold Impact font, making a fairly straightforward observation or gag — you may remember LOLcats. From these humble beginnings, memes have become more nuanced and ubiquitous, spinning off from the slightest of sparks to take on an identity to the internet at large: strangers’ family photos (Scumbag Steve, Disaster Girl), their pets (Doge, Grumpy Cat), stock images (First World Problems, Distracted Boyfriend), viral videos (Double Rainbow, Chewbacca Mom), odd news items (Harambe the gorilla, Antoine “hide yo’ kids, hide yo’ wife” Dodson) and increasingly imperceptible, ironic nonsense (“They Did Surgery on a Grape”); it defies description.

The majority burn fast and bright, turning over at a speed that could give you whiplash if you tried to keep pace. Over the last 10 years memes have become an unstoppable cultural force, both on the internet and increasingly off it as brands, politicians and older generations have joined in. But what is driving their frenetic pace of production? And if they’re not just captivated pictures of cats — what are they, exactly?

Answering that has been Don Caldwell’s job for nearly a decade — and “even I have a hard time articulating some of the stuff going on,” he says. “It’s always changing, and it’s always getting weirder.”

Employed full-time as editor-in-chief of KnowYourMeme.com, a collaborative reference site that aims to make meme culture comprehensible to a wider audience, Caldwell oversees a team of six in New York, LA and Moscow to update a Wikipedia-style database of memes. That means about 10 to 20 new entries each week, setting down for the record their origins, spread and evolution. Caldwell’s team looks to confirm sources and “major points of amplification” as best they can, but this can be a challenge in the online quagmire: the gift of Scanlon’s Blinking White Guy, for example, had existed for two years before it went viral in a high school student’s joke about biology class on Twitter. “If we see 10, 20 variations of the same type of joke or format, then it seems like the ball is rolling and we’re ready to start covering.”

And that process never stops, given the speed with which memes’ meanings can change. “We document memes as if they were living organisms — we nail down where it was born, then chronicle its lifecycle,” says Caldwell. It comes as no surprise to learn that he holds a degree in evolutionary anthropology: The term ‘meme’ was in fact coined by Richard Dawkins, in his 1976 book The Selfish Gene, as a unit of culture that, in being propagated, may evolve similarily as through a process of natural selection. It was first applied to online phenomena in the mid- to late 1990s — you might remember the 3d-rendered Dancing Baby and the equally hypnotic Hamster [sic] Dance. (If you are not familiar with Googe, save yourself.)

“When the internet came around and weird things started to go viral, that term ‘meme’ was just adopted because it seemed to fit so well — it’s just a unit of culturally transmitted information,” says Caldwell. “We generally associate it with pretty much any type of thematic joke, or slang term, or viral video — anything that proliferates throughout the internet.”

KnowYourMeme counts slang such as “LOL,” and common internet phraseal templates — Caldwell calls them “snowclones” — such as “x all the y” (“clean all the things”). It is a broad church, and having to be ever more inclusive as internet culture increasingly dovetails with mainstream culture. “Nowadays the saturation is just so much more. Ten years ago, meme culture was almost exclusively for youth, and now it’s everybody.”

He credits that to technological advances — video hosting and mobile internet becoming more affordable, improved image quality, smartphones unthethering digital communication from our desktop computers — and individual platforms developing their own cultures over time. The explosion of Reddit as “ground zero for memes, churning them out all the time” around 2012, for example, helped usher them into the mainstream, while emoticons and emoji made people more comfortable using images to express themselves online.

When Caldwell joined KnowYourMeme in 2010, memes were more simple, and there were fewer of them (he sounds a bit wishful). Five years into YouTube, it was a boon time for viral videos, with the internet’s collective imagination
captured by a man tearfully in awe of a double rainbow (plucked from obscurity on the platform by talk show host Jimmy Kimmel) and a seven-year-old boy left existential by anaesthetic at a dentist appointment. The other major medium were ‘image macros’ – the name given to that stereotypical picture-caption format – often generated from a stock set of characters and formats. Scumbag Steve, for example, was born when a family snapshot of a teenage boy wearing baggy clothes and a sideways fitted cap surfaced on the front page of Reddit in 2011 and was embraced, entirely by looks alone, as the internet’s favourite “opportunistic and freeloading juvenile” (as KnowYourMeme puts it). The Daily Mail called him an “internet teenage hate figure”, revealing that the “infamous picture was taken by his mother (and he’s actually quite a nice guy)”. Later Pepsi referenced Scumbag Steve in an “internet taste test” ad, hiring an actor to impersonate him from the meme.

Laina Morris, best known to the internet as “Overly Attached Girlfriend” after a still from her YouTube video parodying Justin Bieber’s Boyfriend went viral in June 2012, says her meme led her to appear on Jimmy Fallon’s show, be given a Kia car, and fly to Singapore for a starring competition with Jessica Alba. “The entire experience is strange, to be honest, so strange kind of became my normal at one point.” Though Morris, a Texan who recently quit YouTube for good, says she is recognised from her meme a couple of times a month, she does not consider herself famous. “The meme itself feels very separate to me. If I happen to come across it when I’m online, I think ‘oh, there’s my meme’, rather than ‘there’s my face’.” Few people who have been immortalised in this way have succeeded in translating it into anything lastingly lucrative. Scallon may be the online face of a widely felt emotion, cemented as a useful shorthand of digital communication, but it’s not in his control. (He has, however, managed to raise US $25,000 for multiple sclerosis.) The notable exception is the late Grumpy Cat, the original “petfluencer” who launched a multi-media empire after going viral from Reddit in 2012. Though the cat’s owner denied a reported net worth of nearly $100m in 2014, in January last year a single copyright lawsuit brought them $710k – and that’s not including the endorsement deals, or film. Grumpy – real name Tardar Sauce – even had representation: from Ben Lashes, the same “meme manager” who had earlier taken a chance on Keyboard Cat in 2009 (real quote: “it needed a manager in the same way that the Beatles needed Brian Epstein”).

Caldwell singles out “Cash Me Ousside Howbow Dah” as another meme that went onto being something more – after the viral success of her lippy appearance on Dr Phil in 2016, 13-year-old Danielle Bregoli was able to launch a music career as the rapper Bhad Bhabie: “She kind of became the meme,” says Caldwell. Increasingly it seems that the ‘real world’ is influencing the internet less than the other way round; online culture is infiltrating the everyday, as TV shows, films and songs try to harness the power of memes to cut through the competition. Netflix recorded the biggest week for an original film with survival horror Bird Box, despite fairly desultory reviews, because of gags on social media and the blindfold “challenge” it inspired. Similarly, New Rules by Dua Lipa and Drake’s Hotline Bling had far greater cultural impact for their versatile hooks (“One: don’t pick up the phone”) and videos laden with “exploitables” – what Caldwell and the KnowYourMeme crowd call an image crying out to be turned into a meme.

Nowhere is this feedback loop more obvious – and impactful – than in politics: no sooner had Theresa May explosively confessed to running through fields of wheat or Jacob Rees-Mogg had declined in the House of Commons than both had been amplified online to become major, lasting talking points.

Memes are now well-established political strategy as a means of changing the conversation – the digital equivalent of Crosby Texter’s dead cat. Even the Conservatives have tried their hand at online irony, recently “shittingpost” with purposely bad graphic design and ironic Comic Sans about getting Brexit done on their official Twitter account. That may still be a bridge too far for most digital natives, but as memes have become more mainstream the distaste once felt at them being wielded by politicians and brands has somewhat waned. “Earlier on, meme culture flat-out rejected that stuff and said, ‘No, you don’t get to do that’,” says Caldwell. “Now it’s like: ‘if you can pull it off, okay’.” Regardless of format, what a witty or astute application of a meme signals is literacy: “There are some that are only going to understand if you belong to a certain club.” As more people have felt in on the joke, the communities that feel a sense of ownership of the subculture, such as Reddit and 4Chan, have had to work harder to protect it from mainstream platforms like Twitter and, increasingly, Instagram (which has even hired a ‘meme liaison’ to manage those relationships). The trend for hyper-ironic, ‘dank’ memes emerged over the last four to five years for that reason, and “has just got progressively weirder”, says Caldwell. “Sometimes they’re like five levels of irony deep, or even five layers of memes – you have to know that many just to be able to piece together what it even means.”

This desire for density explains the current popularity of “object-labelling” memes, where different elements of an image are labelled to make some point or joke. The most famous (or perhaps just the most recent) example is “Distracted Boyfriend”. As a format it is as effective in communicating to an audience of one or one million, and endlessly adaptable – fuel for the internet’s unrelenting drive to produce. Dr Scott Wark, a self-described meme researcher at the University of Warwick’s Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies, points
It is a “crazy life cycle,” says Caldwell. “It’s weird to see a meme keep being used for so long, turn into so many different versions of itself. And it continues to evolve.” Pepe’s association with alt-right bigotry means he has fallen from favour with the mainstream, which likes symbols to have consistent meanings — but on the video-streaming platform Twitch, he is still routinely reached for as a digital reaction, often simply to express that “a cool song is playing,” says Caldwell. “Most people will tell you that Pepe on Twitch has no political connotation, he’s just a frog. If you aren’t exposed to these subcultures, and all you see is the news telling you Pepe the Frog is racist, you’re going to see that and assume those people are racist, and they’re not.”

Pepe may be an outlier, but his evolution does reflect memes’ increasing complexity and potential for nuance — an inevitability of digital culture advancing as the distinctions between online and offline break down. Wark argues that, now that our fridges can be connected to the internet, we are “post-digitality” — forcing those native meme-makers to work harder to be weird, “to protect different subcultures from the mainstream that had started latching on”.

Scalon, reflecting on his own claim to internet fame, knows better than to think that he has any say over how his image is used. “I’m sort of at the mercy of the internet — so I want to stay in their good graces.” He is grateful that it is at least “fairly innocuous” — “I’m not doing anything bad in it, I’m just making a facial expression. Generally people have not used it for evil.” Though — given the ways of memes — that could change in a blink.

This story was first published by Tortoise, a different type of newsroom dedicated to a slower, wiser news. Try Tortoise for a month — or for a year — and get the code TNEGUEST.

Bonnie Greer

I was recently called a “centrist” by a Millennial friend of mine. I can only assume by his tone of voice and facial expression that being called this is A Bad Thing.

I asked him what a ‘centrist’ was, and he said that’s what he wanted to be - defined by him in this way it was still being for Remain and, also, not crying my eyes out at the personal fate of Jeremy Corbyn.

I tried to point out that Corbyn remains in the House of Commons and will continue to do what he has done for the last four decades. I said that the fact that he was still there was a kind of tribute to him, and maybe what made him so charismatic to a generation of young voters. I said that Corbyn is about idealism.

During the recent election campaign, I continued to my friend, I had thought that there was something heroic about the Labour leader, something true. He had held on to the politics of his youth that he and I had both shared; of the era that we had both gone through.

I knew guys like Jeremy at university in the 1970s. They did not take the shilling of a career and advancement. Plus, Corbyn’s own Euroscepticism was consistent with what he had always believed; what his mentor Tony Benn believed.

Corbyn went down to a defeat that was the signature of who he is. No one should be surprised. No one should really blame him. He was what the members of the Labour Party wanted and they rode into battle with the banner of his values.

The difference between my Millennial friend and me is that I did not vote for Jeremy. I voted for Labour, and always will because I think that it is a broad enough church for even an old centrist like me.

Labour can return, and return big, when it understands why it lost those 60 seats last month. This can happen.

I am not an ideologue. I don’t believe in anyone. I just want Labour to be in government because I think that the party provides the best offer for the people I care about. The poor, the working poor, women, minorities, children, etc.

Two points strike me about the recent election. One: the response of Labour to the accusation of anti-Semitism, especially from the Jewish community, was simply not enough. Even a whiff of this abomination should have been crushed speedily and publicly in the bud. Right away. No matter where it came from and whom. This did not happen.

Two: Labour allowed the Conservatives to have a general election in December, an error that many of us pointed out.

But if you are an ideologue on the campaign trail, as opposed to a campaigner on the campaign trail, there are things that you cannot hear, cannot see, cannot say. This is because your ideology is your value. My ideology involves winning an election.

So if an election is about winning in order to put into place the policies that you want — and I believe it is — then you have to listen and hear.

I was not on the doorstep and even I knew that it was clear that the election was about Brexit, and that Brexit is about a whirlpool of things: English nationalism; xenophobia; the disconnect with Westminster; the general London-centric atmosphere. And the election was also about austerity. This had changed
The woman who puts radical at the centre

African American men and Hispanic men – males in general – did not go for Biden. White suburban women decided to give Trump a shot because they were tired of her and maybe a little scared, too. This year finds them with buyers’ remorse.

In the 2018 midterm elections, this demographic gave the House to the Democrats with the biggest loss to the Republicans since the Watergate era.

They also voted for Joe Biden twice, in 2008 and 2012, when he ran as vice-president on Barack Obama’s ticket. They could vote for Biden again. The track record is there.

After all, if you do not win an election, how can you make change? And this is the point of Symone Sanders, and maybe what I call Radical Centrism.

I heard Sanders point out on CNN once that it became clear to her that African American women – who vote straight Dem up and down the ticket and are therefore the base of that party – did not go for Bernie. True, he touted his civil rights record and there are pictures of him being roughed up at an open housing march in Chicago in the 1960s when he attended the University of Chicago.

But a lot of us black women, especially us Chicagans, also know that this was part of being a U of C student in those days. This is what you did.

This does not mean that Bernie was not and is not a champion of civil rights and rights for African Americans. It is just that if you attended, for example, the Universities of California at Berkeley, Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Michigan State, and others, and you were a white guy... well, you’d look like a jerk and worse if you sat it out. We remember.

Plus, many of us, black women, as young activists, supported senator Eugene McCarthy at the 1968 Democratic Convention when he sought the presidential nomination. We marched, rioted and disrupted the Convention to get our guy nominated against the establishment. He did not get the nod. So we refused to vote. The result: Two terms of Richard Milhouse Nixon.

Youth is not here to listen to age. Long may that continue. But you could lose.

Symone Sanders, now a chief advisor to Joe Biden, does not want to lose.

She still may, but it will not be without a fight for the hearts and the minds of Middle America, aka: The people who actually vote.

Shaun King, an African American activist and journalist, tweeted last year, after he found out that Symone Sanders was working for Biden. “I am genuinely embarrassed that @JoeBiden has Black surrogates and spokespeople out here defending the 1994 Mass Incarceration bill that he refuses to repudiate. It’s truly humiliating.”

The tweet referred to a piece of crime legislation Biden had helped to write in the 1990s, which critics say led to more prison sentences, more prison cells, and more aggressive policing – especially hurting minority communities.

Symone Sanders tweeted back: “1. What’s humiliating is that you blindly put on for the senator for Vermont [Bernie Sanders] every day (he voted for the bill) 2. no one defended the crime bill 3. you have my b. Lest you continue to be petty on the internet. Don’t personally attack me Shaun. I hope now we are clear.”

That is Symone Sanders. I’m calling her a Radical Centrist. I’m with her.
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Let’s go out with a bang and one more big march

I seriously hope that some sort of pro-EU march will take place (in London and/or elsewhere) on Saturday, January 2. It might now seem pointless to march for a People’s Vote or to stop Brexit, but we can make the point that our support for Europe and our strength of feeling that the UK should rejoin the EU.

If we do nothing, the media that weekend will be full of Brexiteer nationalists holding street parties and flying the Union Jack without any sort of counter-narrative. It would be tragic if those Brexiteer celebrations aren’t matched by pro-European demonstrations, otherwise it will appear that the entire country supports Brexit and Boris.

Which, of course, it doesn’t.

Michael Haldane

Boris Johnson has said that there are no more Leavers and Remainers left. The younger generation do not agree. They are all Rejoiners!

When the Labour Party recovers and the Liberal Democrats acquire new vigour and new leadership, the chances are that the Tories can be defeated in five years’ time. Then the era of the Rejoiners can begin!

David Hogg
Bristol

Bad knight

A knighthood for Iain Duncan Smith is acceptable only when seen through the prism of Voldemort getting a peerage.

Catherine Britton

Zac Goldsmith, multi-millionaire son of a multi-millionaire Tory party donor, who is a failed MP deselected by his constituents, now becomes a law-making peer.

Will other readers of this paper please join me in a people’s movement to stop this continual abuse of what is meant to be a democracy?

Richard Coombs
Holywell

Disband dismay

No, Andrew Adonis (TNE, January 17), the Lib Dems should not disband and join Labour. I lodged the support for Europe and I live in a small area where Labour has always been an irrelevancy. I joined the Liberals in 1979 and all through the nightmare of the Thatcher years we gained more council seats at each election, eventually won control of the council and took the parliamentary seat in 1997. Lib Dems can beat the Tories in areas like this, Labour can’t.

As for joining Labour; I wouldn’t want to be a member of a party that allows members of the Socialist Workers Party not only to join but to control it; or of a party whose leadership ignored a party conference vote to campaign for a second referendum on Brexit; or for a party controlled by Len McCluskey, Seumas Milne and their sock puppets Corbyn, Long-Bailey or whoever succeeds him.

Like Andrew Adonis, I hope Keir Starmer wins the Labour leadership but I am not holding my breath.

Richard Palmer
Pucklechurch

You might have expected Labour’s catastrophic failure to prompt a little humility, but no. Instead Andrew Adonis is calling for the Lib Dems to be disbanded.

Inconvenient fact: while Labour’s vote collapsed, the Lib Dems’ increased by three times more than the Tories’. But because of our undemocratic electoral system, the Lib Dems actually ended up with fewer MPs.

The Lib Dems have more than 2,500 local councillors in England and Wales. Does Andrew Adonis want them to be forced to join the Labour or Conservative parties too? And to hell with those who voted for them?

Oh and by the way, does he want the Greens disbanded as well, and what about other Remain parties like Plaid and the SNP?

If this is the best Labour can do, they’re going to be in the wilderness for a very long time.

John Withington
London NW1

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Keir-cut choice

Keir Starmer’s biggest handicap in his expected bid for the Labour leadership is not being a female. Yet he is head-and-shoulders above all his likely competitors, and it’s very much to be hoped that Labour Party members vote for the person best qualified to lead Labour and serve as prime minister.

Dick Leonard
(Author of A History of British Prime Ministers and former Labour MP)
London NW1

Not Nats

My thanks to Anna Lawrie for the kind comments in your post-election special, about the SNP and their leader (“Nicola surging”, TNE, January 14).

I would like to correct her reference to SNP supporters as “Scottish Nats”. “Nats” is an abbreviation of the word “nationalists”, a derogatory term used regularly by opponents of Scottish self-determination. It does not appear anywhere in the name of the Scottish National Party, and if it did, I would be seeking another home for my vote.

In my view, isolationism and nationalism has taken over the two main parties in Westminster. The SNP is far from that position.

It rejects leaving the EU, is willing providing a safe haven for those fleeing persecution, it stresses that incomers from all parts of the world are welcome in our home and works to oppose all

John Withington
London NW1

Andrew Adonis asks whether the Liberal Democrats now have a reason to exist. The answer is plain: now more than ever.

It may pain him to acknowledge the fact, but the Lib Dems (and Liberal Party before them) have been constant in their support of the European project since it began, through periods when his own party were the sceptics to the present, when Labour has been taken over by a Eurodoubtful hard left.

The arrogance of his claim that “if the majority of social democrats were where they belong, in the Liberal Democrats, we’d have a more equal two-party system” beggars belief. If the majority of social democrats were where they belong, in the Liberal Democrats, we’d have a more plausible pro-EU opposition to Johnson. It’s hardly the Lib Dems’ fault the Tories demolished Labour’s red wall.

Roger Hughes
London

The election was resoundingly lost not by the Lib Dems but by a spiteful and incompetent Labour party which ran full-on campaigns against us in all Lib-Con marginal seats, apparently more interested in preventing defectors like Chuka Umunna and Luciana Berger from beating the Tories than actually winning the election. They also ran a concerted social media campaign against Jo Swinson herself.

Labour only win when the Lib Dems take some seats off the Tories which they cannot. A smart Labour Party would have sought to maximise this effect. Instead, they left their heartlands undefended and eschewed targeting other than to stymie Lib Dem success. This was a recipe for total disaster.

Ludovic Tolhurst-Cleaver
Trafford Lib Dems

The guff about moving on from Brexit and accepting we are out of the EU for a generation sticks in my craw. If Britain one day decided in a referendum to restore capital punishment (a very real possibility with Priti Patel in the home office), would clear-thinking people simply shrug and start knitting by the gallows?

Liz Brown
Bath

Despite having read every name on the New Year honours list twice, I was amazed not to see the words “Chris Greyling” amongst the luminaries.

Surely, being the worst transport secretary since the invention of the internal combustion engine does not preclude an award?

After all, I thought that downright incompetence or even mere mediocrity were the main attributes required to be rewarded with an upgrade on the establishment gravy train?

Robert Boston
Kingshill

My answer to Ian Langworthy (“Just give up”, TNE, January 17) is that Hitler won an election and a referendum. That does not validate Nazism.

Brexit will go horribly wrong and it is inevitable that we will rejoin the EU. It is our duty to work towards that end.

Don Adamson
Rainham

Whatever the reasons that Leave supporters offer, many vulnerable sections of our society will suffer. For that, I cannot forgive nor will I ‘get over it’. Soothing words about ‘healing’ or ‘coming together’ will not wash.

Bruce Dalzell
Edinburgh

When the French army was defeated in 1940, Charles de Gaulle, famously said: “France has lost a battle, but France has not lost the war.” He did not collaborate. He organised the Free French and the Resistance and four years later France was liberated. Following the general election, we should take a similar attitude.

The Brexit project will do immense damage. The government only got 43% of the popular vote. Polls show that most British people now want to Remain, and that proportion is likely to increase.

We should campaign to ensure that Britain rejoins the European Union at the earliest opportunity.

Adrian Waite
Appleby-in-Westmorland

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Novel approach

A literary summation for these times:
*Pride and Prejudice* +
*Vanity Fair* +
*North and South* + (Crime – Punishment) +
*The Idiot* – Sense and Sensibility =
*Hard Times* + *Bleak House* + *Les Miserables.*

Charles Baily
Bedford

Line of defence

The salvation for the United Kingdom in Europe is in defence and security. Whatever frustrations EU partners have had with UK politicians, their respect for the men and women of HM Forces and their role in Europe’s collective security has never been in doubt.

Defence is in the UK DNA. Seventy years ago the great trade unionist Ernie Bevin was foreign secretary and led the way in the Berlin Airlift and forming of NATO. Defence spending was scaled up to mean business.

Ergo the United Kingdom must offset loss of EU membership with a marked increase in defence spending complete with greater deployments of HM Forces to help Europe’s security. Such proactivity can only result in arrangements laced with advantage and honour from the UK viewpoint with the EU.

A win-win.

John Barstow
Pulborough

Trunk call

When one of 28 elephants is a straggler, hunters will come and pick it off. The herd moves on, not stopping to protect it. But the question is, which of their number will be targeted next? Hungary? Poland? Italy? The hunters are not finished yet, I fear.

John King
Stratford-upon-Avon

Own goal

Hypocrisy has now reached new levels with the government’s announcement of an inquiry into racism in football.

Many involved in the game have rightly pointed out that this is a wider problem, and some — ify Onuora in particular — have rightly pointed out that the government itself, through the words and actions of successive PMs, home secretaries and other ministers, has legitimised racist language and behaviour. Oh, and let’s not forget Nigel Farage and his ilk.

Phil Green

Shock and awe

I had to laugh at Charlie Connelly quoting Virginia Woolf’s “It is pleasant to be afraid when we are conscious that we are in no kind of danger” in *TNE* #175.

The great storm of October 1987 was on the night I had been reading Stephen King’s *The Shining,* having reached the passage where the murdered twins called to the young boy to join them, I lived alone in an attic, was unemployed, and was indeed reading by candlelight.

Suddenly, the force of the screaming wind outside ripped open the french windows of the room. The windows went crazy, pounding back and forth — just like in a horror movie. And yes, the candle blew out!

That was frightening but not as frightening as the world today...

Franklin Ryan

AGENDA

Passage where the murdered twins called to the young boy to join them, I lived alone in an attic, was unemployed, and was indeed reading by candlelight.

Suddenly, the force of the screaming wind outside ripped open the french windows of the room. The windows went crazy, pounding back and forth — just like in a horror movie. And yes, the candle blew out!

That was frightening but not as frightening as the world today...

Franklin Ryan

Last Post

I wasn’t convinced by Tim Walker’s arguments in favour of the Liberal Democrats standing down candidates and tactical voting (“Why my party missed its big moment,” *TNE* #174).

It might have helped if Labour and the Lib Dems had come to an agreement to stand down candidates in Westminster and Finchley but I don’t think it would have overturned the result. Unilaterally standing down candidates sends a message of weakness to voters – the Brexit Party vote seemed down across the board after it stood down some candidates.

Despite the Lib Dems standing a candidate in Canterbury against Tim Walker’s wishes, it didn’t make a difference to the final result.

Standing a strong candidate in Kensington was probably one of the worst decisions by the Lib Dems but the party was in a difficult position in having to accommodate candidates who had switched parties and give them potentially winnable seats.

Ultimately the key factor was the first past the post voting system. The Tories won only slightly more votes in total than in 2017 but the difference was the change in the make-up of those voters (and importantly where they were located) coupled with the collapse in the Labour vote.

Alex Tutt

There is really no point in talking about regrouping, rebuilding, or mending our broken politics and country until we get rid of one of the main causes of it: the first past the post system.

It effectively amplifies the front-running party, decreasing the representation of the party in second place, and virtually extinguishing the smaller parties. This makes people feel that voting for one of the smaller parties is wasting their vote, which should not be the case in a democracy as those parties often represent viewpoints not supported by the ‘big guys.’

My neighbouring MP, occupying the sole Green Party seat in the new parliament, explained that the small parties got 20% of the vote, but occupy only a tiny percentage of the seats. Her party got 980,000 votes nationwide, yet returned only one seat.

If we had proportional representation the Tories would now have 288 seats, not 364. They would be a minority government and other parties could form a coalition to stop or at least soften Brexit.

Johnson would be a minority PM, instead of the autocrat this system has created.

Charles Wunderman
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The $25 billion global banana business depends on one variety, which is now menaced by a virulent disease. As FRED HARTER explains, it raises serious questions about the regional economies of south and Central America... as well as our diet.

"It all started here, this small patch of jungle in Derbyshire," says gardener Faye Tuffney, gesturing to a drooping pod bearing several bunches of adolescent bananas. We are standing in a humid greenhouse teeming with ferns and fig trees on the grounds of Chatsworth House, a stately home perched on the edge of the Peak District. In front of us, tucked away in a stuffy corner, sits a banana plant. It looks unremarkable, and it is really – apart from the fact that it is directly descended from another plant brought here sometime in the 1890s.

That seminal specimen is widely thought to be the progenitor of the global banana industry. More than one thousand varieties of the world’s favourite fruit exist worldwide, from the short and stubby Sukali Ndiizi banana – a staple of the Ugandan highlands – to the giant Rhizo Horn, which grows longer than a person’s forearm. But walk into your nearest shop and only one type will be on offer: the gently curved Cavendish, named after the sixth Duke of Devonshire, who first grew them at Chatsworth nearly two centuries ago.

Today the Cavendish makes up 89% of global exports and is the only type of banana most Westerners have ever known. Their presence on supermarket shelves is taken for granted by millions of shoppers as a mundane fact of life. But that could change.

The Cavendish is threatened by a deadly blight called Tropical Race Four, a strain of a fungus known as Panama disease or Fusarium wilt. It was first identified in Taiwan in the late 1990s, where it wiped out around 70% of the island’s banana production. From there it spread to China, destroying around 100,000 hectares of the country’s Cavendish plantations and prompting wild rumours that the fruit caused AIDS. Sales of the fruit plunged as banana hysteria set in. The fungus has since taken hold in the Philippines, Indonesia and other parts of south east-Asia, as well as Australia, Jordan and Mozambique. In 2018 its presence was confirmed in India, the world’s largest banana producer.

Tropical Race Four attacks the roots of banana plants, sparking a host reaction..."
that wards off the fungus but also clogs the plant’s vascular system, preventing it from absorbing water and nutrients. Starved of sustenance, first the plant’s leaves turn yellow and start to wilt; then its roots rot away and die. “The effect is sheer devastation,” says James Dale, a biotechnologist at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. The pest is spread by humans, carried in mud caked on the bottom of a pair of dirty boots or as spores lingering on the blade of an infected knife. Another common route is the unwitting export of contaminated plants that bear no visible signs of infection. Once in the ground, the pathogen can sit there for decades. And whereas airborne banana blights such as black sigatoka can be countered by pumping plantations with pesticides, there is no such cure for Tropical Race Four.

“You can compare it to a landmine,” says Gert Kema, a plant pathologist at Wageningen University in the Netherlands. “It sits in the soil unnoticed and suddenly—boom—it hits. It’s a very difficult problem.”

For decades Latin America, which grows around 90% of the bananas eaten by Americans and Europeans, avoided the epidemic. But in August Tropical Race Four was reported in Colombia, whose government promptly declared a national emergency. Some 175 hectares of banana plantations are known to be affected, but the true figure could be higher. “We expected this to happen sooner or later,” says Kema, who helped confirm the outbreak. “The chances that it will show up in other parts of Colombia and Latin America are extremely high. I can’t predict when that’s going to happen, but it will happen for sure. History shows you can’t stop the spread of this disease.”

If that were to happen, the economic effects could be ruinous. In neighbouring Ecuador, for instance, banana plantations employ more than 2.7 million people, around one third of the country’s total workforce. “People here are very worried,” says Freddy Magallic, a banana researcher at Ecuador’s Polytechnic School of the Coast. “The government is monitoring the borders and trying to guess where the pathogen might enter. Thousands of farmers have to be trained to recognise the symptoms. But the disease is very hard to contain. It’s a huge threat.”

The Cavendish is not the tastiest type of banana. But exporters like them because their skins are relatively thick, meaning they can survive being tossed into boxes and dispatched along bumpy dirt tracks on route to supermarket shelves thousands of miles away. The plants also produce high yields and are short enough to withstand the hurricane winds that regularly batter the tropics.

Like all edible varieties, Cavendish bananas are sterile. Bite into a wild banana and you’ll find dozens of teeth-shattering seeds, whereas the ones in your fruit bowl have none. Because they cannot breed, Cavendish banana plants are grown through a form of cloning similar to taking a rose cutting, a process that produces genetically identical plants. Dan Koelpel, in his book *Banana: The Fate of the Fruit That Changes the World*, describes the Cavendish as the fruit equivalent of the Big Mac: utterly uniform in taste and appearance, whether bought in a corner shop in Lincolnshire or a Wal Mart in Los Angeles.

This characteristic is the Cavendish’s great strength. It means farmers can plant them on a large-scale knowing how many fruits each stem will yield, and exporters can ship them across oceans confident that each bunch will ripen more or less at the same rate. It is the cornerstone on which big banana companies such as Dole and Chiquita have built their high-volume, low margin business models, and it helps explain why a banana from Guatemala only costs a shopper in London around 20 pence, roughly half as much as an apple from an orchard down the road in Kent.

“The international banana trade is completely addicted to the Cavendish,” says Randy Ploetz at the University of Florida. “It’s a very productive banana that producers can ship quickly and cheaply. They’ve got it down to a fine science.”

This genetic uniformity, however, carries vulnerabilities. The plantations that grow Cavendish bananas for export to Europe and America are monocultures, containing only one crop. “They might look nice and green, but there’s nothing there, no biodiversity,” says Ploetz. Since there is no genetic variation between the plants, that means they are all equally susceptible to a given malady. So when one of them gets infected with a pathogen like Tropical Race Four, it can easily hop to neighbouring plants and then rip through the rest of the plantation. “It’s a very risky form of agriculture,” says Kema.

Britons eat about five billion Cavendish bananas every year. If you are in your mid-forties, calculates Koelpel, then the one you had this morning was around your ten thousandth. But Western consumers have not always been hooked on the Cavendish. Our grandparents grew up eating a different variety altogether—the Gros Michel, or Big Mike, a bigger and by many accounts much tastier banana than our Cavendish. It is also more robust. Whereas Cavendish bananas must be exported in boxes to prevent their flesh from bruising, bunches of Gros Michel bananas can be thrown directly into a hull of a ship, making them even more ideally suited for export. They first appeared in American shops in the late 19th century and went on to dominate the export market until the 1950s. But the Gros Michel fell prey to an earlier strain of Panama disease known as Race One, which began tearing through monocultures of Gros Michel in Latin America almost as soon as they were planted.

The environmental effects were devastating. When one plantation of Gros Michel was hit by Race One and became unproductive, normal practice was to simply abandon it and clear a nearby patch of virgin forest to make room for a new one. When that plantation got infected and failed, the process was repeated. “The lowland tropical rainforests of Latin America were completely wiped out,” says Ploetz. “They no longer exist.” The practice continues
Today in areas such as Mindanao hit by Tropical Race Four, the damage wrought by Race One was so severe that some banana-addicted Central American economies teetered on the brink of collapse. A shortage of the fruit in American shops inspired the 1953 hit Yes! We have no bananas. By the 1950s the disease was spreading too fast for the banana companies to keep up. Luckily, they discovered that the Cavendish was immune to the ravages of Race One and switched production over to the new variety.

Today’s banana barons are confident they can save the Cavendish from the fate of the Gros Michel. “We’re vigilant but I wouldn’t say we’re very worried,” says Caolimbe Buckley, director of corporate affairs at Fyffes, the biggest shipper of bananas to Britain. Like other exporters, Fyffes has introduced tight controls on its Latin American plantations, including vehicle washes and restrictions on footwear. “If we strictly adhere to the biosecurity guidelines and we share that knowledge, there’s no reason that the Cavendish banana can’t continue to be very productive for a number of decades,” says Buckley.

BANANA
REPUBLIC: Early-20th-century advertising poster for the world’s most popular fruit

“Tropical Race Four in northern Australia. “We really didn’t know what they were going to do,” he says. The three-year trial was a huge success. Practically all of the unmodified plants at the site died, whereas the modified ones survived with very low rates of infection; one line of the modified plants finished the trial with no signs of infection at all. “We’re now doing a second trial on a much bigger scale and are getting much the same results,” says Dale.

For now, though, there is little prospect of Dale’s bananas resolving the blight: they are genetically modified organisms and are not yet cleared for human consumption under Australia’s strict biosafety laws. Tropical European Union regulations also prevent their introduction to European markets. “Proving biosafety is a long, expensive and arduous process,” says Dale. “We haven’t overcome that hurdle yet.”

Like other scientists, Dale worries about the impact of Tropical Race Four on the varieties of banana that represent the staple food of more than 400 million people in parts of Africa, Asia and Latin America. “It would be unfortunate, but the West would survive without bananas,” he says. “There are other places where the impact would be far, far greater.”

Nonetheless he’s confident that scenario can be avoided. “With good quarantine measures, you’ve probably got a decade until you start seeing a big impact in Latin America. If we haven’t come up with a good replacement by then, we’re not trying hard enough. I don’t think that will happen.”

In fact, Dale sees the arrival of Tropical Race Four in Latin America as a long overdue opportunity to break free from the iron grip of the Cavendish. “For the consumer it will bring huge benefits, there’ll be more types of banana for us to eat. The possibilities are wonderful.”

This story was first published by Tortoise, a different type of newsroom dedicated to a slower, wiser news. Try Tortoise for a month for free at www.tortoisemedia.com/activate/teguest and use the code TENGUEST.
BENJAMIN IVRY investigates revived claims that Albert Camus was assassinated by the KGB and considers other material published to mark the anniversary of his death.

Sixty years after the Nobel Prize-winning French author Albert Camus’ premature death in a car accident on January 4, 1960, can anything new be said about him? His works, including the novels The Stranger, The Plague, and The Fall, and book-length philosophical essays The Myth of Sisyphus and The Rebel, have been analysed to death.

In an attempt at innovation, Giovanni Catelli, an Italian poet and writer, suggests that Camus’ car crash was really a sinister Soviet plot.

Camus suffered a broken neck and skull fracture when the Facel Vega sportscar in which he was riding hit a tree in Villeblevin, a small town southeast of Paris.

The Facel Vega, considered a French competitor to the Mercedes SL or Aston Martin DB5, was driven by its owner, Camus’ publisher Michel Gallimard. Catelli alleges that it was tampered with by KGB agents.

Catelli’s theory was first floated in the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera in 2011. He followed up with a book, Camus Must Die (Camus deve morire; Nutrimenti Publishers, 2013), the updated French edition of which has just been released, with the less imperious title, La mort de Camus, but to much scrutiny and attention.

Catelli recently informed the French blogger Thibault Isabel: “As soon as I discovered the work of Camus, and especially his involvement in politics of his time, I always had the feeling, almost a certainty, that the accident in which this great author was the victim could not be the result of chance, but must have been done purposefully.”

Because of Camus’s documented anti-Communist stance and ties to anarchist politics in his native Algeria, Catelli was predisposed to think that Camus was on a hit list.

This was especially so before a scheduled visit to France from March to April 1960 by Nikita Khrushchev, first secretary of the Communist party of the Soviet Union. According to Catelli, Camus might have denounced Khrushchev and the USSR, causing an international scandal.

His information was drawn from the published journals of Jan Zilbrana, a Prague-born translator of American Beat poets who had produced Czech versions of Allen Ginsberg, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso.

Zilbrana, who died in 1984, left a posthumously published diary, A Whole Life. In an entry for 1980, he claimed that an unnamed man had informed him that Dmitri Shepilov, a Soviet politician and one-time minister of foreign affairs, ordered that Camus be murdered in response to an anti-Soviet article published in March 1867 in the French newspaper Franc-Tireur.
CONSPIRACY THEORY:
1 Albert Camus on the balcony of his Paris publisher Michel Gallimard. 1955
2 Wreckage of the crash that killed Camus and Gallimard in January 1960
3 Camus’ coffin is carried from the town hall of Villeblevin on January 5, 1960.
Photos: Getty Images

TRAGIC END

Camus was heading back to Paris after spending the Christmas holidays with his wife and their twin children in Provence. He had originally intended to make the journey by rail but accepted the offer to drive with his publisher and friend Michel Gallimard, possibly for the opportunity to discuss the handwritten manuscript for a new book he carried with him, The First Man, a novel based on his Algerian childhood.

Also travelling in the car was Gallimard’s wife and daughter. The group had broken the 500-mile journey with an overnight stop at Thoissey and by the next afternoon were barely 100 miles from Paris when they passed through Villeblevin. Just outside the town Gallimard suddenly lost control of the car, possibly due to a tyre blowing out at speed. They veered off the road, struck one tree and then smashed into another, killing Camus instantly.

First Man was found on the grass nearby in a briefcase with copies of Shakespeare’s Othello and a volume of Nietzsche’s. The train ticket was found in a pocket of Camus’ coat.

The New European | January 2-January 8, 2020

Catelli recounts all this in Camus Must Die. Yet the historical record shows that by March 1957, Shepilov was no longer Soviet foreign minister, but secretary of the central committee responsible for Communist ideology, where he denounced composers in the USSR who did not follow the party line.

In June 1957, Shepilov was the only commissar committee secretary to oppose Krushchev in an abortive coup, incurring the leader’s wrath.

In disgrace, Shepilov was sent to Kyrgyzstan to work at the economics institute of the local Academy of Sciences. In 1960, he was expelled from the Soviet Academy of Sciences and demoted to a clerkship in the state archives.

So Shepilov – who died in 1968 – lacked any position or power to order the assassination of a world-famous author in 1957 or 1960.

In 2001, Shepilov posthumously published a memoir, translated as The Kremlin’s Scholar: A Memoir of Soviet Politics Under Stalin And Krushchev, with no mention of Camus.

Catelli indirectly cites another source backing the claim that Camus was murdered: Jacques Vergès, a French lawyer who died in 2013 and who defended, among others, the Nazi war criminal Klaus Barbie and the French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy.

According to Catelli, Giuliano Spazzali, an Italian barrister, contacted him after Camus Must Die was published in Italy, stating that Vergès had informed him that Camus’ “staged accident was schemed by a KGB section with the endorsement of French intelligence”.

Why would Vergès allegedly spread such hearsay about Camus? Vergès was an opponent of French imperialism, defending Algerian nationalists accused of terrorist activities before Algeria was declared independent from France in 1962.

Camus, by contrast, held the opinion that his native land should remain French property, a view that understandably remains unpopular in Algeria today, where Camus’ name is hardly revered in official circles.

They include more than 1,400 pages of letters exchanged from 1944 to 1959 by Camus and the Spanish-born actress Maria Casares, which will be reprinted in paperback in January.

Casares was one of the three girlfriends to whom Camus sent love missives before starting on his fatal car ride. He had put his wife and children safely on a train to Paris shortly before.

Beyond a busy amorous life, Camus devoted much energy to friendship. Other recent collections of letters with Algerian-born chums such as the novelist Louis Guilloux (also published in January); and the artist Louis Bénisti as well as with the Italian intellectual Nicola Chiaramonte (both published in 2019) show an amiable, endearing Camus.

An unpretentious side of the writer is also seen here, far more approachable than the glacial Camus in public squabbles with his intellectual rivals Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir.

Contrasting these pompous, formal exchanges, Camus’ letters explain more of the inner man who chose to translate James Thurber’s The Last Flower, a whimsical illustrated story about the themes of peace, love, and resilience.

Thurber’s parable tells of the only survivors of a future world war; a man, woman, and flower, who create yet another civilization that necessarily leads to more conflict. Camus’ translation of this flight of fancy was first published in 1982 and reprinted in 2019.

Its playful version of cyclical history echoes his more formal Myth of Sisyphus, in which a mythological Greek king was condemned by the gods for eternity to roll a boulder up a hill, whereupon it rolls down again once he gets it to the top.

Confronting the absurdity of life, Camus concluded: “The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man’s heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

Rather than obsessing over unsubstantiated allegations about his tragic demise 60 years ago, readers might relish the rediscovered evidence of a jubilant Camus.
Known as Red Nev in his footballing days, Gary Neville is now showing his political colours in his business and broadcasting careers. JAMES BROWN reports

One of the unanticipated aspects of last month’s general election was the simple one-word declaration of voting intentions from famous people on Twitter. For many years celebrities and sports stars didn’t want to disclose their political allegiances for fear of alienating fans, but amid the longer rants and tirades and heartfelt reflections from musicians like Lily Allen or Stormzy, a member of Pink Floyd would serenely float through your Twitter timeline with just the word ‘Labour’.

The single word support tweet also delivered a new type of political influencer: the conscientious footballer. Not so much a genre as an individual – former Manchester United and England right-back turned Sky Sports analyst Gary Neville.

Anyone who follows the sport will know that Neville is no ordinary ex-pro but in the week leading up to the election he clearly defined his moral and political standing during a Sky Sports studio discussion after the Manchester derby, by laying the blame for the rise in recorded racial insults from the terraces towards black players at the feet of Boris Johnson. He returned to the subject last month, after Chelsea’s Antonio Rudiger said he was racially abused in a match at Tottenham Hotspur, linking the incident to the election and to both main parties, and their leaders, being accused of “fueling racism and accepting racism within their parties”. He added: "If it is accepted within the highest office in the country, we are absolutely not talking about it at a micro level, we are talking about an absolutely enormous level.”

While this would seem an obvious conclusion for anyone who understands the link between the normalisation of racist terms used by politicians and what happens in the street, it stands out because politics so rarely enters the world of the Rupert Murdoch-owned sports station, or indeed football itself.

Some fans become angry and confused when they see stars like Neville and Match of the Day host Gary Lineker verbalising political opinions they oppose themselves. It confronts their loyalties. Others are furious if political party campaign buses pull up outside their local football stadia. There is a belief among many that football and politics shouldn’t mix, that it should be a political opinion-free zone. The reality, though, is very different.

When Brian Clough so eloquently explained his political opinions with lines like “I think socialism comes from the heart… I think everyone should have a book. I think everybody should have a nice classroom to go to. I think everybody should have the same opportunities” he was representing an era when football really was the sport of the working class man. Clough, like Sir Alex Ferguson, Bill Shankly and co would instinctively side with the plight of the working man, because they themselves had come from the communities building ships and mining coal. But football isn’t like that any more. Players don’t climb out of the mining communities and forge into the England team because those tough working environments don’t exist anymore. Footballers are incubated, coal and steel come from abroad.

Which is what makes Gary Neville’s stance all the more remarkable. He’s not totally alone, his studio colleagues, former Liverpool players Jamie Redknapp and Jamie Carragher; also came down on the racism but it was Neville who directly held Johnson responsible and not just ‘society’. As a player Neville was, to use the appropriate terminology of football fans, a “right shithouse”. That is, he delighted in winding up the opposition through the superiority of the Manchester United team he appeared for 400 times. United fans appreciated his basic, hard-working link-up play with global superstar David Beckham. But to even the most open-minded, generous opposition fan Neville wasn’t a player like Tottenham’s Chris Waddle, Liverpool’s Steven Gerrard, or Manchester United’s Ryan Giggs, you could warm to for their style of play or hold a grudging respect for due to their ability. He simply appeared to take the game too seriously, he came across like Ferguson’s prefect.

There is a clip on YouTube, which has been viewed more than six million times, of the former Manchester United goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel shaking hands with his ex-teammates in the tunnel as he reads himself to lead out rivals Manchester City, for whom he played later in his career. While most players warmly smile and shake hands with the Dane, Neville turns to see who is tapping him and then just coldly blanks him, such is the intensity of his focus on the game ahead. It’s a steel he’s carried into his post-playing career. As a Leeds United fan it feels unnatural to be writing about a former Manchester United player so respectfully but Neville has already long since caused this sort of discomfort nationally since he revealed himself to be a top class pundit.

In 2011 he took over the role of leading analyst at Sky Sports from former Aston Villa, Wolves and Everton striker Andy Gray, whose reading of the game had been instrumental in building Sky’s credibility as a football broadcaster. It was Gray who first used a computer screen in the studio to revisit video of key moments in matches and explain what should have happened using on-screen touch graphics.

Red Nev. Gary Neville, left, made more than 400 appearances for Manchester United
Photo: Getty Images

Neville had big boots to fill. But after analysing his first game he instantly prompted a wave of disbelief on social media that went along the lines of “As a Liverpool/Leeds/Man City fan this doesn’t feel right but Gary Neville is really good at this”. What he added was a sort of intelligent insight that is still rare in
roses and Leeds badges for avatars. When the stakes are so high, politics does come above football for many.

Neville is an unusual mix, professionally He supports Labour but works for Murdoch at Sky Sports. And broadcasting is far from his sole form of post-playing income. He has been the driving force between building a brand, the Class of ’92 – with former Manchester United teammates, Ryan Giggs, Paul Scholes, David Beckham, Nicky Butt and brother Phil – which is involved in several development and property projects.

It soon became clear the real mission of the Class of ’92 was about creating a meaningful legacy for the community that had given them their start. Gary Neville and Ryan Giggs wanted to invest in their roots – Salford. It was Salford Boys Club where Giggsy played as a schoolboy, Beckham had his digs in Salford, Scholes was born in Salford hospital, and most meaningfully The Cliff (Manchester United’s training ground) had been in Salford, so that’s where they’d all met.

Salford, then, has been a particular focus for the Class of ’92, and for Neville, for whom the city’s motto – “The Welfare of the People Is the Highest Law” and “Integrity and Industry” – seems particularly fitting. With Lim, the Class of ’92 took over the local football team, Salford City, in 2014. The team has since been promoted through the football pyramid and now plays in League Two. The latest scheme for Neville and others from the Class of ’92 is a university academy close to Old Trafford.

Mooge adds: “I’ve met a few footballers and Gary is clearly differently wired. Meetings start at 7am. He’s a chief exec, a COO and a CMO combined. There’s an intuition combined with a self-belief, and a thousand questions. He doesn’t pretend to know what he doesn’t know about. But when he does know, f**k he knows.

“He’s got a grip on all the figures, the five-year projections and the Capex and Opex. There’s a reason why he’s opened hotels, restaurants, a football club and a university academy.

“In pure marketing terms, he really understood his audience, and that was especially evident when setting up Salford City – he knew what the brand could be if handled right, but also was at pains to do it the right way, and meet all the community leaders, because he knew what success could mean for the community. He’s intense, but he’s very good company.”

Many people feel Neville would bring a sense of community perspective and heart to the role of director of football at Manchester United, in an era where the club has increasingly been seen as a business enterprise first and a football team second. The club makes a lot of money for owners and investors but haven’t won either the Premier League or the Champions League since Ferguson resigned. Neville has made it clear he doesn’t want that role. Perhaps there is another professional destination ahead.

During his playing days he was known as Red Noy for his shop steward role in the Old Trafford dressing room. He has acknowledged he was planning for a business life after football as soon as friend and teammate Ben Thornley lost his Manchester United career to injury, when they were both in their early 20s. Neville was gripped by the concern about what he would do with his time and brain when he couldn’t play football any more. Maybe his recent political statements are an indication of another period of his life yet to come.
MY RESOLUTIONS. . . BE A SOR
LOSER, AND KEEP RESISTING

Okay, so that sucked.
Not Christmas; I should point
that out. I can’t speak for anyone
else but I had a good Christmas;
indeed, judging by the fact I no
longer appear to own a single item
of clothing that fits properly, a great
Christmas.
This was partly because, for the first
time all year, politics played no part in
proceedings whatsoever.
My family didn’t even have to make this
decision; it was an entirely unspoken but
universally agreed upon arrangement
that the subjects of Brexit, Boris Johnson,
Jeremy Corbyn and the precarious
situation this country now finds itself in
would be left for another time.
This wasn’t in order to avoid
arguments; I’m very fortunate in that my
family is more or less of a single mind on
all of these topics. We just didn’t want to
think about them over Christmas. So we
didn’t.

But Christmas is over, and the New
Year is with us. Auld Lang Syne,
resolutions and all that.
I’ve been thinking about New Year’s
resolutions, and I’m kind of in two minds
about the whole tradition, to be honest.
On the one hand the purely rational
side of my brain thinks that if something
would be a good and right thing to do, you
should be doing it already rather than
waiting for January to come around, and
that putting such a change off until then
may make it seem more daunting than it
need be, and, as such, all the more likely
to fail.
The more human side of my brain
recognises that people sometimes need an
excuse and a context in which to make
good choices and that a New Year’s
resolution serves such a purpose, then
fair enough.
And as is usually the way with my
brain, thinking about this got me
thinking about something else, and it was
this: It’s okay to be a sore loser, if that’s
what it takes to get your arse into gear.
This, I know, flies in the face of
everything we were all taught as children.
Losing with good grace and acceptance
was an undisputed virtue and a sore loser
was one of the worst things you could be.
But we’re not children any more, and this
is not a game we’re playing.

Besides, it’s not being a sore loser to
point out that the game was, if not rigged
exactly, heavily skewed against you.
The failure of the pro-Remain parties
to unite (and specifically the failure of
Labour definitively to decide if it even
was a pro-Remain party) made the
scenario we’d all been fearing a reality:
The government, having won 43.6% of a
67% turnout, has nonetheless been
granted a sizeable majority by our
archaic embarrassment of an electoral
system and is now declaring an absolute
mandate to pursue Brexit, despite Brexit
now being less popular with the public
than ever.
When the way the game was played
gave you no chance of winning, you’re not
being a sore loser when you point this out
and refuse to give up. You’re just taking a
stand for what’s right.

Moreover, accepting defeat with grace
and humility when your opponent doesn’t
act in good faith – indeed seems only
dimly aware of the concept of acting in
good faith – isn’t being a ‘good loser’. It’s
being a mug.

Something I learned many years ago in
the midst of my midlife crisis (I got mine
out of the way when I was 24) is that while
you can’t always control your initial
emotional reactions to events, you can –
with a bit of practice – control your
reactions to your reactions.
In other words, while you can’t change
the way you feel, you can choose what
your feelings make you do.

Right now I’m angry, and I’m not the
only one. I’m sure many of you now
reading this have been in a state of barely
suppressed rage for about three weeks
(even if, like me, you did give yourself a
few days off in the middle of it). So we
have a choice: what are we going to do
with that anger?

Are we going to bottle it up like so
much post-Christmas indigestion, feeling
it eat away at us from the inside until
we’re hollowed out, or until it bursts out
of us in uncontrolled and probably
undesirable circumstances?

Or are we going to let it motivate us and
guide us, as we take the next steps

Towards restoring some sort of sanity
our country?
It’s not, of course, yet clear exactly
what form those next steps are going to
take. I don’t think it’s unnecessarily
cynical of me to wonder if Boris Johnson
called a mid-December election precisely
because he knew Christmas would
provide a welcome distraction from

Events and take all the post-election anger
and energy out of the Remain movement.
But he’s underestimated us before. And
while I haven’t been talking much about
Brexit these last couple of weeks, I’ve had
plenty of time to think about it, and I’ve
had some ideas.

But that’s for next week.
Resist.
Yeah, I said resist.

Mitch Benn
Comedian,
Musician,
Writer

Okay, so that sucked.
Not Christmas; I should point
that out. I can’t speak for anyone
else but I had a good Christmas;
indeed, judging by the fact I no
longer appear to own a single item
of clothing that fits properly, a great
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all of these topics. We just didn’t want to
think about them over Christmas. So we
didn’t.
THE ORIGINAL VICTIM OF THE VERMEER CULT

ALASTAIR SMART ON THE LONG-OVERDUE EMERGENCE OF PIETER DE HOOCH FROM THE SMOTHERING SHADOW OF HIS MOST FAMOUS CONTEMPORARY
WHAT IS AVAX HOME?
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Protect your downloadings from Big brother
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It’s easy to see why a new exhibition devoted to Dutch old master, Pieter de Hooch, is subtitled From the Shadow of Vermeer. The two men weren’t just peers but rivals, during the decade de Hooch spent in Vermeer’s home city of Delft in southern Holland.

That decade was the 1660s, when both were members of the Delft artists’ guild. In the centuries since, paintings by one have often been misattributed to the other. Such is the similarity between many of their pictures; such was the extent of their mutual influence.

In terms of popularity and renown, however, there’s really no comparison. Vermeer is a household name worldwide, an exhibition of whose at Cambridge’s Fitzwilliam museum earlier this decade broke UK attendance records for a show outside London.

De Hooch, by contrast, has fallen from grace pretty dramatically. Between his death in 1684 and the current show, he didn’t have a single, solo exhibition in his homeland.

Who exactly was Pieter de Hooch, then? What made him special? And how to explain his neglect for so long?

Born in Rotterdam in 1629, de Hooch was the son of a bricklayer and a midwife. Biographical information is patchy, though we know he moved to nearby Delft in his early twenties. The city at the time was flourishing, thanks to its butter and cloth industries – not to mention its establishment as one of the headquarters of the Dutch East India Company.

As so often in history, art followed money. Sensing sales and opportunity, a number of painters swiftly began settling in Delft, Carel Fabritius and Jan Steen to name but two. (Fabritius, a promising pupil of Rembrandt’s, best known for his painting The Goldfinch, would be tragically killed by a gunpowder explosion near his house in 1654.)

It’s estimated that around two-thirds of Delft’s homes in the mid-17th century contained paintings. The recent declaration of the Dutch Republic – and with it the end of rule by Catholic Spain – resulted in a sharp decline in religious imagery and rise in demand for secular subjects.

In truth, de Hooch’s early offerings weren’t especially memorable. He produced work in an established Dutch genre known as the guardroom scene. This consisted of soldiers in dark, indoor quarters engaged in pursuits such as drinking, smoking and card-playing.

It wasn’t long, though, before the artist made his big breakthrough. Or, to be precise, his two big breakthroughs – with depictions of goings-on in people’s backyards; and scenes inside houses, complete with ‘through-views’ leading our gaze via a doorway or window to a different scene beyond.

In both cases, de Hooch was going where no painter had gone before. Among his finest backyard scenes is Woman and Child in a Bleaching Ground (1655-58), in which a girl watches her mother lay out a load of linen in the sunshine for whitening.

The spire of Delft’s Oude Kerk (‘Old Church’) – a feature in many of de Hooch’s outdoor scenes and still a landmark today – looms in the background.

What we might call de Hooch’s golden period – that of the backyards and
through-views – began in the mid-1660s. His works from this time moved away from conventional perspective with a single vanishing point, in favour of a more complex perspective scheme. They also boast the fall of light at ingenious angles.

If that makes de Hooch sound more of a geomancer than an artist, let’s remember optical wizardry was always twinned with humble subject matter. One of the standout paintings of his career, A Mother’s Duty, depicts a woman delousing her child. (In the corner of the room, de Hooch also included a large kakstoe – which translates, rather inelegant, as “a child’s toilet chair”).

As for the relationship with Vermeer, frustratingly no documents exist shedding light on their interactions. Nor, for that matter, are there any tales – apocryphal or otherwise – of daggers drawn.

What does seem fair to say, though, despite their respective statuses today, is that de Hooch was the more innovative. Both could pull off clever tricks with perspective and light; both enjoyed painting a well-positioned ‘through-view’; both liked to depict everyday action in everyday bourgeois homes. However, it was de Hooch who by and large did this first.

Proof comes with his Woman Weighing Gold and Silver Coins, a canvas remarkably similar to Vermeer’s Woman Holding a Balance. So similar, in fact, that whoever painted his second was surely trying to emulate whoever painted his first.

Each features a female in a bonnet and blue jacket, weighing coins at a table (common practice at the time, as a coin’s weight determined its value). Each female is also illuminated by a burst of light entering from a window on the left. The curators’ research confirms de Hooch’s picture was painted before his counterpart’s.

Sir Michael Levy, director of the National Gallery from 1973 to 1986, once claimed he’d have swapped 10 Vermeers for a single de Hooch. Clearly that was – and still is – a minority view, however. For the truth is that, though de Hooch may have done things earlier, Vermeer did things better. And it’s no slight on de Hooch to say so. His peer managed to invest paintings with a kind of magic that precious few others in history have come close to.

Where de Hooch’s pictures are worldly, Vermeer’s are almost other worldly. Part of the latter’s success comes down to the way he probed the psychological state of his subjects, thereby creating hints of drama in every scene. De Hooch, by contrast, had little time for human emotion. For him, drama came purely in the movement of light as it hit a wall or floor.

At the turn of the 1660s, de Hooch left Delft for Amsterdam, where he’d spend the rest of his life. His final years weren’t especially happy (and even included a spell in a lunatic asylum).

The exhibition features just a handful of his Amsterdam paintings, its curators arguing – quite rightly – that the bigger, richer city saw a drop in quality. De Hooch’s work there tended to depict the flashy homes of his moneyed new clients, yet it lacks the evocative atmosphere of old, almost as if his heart wasn’t in it.

The show focuses on the artist at his best, then: During his Delft years. In the century or so after his death, he seems to have been regarded as just another Dutch painter. The Parisian art dealer, Alexandre-Joseph Paillot, expressed a widespread view when he said “I do not place the paintings by this master in the first rank”.

Gradually, the prices for de Hooch’s work rose, and in the 19th century it began to be collected internationally – by the likes of King George IV and Sir Robert Peel in this country. However, it was also about this time that a cult developed around Vermeer, who became dubbed “the Sphinx of Delft” and was soon the only artist connected to that city anyone really cared about.

Which is what makes the current show so welcome. De Hooch can finally now emerge from the long shadow cast his rival. Or, to use a different metaphor, he can finally now emerge from art history’s backyard.

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**ILLUMINATED:**

1 The Mother (1659-60)  
Photo: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.  
Photo: Jörg P. Anders

2 A Mother Delousing her Child’s Hair, known as A Mother’s Duty (1658-60)  
Photo: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam; on loan from the City of Amsterdam (bequest A. van der Hoop)

3 The Courtyard of a House in Delft (1658)  
Photo: The National Gallery, London

4 Paying the Hostess (1658)  
Photo: The Bute Collection at Mount Stuart

5 Figures in a Courtyard behind a House (1663-65)  
Photo: Rijksmuseum Amsterdam; on loan from the City of Amsterdam (bequest A. van der Hoop)
Judy Collins begins a UK tour this month. Ahead of her arrival, LIZ THOMSON renews acquaintance with the woman who discovered Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell.

April 1969, the Holiday Inn, Santa Monica. Judy Collins was out west to play a concert. Her affair with Stephen Stills, ignited a year earlier, was “thrilling but sometimes rocky”. Collins had refused to leave New York – her friends, her cats, her therapist – for what she saw as the vacuity of Los Angeles. Collins was anticipating a pre-concert tumble. Stills arrived, took a lovingly restored 1930s Martin from its case and sat on the bed to play. “The big, ringing open chords of his guitar and Stephen’s clear tenor” filled the room:

“Chestnut-brown canary
Ruby-throated sparrow
Sing a song, don’t be long
Thrush me to the narrow
Voices of the angels
Ring around the moonlight
Asking me said she so free
How can you catch the sparrow?”

Suite: Judy Blue Eyes. Collins knew in a heartbeat she was listening to a classic, and it was about her. It broke her heart: “It’s a beautiful song but it’s not going to get me back!” She cried, they hugged, he gave her the Martin. “Now you have the song, and the guitar. And my heart,” Stills said as he left.

This month, Judy Collins arrives in Britain for her first tour in decades, a dozen dates beginning at the newly-refurbished Grand Central Hall in Liverpool. In the 1960s and early ’70s, she was a regular visitor; easily filling the Royal Albert Hall. Like her friend and contemporary, Joan Baez, she continued to sing and record but struggled in the 1980s and ’90s. Her long career is something of a miracle. She’s survived polio, TB, depression and attempts to take her own life, and the suicide of her only child. All this and decades of serious drinking. But the past 40 years have been clean and fulfilling.

The hair is no longer chestnut but the famous eyes are as big and blue as ever and her luminous smile reaches them. “I’m so lucky that all those terrible sins of the past didn’t do me in,” she told me, as she prepared for a sold-out 10-day residency at Joe’s Pub at the Public Theater in Greenwich Village. The season marked the release of her latest album, Winter Stories, and concluded Collins’ year-long Vanguard Award and Residency, an acknowledgment of her influence and legacy. It’s easy to forget what a force she was – many people have no idea that it’s to Judy Collins that both Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell owe their careers.

Cohen was an award-winning but impoverished poet and novelist when he turned up at Collins’ door in 1966, just as she was recording In My Life. He played her Suzanne and Dress Rehearsal Rag, a contemplation of suicide to which she could sadly relate. He was unsure if they were even songs. Collins recorded both immediately and went on to feature Cohen’s work on numerous albums. It was she who persuaded him to sing publicly, though he was so terrified the first time he did it that he fled the stage midway through Suzanne. Surprisingly, given his charisma and sex appeal, they did not have an affair but remained friends until his death. “I had the good fortune to be involved with Leonard and push him out on stage. I told him he had to sing and he told me I had to write,” she said.

Cohen read through Collins’ “dark notebooks” – journals she’d kept through years of therapy and in which she’d written down her dreams – giving her an assignment of five songs. Since You’、“You Want It Darker” and Lady Don’t You Worry ‘bout a Thing. She’s thrilled when people tell her they played it at their weddings. “Leonard was a fabulous man and very generous.”

As to Mitchell, that introduction was made via telephone in the small hours of the morning by Dylan keyboardist Al Kooper, who said he’d soon after arriving in New York. He had been playing a gig. Joni was in the audience, and they’d gone home together. But instead of taking him to bed she sang him a song.

Kooper, impressed, rang Collins who heard Both Sides Now down the telephone. She recorded it, along with Michael from Mountains on Wildflowers. It was Collins’ version of Chelsea Morning, not Mitchell’s own, that inspired the naming of Bill and Hillary Clinton’s daughter.

Perhaps that rankled with Mitchell. After all, Collins was not featured in the all-star cast assembled to celebrate Mitchell’s 75th birthday in November 2018.

“Joni has nothing nice to say about anyone,” Collins said, sotto voce. “I’ve never on her invitation list. I made her a star, yet Both Sides Now makes her mad as hell. It’s always shocking with Joni. She has crafted her life to make people mad and insult them. I’ve put in a lot of hours making phone calls, sending her notes, flowers. And I’m so in awe of her writing that I don’t care!”

Though never a singles artist, Collins has enjoyed transatlantic hits. Both Sides Now was one and Amazing Grace which spent 32 consecutive weeks in the UK chart, another. Her recording of that was selected by the Library of Congress for preservation in the National Recording Registry as “culturally, historically, or artistically significant”. Send in the Clowns jostled for airplay with Queen and the Bay City Rollers, and reached number three, just as A Little Night Music arrived on the London stage and Stephen Sondheim’s name entered general consciousness.

We met for the first time not long after that and Collins told me then she’d love to take on a Sondheim stage role. While she hasn’t (yet) done so, she did record an album: A Love Letter to Stephen Sondheim.
FOLK'S HERO

SURVIVOR:
1 Judy Collins on stage in 1960
2 Collins performing at the 60th anniversary Newport Folk Festival, 2019

A JUDY COLLINS PLAYLIST: SIX OF THE BEST

Anthea, the opening track from #3 (1963) is thrilling, Collins’ voice weeping, scaring, tumbling over her strummed guitar and upright bass. The diction is perfect, the rendition dramatic.

Sons of, from Whales and Nightingales (1970), is one of several Brecker brothers. Profound words carried by a simple lilting melody sung with feeling to strings and piano.

Somewhere Soon from Who Knows Where the Time Goes (1968) is an Ian Tyson number. Collins’ vocal matches the abandon of the lyric, a touch of bluesy glissando here and there enhanced by pedal steel and electric lead. A memorable slice of Americana before anyone so named it.

Famous Blue Raincoat from Living (1971) is one of many Cohen songs (it’s hard to choose a “best”, they are all so different) but there’s something wonderfully mesmeric about Collins’ account of this deeply personal song. It’s so very different to Cohen’s of course but no less intimate. Indeed, so intimate listening makes you feel like a voyer.

Send in the Clowns from Judith (1975) is a perfect miniature that deserves hit status. Beautifully arranged, for piano, strings and cor anglais, you’d never guess listening to it that Collins’ voice was in meltdown. Knowing what she was going through makes it almost unbearably poignant.

The Blizzard from Winter Stories (1999) is a big ballad, Collins returning in her imagination to the Colorado mountains. Originally recorded in 1990, this version is true to the original, but recorded with new musicians for her latest album. The singer-composer is at the piano for this rich and layered story-song.

The eldest of five children, she was born in Seattle. Her parents would disagree as to whether she was named after the biblical Judith or Judy Garland – it was the year of Over the Rainbow and the Great American Songbook loomed large because it’s what her father sang on his live radio shows. Chuck Collins, who was blind, lived as though he were sighted, refusing dog and cane, which probably exacerbated both his Irish temper and his drinking. Judy remembering the supplies of hand-painted glass eyes that arrived in the mail, once wrote that: “I often felt not that he was blind, but that I was invisible.”

She was nine when the family moved to Denver and Collins was immediately hospitalised with polio. Recovered, she resumed piano lessons: Dr Antonia Brisco had played duets with Albert Schweitzer and studied conducting with Sibelius, becoming the first woman to conduct the New York Philharmonic. Judy was just 13 when she made her concert debut, playing a Mozart concerto under Brico’s baton. She was poised to perform Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto when a chance encounter with The Gypsy Rover drew her into folk music just as the revival was beginning. To the disappointment of Brico and her parents, all thoughts of life as a classical pianist vanished.

In spring 1968, married with a new baby, Collins got her first professional gig – Michael’s Pub in Boulder, Colorado: three shows a night, five nights a week, a hundred bucks. She never looked back and was soon in New York, “transplanted immediately and completely... I lived on West 10th and Hudson. I still have some of the furniture I bought on the street for almost nothing.”

Collins has vivid recall of “a special time, an amazing time. There was an easiness about the folk community – in London too. Everybody knew everybody.” Collins’s career followed a typical path: downtown clubs such as Gerde’s and the Gaslight, then New York Town Hall, then Carnegie Hall, then the world.

She was part of a remarkable scene. Collins had run across “a scruffy, brat singing bad versions of old Woody Guthrie songs” in the Gilded Garter in Denver. Bob Dylan had arrived in Greenwich Village at the same time as she did. “I thought: he’ll never make a living.” Collins also recalled a weekend at the Woodstock home of Dylan’s manager, Albert Grossman. “Bob was there and [his then girlfriend] Suze Rotolo, and Sally, Al’s wife. After a great festive evening, lots of food and drink, I woke up at about three in the morning and heard a melody coming up the stairs from the basement. I don’t know why I woke up – it wasn’t loud and I was pretty drunk,” she recolled. “I made it down three flights where Bob was sitting behind a closed door writing My Tambourine Man. I sat for a couple of hours and listened.”

Collins first encountered Stephen Stills in the tumultuous spring of 1968. She was in LA to record Who Knows Where the Time Goes – its title song plucked from a Sandy Denny demo – and Stills was booked to play on the sessions. They met at a Laurel Canyon welcome party and drank and sang all evening, trading verses and harmonies. Collins noticed his eyes were a different shade of blue to her own. Stills told her he was about to form a group with David Crosby, who happened to be producing Joni Mitchell’s second album. Collins remembers that Stills kissed her for the first time during a playback of My Father. Their breakup was dramatic but they never lost touch, and happily admit that it was an encounter at an American Association of Retired Persons convention in Orlando that spurred their musical get-together for an album, Stills & Collins: Everybody Knows (2018), and tour. The tie-dye and patchouli of their 1960s heyday may have faded along with Stills’ hearing, but Collins’ voice has endured despite the drugs, cigarettes and especially alcohol, not to mention eating disorders. Inevitably there was a price to pay along the way. By the mid-1970s, her once-silvery voice had become unreliable, her vocal cords damaged by drink and bulimia. In 1977, she had to make-or-break laser surgery to remove a haemangioma.
Miraculously her voice recovered, notes added top and bottom, yet still she drank. Early the following spring she acknowledged the problem, checking in to what she described as “a drunk farm” in the Pennsylvania hills. She emerged after three months for a date with Louis Nelson, an industrial designer and graphic artist with whom she has since shared her life. They live on New York’s Upper West Side with Coco Chanel, Rachmaninov and Tom Wolfe, three glamorous Persian cats. “Louis is a wonderful man, a real artist in his own right. We have a very good life and we have friends and things we love to do together.”

In 1992, her son, Clark Taylor, who had struggled with alcoholism and drug abuse for years, committed suicide at the age of 33 in a car she had bought him. Collins has spoken often of her son. She told the Seattle Times: “Alcoholism is a disease... To blame would be like saying if Clark had cancer, he got it from me. That’s a hopeless and useless exercise.” Collins has since written a book on suicide and speaks regularly on the subject.

Collins marked her 80th birthday with a lunch party for family and friends, which included Robert Caro, the biographer of president Lyndon Johnson, Gloria Steinem, and Baez, who bought her a pink, sequined jacket a symbol of how far they’ve come since they both burst onto the scene in the Technicolor glow of the early 1960s.

Collins was always ahead of the curve, her childhood training as a classical pianist equipping her with the musical smarts to spot a good song in not-so-obvious places. When she signed to Elektra in 1961, founder Jac Holzman declared: “We’ve found our Joan Baez”. Yet, from her first album, A Maid of Constant Sorrow, Collins plunged her own arrow. By Judy Collins #3 she was fully in stride. Another and The Bells of Rhymney, which she sang at the Royal Albert Hall on the night of the Aberfan tragedy, are still exhilarating a half-century on. By the mid 1980s she was recording Bel, Brecht/Weil, Randy Newman and extracts from the “Marat/Sade” suite, which she put together from Richard Peaslee’s music for a Peter Brook play, and she was working with Joshua Rifkin, a Bach scholar who would bring Scott Joplin to popular attention.

The 1980s was a time when art forms collided, nowhere more so than in Greenwich Village, and artists were free to explore and collaborate unfettered by commercial pressures. “Oh my God, it was fabulous and I was so lucky,” Collins reflects. “We had that little slice of time where a lot of things were coming together, and we could play, record companies that figured out how to distribute and sell these records,” which were “a vehicle through which everybody learned new songs, making the whole folk revival available to everybody.”

Collins’ own songs are beautifully constructed miniatures – sophisticated narrative lyrics paired with piano accompaniments that could only come from someone classically trained. She practises daily (scales and exercises, then Chopin or Rachmaninov, or perhaps Debussy), and writes at the piano, although she has now brought the guitar back into her concert work. She began singing lessons in the 1960s, as her phrasing and evenness of tone across her wide range testifies, and knowing how to use her voice enabled its survival despite the trauma. Unlike Baez, who announced she was retiring earlier this year, she hopes to be able to sing on for years.

While she’s long favoured satin and sparkle over boots and jeans, Collins has a folkie’s heart, continuing a lifetime of standing up to be counted, not least on mental health issues. This is the woman who went to Mississippi in summer ‘94 to register black voters; who took to the witness box at the trial of the Chicago Seven to sing Where Have All the Flowers Gone in support of friends Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin; who’s written songs for Che Guevara and, more recently, the Dreamers.

Like her 1980s confères who hoped they had changed the world forever, she is aghast at where we find ourselves. “We’re in such bad shape. The lies, from the top down. But we did live through Vietnam and we will live through this. We think when we get something done it’s done,” she said. “Everything freezes over and then spring comes and we have to become farmers again and take care of it. Music can change the world, and it does.”

FOLK ROYALTY: Judy Collins, left, with Joni Mitchell at the 5th Big Sur Folk Festival in California, 1968

On the 25th anniversary of the comedian’s death, RICHARD LUCK evaluates his varied film career, in which he eventually found his niche.

Of course, the problem with Peter Cook was that he didn’t really do much in his later life. You know, other than recording five Derek and Clive albums with Dudley Moore. And selling out venues the world over in Behind The Fridge (aka Good Evening), the revue he wrote and performed with Dad. Just that then... and A Life In Pieces and Why Bother?, the acclaimed radio series in which he appeared as the demented but debonair Arthur Streeb-Grebbe (opposite Ludovic Kennedy and Chris Morris respectively. Okay, and there were those eye-dazzling cameos in the first episode of The Black Adder, the Comic Strip’s Mr Jolly Lives Next Door and One Foot In The Alcove, plus his bravura turn on Clive Anderson’s Talk Back and the way he rolled back the years when asked to host Channel 4’s Saturday Live. And the award-winning ITV special Peter Cook & Co. Oh alright, and he was the voice of Vic’s Roger Mellie (the man on the jelly) and he starred in two series of the CBS sitcom The Two Of Us. All that aside, Peter Edward Cook was the epitome of underachievement.

With the triumphs of Beyond The Fringe and Not Only... But Also, the founding of the Establishment Club and the rescue of Private Eye all coming before his perceived fall from grace, the remarkable thing about the postlapsarian Peter is that he was able to accomplish so much when apparently doing so little. Just look at his movie career, considered a joke in some quarters but impressive in at least in terms of output. Indeed, between 1964 and his death on January 9, 1986, at the age of 57, Cook appeared in 18 feature films. Of these, four featured him as the lead or co-lead while five saw him credited as either writer or co-writer.

A quick whizz through his big screen career shows what fame and success meant to Cook at different stages of his career, while also illustrating how, depending on the year and the production, a role in a feature film could represent either a life preserver or a means of accessing the A-list.

Though he can be briefly glimpsed in the Hardy Kruger vehicle Bachelor of Hearts (1958) and he appeared in a few TV projects – most notably playing the Mad Hatter for his Beyond The Fringe colleague Jonathan Miller in Alice In Wonderland (1966) – Cook arrived on the silver screen to considerable fanfare and in the most impressive of company. Directed by Bryan Forbes, The Wrong Box (also 1966) saw Pete and Dad cast as scheming brothers keen to get their hands on the proceeds from a tonnique, a scheme in which the spoils go to the last surviving participant.

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COCK-UPS AND CAMEOS
PETER COOK’S CONTRASTING CINEMA CAREER

DISASTER MOVIE: Peter Cook with long-time comedy partner Dudley Moore in The Hound of the Baskervilles (1978)
Based on a lesser work by Robert Louis Stevenson, The Wrong Box’s cast resembled a Who’s Who of British acting greats. Ralph Richardson, John Mills, Michael Caine, Peter Sellers, John Le Mesurier, Irene Handl, Leonard Rossiter – the biggest names of today and yesterday were on hand, as were a young Nicholas Parsons, a positively boyish Jeremy Lloyd and an uncomfortable looking Tony Hancock.

As for our heroes, it’s Dudley that appears more at home on screen while Pete looks more like a movie star. Little though there is to suggest that glittering film careers lay in wait, Columbia Pictures were sufficiently impressed to offer Cook and Moore a three-movie deal. Not only that but Singin’ In The Rain’s Stanley Donen had been in touch, desperate to work with the pair on the first of these projects.

Donen, a man who’d never before put out feelers in this manner, not even to Gene Kelly, was determined to collaborate with the current kings of British comedy. And the project? A fresh take on the Faust story was all the sense he could get out of Pete...

Had Peter and Dudley had their way, 1967’s Bedazzled would’ve been named after their co-star Raquel Welch – the tagline ‘Peter Cook and Dudley Moore in Raquel Welch’ had a certain ring to it. The story of a hapless burger flippin’ (guess who?), who sells his soul to the Devil (ditto) in the hope of winning the heart of his vapid co-worker (Eleanor Bron), Bedazzled represented Cook’s best shot at establishing himself in the world of cinema.

Like the great theatre and television comics of the past, he seemed to think he wouldn’t have made it until he’d proved himself on film. To this end, he took sole writing credit (Dudley had to make do with a ‘story by’ disclaimer) and gave himself every opportunity to shine on screen – in the guise of pop star Drimbble Wedge, he’s the acme of cool and every bit as pretty as his female co-stars.

But while the best set-pieces and the finest lines are Cook’s (“You realise suicide’s a criminal offence. In less enlightened times they’d have hung you for it”), Bedazzled sees him acted off the screen by Dad.

Perhaps because he has less to work with, Moore has to give more of himself in order to win the sympathy of both the woman of his dream and the audience. A movie star he ain’t – not yet, at least – but he seems far more engaged with the material, a strange occurrence given that so little of it was his.

A cult success rather than the box-office smash Stanley Donen was hoping for, Bedazzled was where Cook and Moore’s movie careers began to diverge. Sure they’d trot out their upper-class twits act for Monte Carlo Or Bust! (1969) and they’d guest star in the Spike Milligan-scripted The Bed Sitting Room (also 1969). But while Moore already had a solo hit to his name – 1968’s 39 Is A Dangerous Age, Cynthia – Cook would follow up a dire straight turn in A Dandy In Aspic (also 1968) with the project that killed his movie star dream stone dead.

The Rise And Rise Of Michael Rimmer (1970) was the brainchild of David Frost, the man whom, depending on your point of view, rose to high estate through homaging to Peter Cook or by flat-out
stealing his act. For while Pete, Dud and the rest of the Beyond the Fringe team were going down a storm on Broadway, Frost – in the year below Cook at Cambridge – established himself as the king of British satire via That Was the Week That Was.

Given the somewhat fraught nature of their relationship, it was rather amusing that Frost not only hired Cook to star in Michael Rimmer but also asked him to contribute to the script – his co-writers included two of his co-stars, John Cleese and Graham Chapman.

In return for such generosity, Cook proceeded to turn the title character – an opinion pollster who rises without trace to become Britain’s first dictator – into a parody of Frost. Apparently the future Sir David didn’t care much for Cook mimicking his catchphrases and bearing his trademark clipboard. The critics, meanwhile, didn’t care for the fact that, though Cook looked every part the movie star, he didn’t appear to have a clue how to act on the big screen.

“I think he was a strange actor,” Moore remarked in the wake of Cook’s death. “He was very awkward with other people’s lines.” Since Cook had a hand in writing Michael Rimmer, you might assume this ensured a quality performance. But as Mel Smith observed, “Pete was doing the lines and getting through the plot but he always seemed slightly removed from the movie. It was like a Brechtian technique all of its own. It’s a very unusual technique to watch on film – it’s not a film acting technique at all.”

Indeed it isn’t and whatever the movie’s merits, you can’t escape the feeling that Michael Rimmer would’ve been a more accessible film had Cleese or Chapman played the title role. Either way, the short and not terribly happy era of Peter Cook: Movie Star was over.

So began his career in movie cameos. Having both nurtured the talent of Barry Humphries and co-created the character for Private Eye, it’s perhaps no great surprise that Cook is actually rather good in The Adventures of Barry McKenzie (1972) – according to Humphries, the credit for Cook’s performance is attributable to his being a**hole throughout. He was similarly refreshed throughout the years of touring Behind the Fringe Good Evening with Dud, during which he found time to appear in the John Candy kidnap comedy Find the Lady (1976).

His alcoholism having compromised their working relationship, Cook bade farewell to Moore via the bizarre medium of 1978’s The Hound of the Baskervilles in which they play Holmes and Watson respectively, while former Andy Warhol cohort Paul Morrissey holds the reins. Made stranger still by the director’s insistence that Pete and Dud re-enact classic sketches like One Leg Too Few,

COMEDY GOLD:
1 Peter Cook, left, with Jonathan Miller, Dudley Moore and Alan Bennett in a sketch from their hugely-successful revue show Beyond the Fringe (1964)
   Photo: Getty Images
2 Poster for Find the Lady (1976) in which Cook appeared alongside John Candy
   Photo: IMDB
3 Whoops Apocalypse (1986) was one of the later highlights of Cook’s big-screen career
   Photo: IMDB
4 Cook in The Princess Bride (1987)
   Photo: IMDB
5 Poster for Bedazzled (1967)
   Photo: IMDB

Baskervilles was considered by co-star Kenneth Williams to be the worst film ever made. He had a point.

The following year, Cook and Moore recorded Derek and Clive Get the Horn, a fantastically foul-mouthed concert movie, albeit one whose audience comprises Richard Branson, Cook’s pregnant second wife Judy, Highlander director Russell Mulcahy and an inflatable woman. Moore would then jet off to Hollywood and bona fide movie stardom. Peter, meanwhile, headed back to Hampstead and a fresh round of minor roles in films either underwhelming – the 1983 Graham Chapman vehicle Yellowbeard – and utterly appalling – 1984’s Supergirl.

By now it was quite clear that, though he couldn’t carry a film, Cook was good value as a performer if you needed him for just a couple of scenes. Besides fun turns as John Watson’s publisher in Without a Clue (1986) and the speech-impeded preacher in The Princess Bride (1987) – “Mawage is wat brings us together today” – Cook proved particularly superb in Whoops Apocalypse (1986) playing Sir Mortimer Chris, a prime minister convinced unemployment is caused by pixies.

What was also now evident was that Cook wasn’t quite as flush as he used to be. According to Harry Thompson’s excellent Cook biography, the mid-to-late 1980s saw him draw a salary from Private Eye for the first time since taking over the magazine. Penury might also account for our man showing up in turkeys like Randal Kleiser’s Getting It Right and the Jerry Lewis biopic Great Balls of Fire! (both 1989).

Cook’s movie career ended on something of a high, though. In Black Beauty (1994), he looks every bit to the manor born as Lord Wexmirle. That Lady Wexmirle was played by his old friend and Bedazzled co-star Eleanor Bron made this farewell to film fonder still.

Of course, a polite cameo can’t compensate for the fact that Cook left us far too early. What can be said about his life on screen is that, rather like his hero Elvis Presley, the fact he found the time to appear in so many pictures is amazing given that movies were by no means his principal concern.

Speaking of Presley, Cook also fancied himself a singer and insisted that each episode of his short-lived chat show Where Do I Sit? end with him belting out a number. As you might have guessed, as a singer, Cook made a bloody fantastic actor, but that’s not really the point.

Movies – like music – were something he clearly enjoyed. Enjoying his enjoyment is a gift that will outlive us all.

In closing then, Peter Cook as movie actor was far from a maverick made in heaven. Still, it wasn’t the worst job that he ever had...
Edinburgh
A CITY IN MUSIC

SOPHIA DEBOICK
on the sounds of the Scottish capital

In the 17th century, Scotland rediscovered itself, and Edinburgh was the centre of that rediscovery. The 1758 publication of A Treatise of Human Nature, by the city’s own David Hume heralded the beginning of the Scottish Enlightenment and by the end of the century Benjamin Franklin would single out the city as one of intellectual rigour to the point of querulousness: “Persons of good sense... seldom fall into [disputation], except lawyers, university men, and men of all sorts that have been bred at Edinburgh.”

But logic and debate would be met by the Romantic impulse, and Edinburgh’s cultural life would be among the richest in northern Europe, the landscape and folk tradition of the Highlands beyond providing constant inspiration and giving rise to a deep sense of the epic and the mystical that would run throughout the history of Scottish music.

Elegant Edinburgh became the epicentre of the preservation of Scottish musical tradition from the days of Allan Ramsay, notably the creator of the first circulating library in Britain, but also publisher of The Tea Table Miscellany: A Collection of Choice Songs Scots and English (1723).

While 18th and 19th century efforts to preserve folk tradition in song were sometimes of dubious authenticity – as the allegedly ancient and unchanging was reshaped according to urban tastes – in this city a passion for Scottish culture burned with near religious fervour, and in the following decades, the music coming out of Edinburgh still bore the marks of a tradition for wonder and deep emotion, even as the summer Edinburgh Festival, Hogmanay and Military Tattoo have become massive, music-studded celebrations of international fame.

The bagpipe as we know it has been accepted in recent years of being an invented tradition, arising from a Romantic fascination with Highland culture as the foundation of the Scottish national character and a Victorian vogue for all things Caledonian. Yet the Great Highland bagpipe – the instrument as popularly recognisable today – was being manufactured in Edinburgh more than 250 years ago.

From the 1700s Hugh Robertson, a wood and ivory turner, was making bagpipes in his shop on Castlehill, while Donald MacDonald on adjacent Lawnmarket would be the foremost maker of the pipes in the early part of the 19th century.

While the association of piping with war went back to the Highland clans, the martial nature of the bagpipe came to its fullest expression in the 20th century with the founding of the Piobaireachd Society (piobairachd meaning the music unique to the Great Highland bagpipe) in Edinburgh in 1909 by a group of army officers, the nucleus from which the Army School of Piping would be formed shortly afterwards.

Today known as the Army School of Bagpipe Music and Highland Drums, it is located at Inchdrewer House, within Redford Barracks, and is one of the guardians of bagpipe music as a Scottish icon.

The Soul of Scotland:

1. Army pipers at Scotland’s School of Classic Bagpipe Playing at Edinburgh Castle, 1946

2. The Proclaimers, 1989

Now listen to the music...

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New European: Edinburgh

Featuring:

My Love Is Like a Red Red Rose
Eddi Reader
The John MacLean March
Hamish Henderson
Blackwaterside
Bert Jansch
Letter from America
The Proclaimers

Alloway on the West coast of Scotland, another Scottish icon – Robert Burns – was already a celebrity among Edinburgh’s society people when he went to the city in late 1770. The farmer-poet had championed the literati with his first edition of Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect, published that summer; and the second Edinburgh Edition would follow early the next year. It was during that initial visit, when he stayed for some of the time in a house on the site of Deacon Brodies Tavern near the top of the Royal Mile, that Burns’ contribution to the Scottish song tradition would be sealed.

It was while in Edinburgh that Burns met James Johnson, whose engraving workshop on Bell’s Wynd produced sheet music that he sold from a shop on Lawnmarket and who had already far advanced his plans for his publication of The Scots Musical Museum, a collection of traditional songs. Burns would become the virtual editor of five of the six volumes that followed, contributing around 160 songs of his own.

These included some of his best-known – Ae Fond Kiss, My Love Is Like a Red, Red Rose and Auld Lang Syne. Like many of Burns’ songs, Auld Lang Syne was one he did not claim as his – a version of it had been published decades before and Burns claimed his lyrics came from an old man he heard singing it in the street. Since Burns’ song work consisted of lovingly patching up and writing words to old airs, the results bore the marks of the time.

The 114 songs Burns contributed to George Thomson’s A Select Collection of Original Scottish Airs for the Voice from 1783 onwards would be even more questionably “authentic”, constrained by the taste of Edinburgh’s cultural elite for a sanitised folk culture (Thomson, after all, enlisted Haydn and Beethoven to write some of these “Scottish” tunes). As Burns sat working down in Dumfries, Edinburgh was still exerting its influence on his work.

Early in the next century, one of Edinburgh’s most famous sons, Walter Scott, would also make large contributions to the tradition of the Scottish folk song which would be shaped by the fashions among the international cultural aristocracy, from his anthology of ballads, Minstrelsy of the Scottish Border (1802), to writing the texts for three of Beethoven’s Twenty-five Scottish Songs (1818) and his The Lady of the Lake being set to music by Schubert and Rossini.

Over a century later, another great collector of songs, adoptive Edinburgher Hamish Henderson, would emerge. A man who wandered far from his native land during an orphaned youth and incredible wartime career in intelligence, he was nonetheless always under Scotland’s spell. After the war, he found an almost sacred vocation to document the folk music of Scotland and in 1951 he established the School of Scottish Studies at the University of Edinburgh with the Gaelic scholar Calum Maclean, becoming a
fixture of its George Square premises for decades.
1951 would be a pivotal year for Henderson, as he also founded the Scottish People’s Festival, a short-lived, radical alternative to the official festival, and acted as guide to ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax as he toured Scotland making recordings. Lomax would claim “the Scots have the finest folk tradition in the British Isles”, saying its songs were “among the noblest folk tunes of western Europe”, and he recorded in Edinburgh that important year, capturing the famed Amby School of Piping-trained piper John Burgess, as well as Henderson himself, singing his John Maclean March.
Henderson was famous for holding court at Sandy Bell’s bar, a stone’s throw from Greyfriars churchyard, and while Henderson’s championing of Scottish folk tradition had a huge effect on Scottish nationalism, it also catalysed the folk revival that Sandy Bell’s would be a hub for.

Indeed, in the mid-1960s Edinburgh was home to a network of folk clubs where traditional Scottish music would be melded with blues and American folk during some of the most exciting years of musical history.

The Howff club, opposite St Giles’ Cathedral, was known for bringing influential international artists to Scotland, including Brownie McGhee, Sonny Terry and Pete Seeger, while the Victorian pub the Waverley, on the Old Town’s St Mary’s Street, had a thriving programme of performances from the British Isles. Acts from beyond the city – Glaswegian Billy Connolly and Irish acts the Clancy Brothers and the Dubliners, were joined at the Waverley by Edinburgh-raised Burt Jansch and the Incredible String Band (original members Robin Williamson and Clive Palmer shared a flat on West Nicolson Street, off George Square), who would exert a subtle but deep influence on British music.

Originally a duo, the Incredible String Band’s Williamson and Palmer often played the low-key Crown Bar on Lothian Street, but when they added Mike Heron to the band in 1965 and released their eponymous debut the following year, they caused a critical stir and would be claimed as an influence on everyone from the Beatles to the Stones. Meanwhile, Jansch would find his songs ‘repurposed’ by some of the most revered names in rock – his Blackwaterside bore enough of a resemblance to Led Zeppelin’s Black Mountain Side that legal action followed, while his Needle of Death was uncannily similar to Neil Young’s Ambulance Blues.

While in the 1970s the tartan-draped, teen-baiting pop of the Bay City Rollers was, for better or worse, Edinburgh’s biggest musical export, in the following decade a sound rooted in the folk tradition emerged to chart success.

The pan-Celtic ‘Big Music’ of the mid-1980s was no better represented than by The Waterboys’ The Whole of the Moon, a modest Top 30 on its original 1985 release and a transatlantic smash on re-release in 1981. Mystical and achingly romantic, its triumphant kitsch was matched only by The Proclaimers’ debut Letter From America (1987), cinematic in its evocation of the emigration of Scots during the Highland Clearances and since: “All the blood that flowed away/ Across the ocean to the second chance.”

Folk authenticity is one thing, but in these hits the epic in the soul of Scotland was reflected with rare perfection.

GIVING UP HOPE

Quite possibly in response to the vacancy of the times in which we live, the National Theatre seems to have adopted a policy of staging very long, cerebral and earnest productions. Inza Ellam’s adaptation of Chekov’s Three Sisters – running three and a quarter hours – is a prime example.

Ellam has relocated the story from provincial Russia at the turn of the century before last and plonked it down in Nigeria between 1967 and 1970 during Biafra’s attempted secession. An interesting conceit, but I fear not one that can be altogether sustained. I’ve no doubt that Chekov, who wrote this play in 1900, would find it perplexing.

I don’t say that Ellam hasn’t got some interesting points to make about British neocolonialism, but it would have been a lot more straightforward, if not also honest, to have just started a new play from scratch than to try to weld all his ideas on to an existing classic. He may say it’s a “new play” that he has written “after Chekov”, but it feels as if he just hasn’t the courage of his own convictions to do his own play.

The setting is a village in Owerri, where three sisters, sitting on the porch of their home, think back longingly to their halcyon days in Lagos. The sisters are pretty much the same as the sisters in the original. There’s Lolo, the teacher; played by Sarah Niles; Nne (Natalie Simpson), the married middle sister who is engaged in an affair with a military commander; and Udo, (Rachael Ofiori), who is the youngest and slowly becoming reconciled to never fulfilling her potential.

A lot of the friction of the original was about social class, but it is now about tribal hostility. The failure of Nne’s marriage is now down to the fact it was arranged in accordance with tribal tradition when she was 12. It may all be very clever, but it feels a little for the sake of being clever.

All of the conflict and violence that inevitably comes with the setting is hardly in keeping with the spirit of Chekov. He was famous for writing plays in which not a lot happens but a sense of despair gradually descends upon his characters.

In Nadia Fall’s production, the focus is less on the characters and the mood than all the stuff that is happening. The acting is uniformly excellent and Katrina Lindsay’s sets and costumes are impressive, but ultimately it’s the idea behind it all that just isn’t strong enough.

I might add, too, in these bleak times, the National Theatre should be in the business at least just occasionally of instilling spirit and hope in the citizens of a largely disillusioned and demoralised capital. This was clearly never going to do that. I look ahead to the productions being staged in the New Year and I see no grounds for optimism.

Opening towards the end of January is a show called Death of England.
A nostalgic flick through an old childhood favourite leads **Charlie Connelly** on a very unexpected journey.

I was going to bring you a column about escapism this week. Talk about some of the books I read over the holiday to help take my mind off the roar of the wind in my ears as this handset we’re on careers unstoppable towards the gateway, flame-locked gates of hell. I had it all mapped out, starting with a book I picked off the shelf at my mum’s that I was obsessed with as a child, moving on to a couple of amusing obscurities and ending up at some weirdness from the 18th century I’d found, all wrapped up in witty quips and a fair bit of **well—if you think that’s nuts—what about this—is government eh?** exasperation to ease us all into a year already promising to tank for progressives before January is out.

The book I was obsessed with as a child is called *Orrible Murder: Victorian Crime and Passion* by Leonard de Vries. Published in 1970, it’s a compilation of some of the more lurid tales that appeared in the *Illustrated Police News*, a scandal sheet of a newspaper that appeared during the second half of the 19th century, complete with the occasionally gruesome line-drawn illustrations that illuminated *Ipswich's* lascivious descriptions of Victorian murders, suicides and dreadful accidents.

The book opens with “A sanctimonious scoundrel murders his own child” and ends at “Suicide from Waterloo Bridge”, arriving there via “Horrible scenes at a wake”, “Cat’s meat man attacked by dogs”, “Suicide of a butcher’s wife at Bolton”, “Mysterious death at Pengo” and all points in between.

As a boy I’d experience an illicit thrill from leafing through *Orrible Murder*. It was a different kind of illicit thrill from the one prompted by Ronnie Barker’s *Book of Bathing Beauties* on the next shelf up but was illicitly thrilling nonetheless. I’d not looked at the book in years until Christmas when I found myself transported back first to my childhood and then on to Victorian Britain, where almost every day it seemed there was a baby burning fire or a man on a train having his throat slashed by a razor-wielding maniac or some poor, wronged domestic servant throwing herself off a bridge with the back of her hand to her brow and her sad eyes raised to the heavens.

As escapism goes it’s probably not the first thing that would come to mind in the current climate but it served at least to divert us from the maelstrom of disaster that’s blowing a hole through the nation with more ferocity than ever before. Indeed, with its tales of unrelenting poverty and senseless acts of cruelty *Orrible Murder* is almost too close to the world in which we find ourselves today to count as escapism, and there, I thought, cracking my knuckles and waggling my fingers, is my opening to a piece about escapism.

I gave the author a cursory Google in case there was a little snippet from which I could wring a tortuous pun or smug aside. And that’s when everything changed.

No more would this be a piece about escapism, no more would it descend into book-based mockery about the political nightmare prompted by the last days of 2019. Indeed, once I’d looked past the dust jacket cadavers, accidents and the girl eaten alive by rats I even found myself experiencing something that’s been wholly unfamiliar in recent months: hope.

A book of macabre news stories from 150 years ago accompanied by grisly drawings might seem an odd stepping stone to tangible hope but that’s what happened when I went beyond the book to learn about its Dutch author Leonard de Vries.

According to the back flap of *Orrible Murder de Vries’* other titles included *Panorama: 1842–65*, a selection of stories culled from the *Illustrated London News*, and a compendium of Victorian newspaper advertisements. There’s also mention of anthologies of children’s stories and that his interests included “playing the violin, baroque music, mountain climbing, medieval painting, primitive wood sculpture, 19th century illustrated magazines and collecting cylinders for his old Edison phonographs”. An amiable sounding old eccentric, I thought. But no. There was much more to it than that.

Leonard de Vries was born in Java shortly after the end of the First World War. His father Solomon was a journalist posted to what was then the Dutch East Indies, the family moving back to the Netherlands when Leonard was a small boy where he soon became fascinated by science and technology.

“In 1929 when I was about ten years old my parents took me to visit the Kootwijk radio broadcasting station,” he recalled. “I was very impressed by the transmitter and the high masts and that’s how I first came into contact with technology.”

In 1937, when he was 17, de Vries wrote a school essay about the then fledgling science of television. He was disappointed to only scrape a pass but when his father read the essay he suggested sending it to a magazine, which led not only to the piece being published but a regular column writing about radio technology.

On leaving school he began training as a laboratory technician at an oil company but the scheme was discontinued at the outbreak of the Second World War. De Vries then filled his days writing a practical guide to building and maintaining a radio that was published in 1940 as *The Boys’ Radio Book*, a publication that would become an indespensible instruction manual during the conflict used by everyone from the Dutch resistance to ordinary people trying to hear news of the war from somewhere other than German propaganda stations.

In 1942 the occupying German forces stepped up their oppression of Dutch Jews. When his family was interned during a round-up in Amsterdam de Vries, who happened to be away at the time, was forced into hiding. His parents, brothers and sisters would all die at the Sobibor concentration camp in May 1943, leaving de Vries as the family’s only survivor.

He spent more than two years in hiding at an old country house in Brabant and once even had a gun pointed at his chest during a raid by the Wehrmacht. Fortunately for de Vries they were only interested in finding a pair of downed British pilots at large in the area rather than Jews on the run. That aside, confined to his hiding place for two years until the Allies arrived to liberate the Netherlands in 1944 de Vries retreated into his imagination. He scribbled away in notebooks, writing a novel set in less dangerous times about a group of youngsters who came together to explore and enjoy practical hobbies.

“Because I was writing so intensively and living in this kind of fantasy world the war passed by me almost unnoticed,” he said. The book was published in 1947 as *The Boys of the Hobby Club* and became an instant bestseller.

“What I had in mind when writing The Boys of the Hobby Club was that after the war we’d need somewhere set aside in all major towns and cities for young people to explore a range of activities,” he said. In the book the characters learned to work together and develop skills equipping them to make informed career choices further down the line.” Immediately de Vries began receiving letters from young people all over the Netherlands asking how they could turn the hobby club of his fiction into a reality. The author was delighted by the response and two years after the book appeared launched a magazine called *Hobby Club* to serve as a rallying point for interested youngsters. By 1950 hobby clubs had been established in 70 Dutch towns and cities and de Vries found himself at the head of a national movement.

By inspiring young people to be creative, cooperative and industrious de Vries made an incalculable contribution to a Dutch post-war recovery whose reverberations were felt across Europe. Out of the ruins came a harnessing of potential that produced engineers, technicians, photographers, marketing professionals and future business leaders. Clubs that began in back bedrooms, sheds and garages saw major Dutch companies like Philips becoming involved, helping out with equipment and inviting club branches to tour their facilities. De Vries’ vision was one based on co-operation and meritocracy. While the books – there was a string of *Hobby Club* novels throughout the 1950s – were old-fashioned by today’s standards, with the practical and technical activities aimed squarely at boys, there was a real sense of youth binding together for the common good and a brighter future.
At the end of the first novel de Vries set out some of what he felt his Hobby Club kids had achieved.

“Speaking in public, bearing responsibility, designing and carrying out plans, organizing, making publicity material, doing the accounts and writing articles,” he wrote. “Moreover they gain human awareness and technical knowledge, the best expressions of human reason and learn an appreciation of others’ contributions, all factors that are of utmost importance for spiritual education.”

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**FIVE GREAT BOOKS COMING IN 2020**

**THE MIRROR & THE LIGHT**

Hilary Mantel (Fourth Estate, £25)

Eight years after *Bring Up the Bodies* Mantel finally completes her trilogy that began with *Wolf Hall*. *The Mirror & the Light* picks up the story of Thomas Cromwell after the execution of Anne Boleyn as he seeks to secure his own influence at the heart of Henry VIII’s English court. One of the most anticipated books of the year, could this complete a hat-trick of Booker wins for Mantel?

**ACTRESS**

Anne Enright (Jonathan Cape, £16.99)

Enright’s seventh novel and the first since 2015’s *The Green Road* is an account of the life of Irish actress Katherine O’Dee narrated by her daughter Norah and told through the prism of their relationship. From the glamour of post-war America to the shabbiness of Dublin in the 1970s, this promises to be a thought-provoking novel about fame, sexual power and the unsettling truths that underpin every family. Coming in February.

**WINTERING**

Katherine May (Rider, £14.99)

Published early next month, landscape-based memoir recounts May’s year-long journey through winter, where she found strength and inspiration at a time when her life felt frozen. *Wintering* is a journal of the healing power of nature and how we can learn to appreciate long periods in our lives before the ushering in of a new season.

**A LONG PETAL OF THE SEA**

Isabel Allende (Bloomsbury, £16.99)

Arriving on January 21, Allende’s new novel begins during the Spanish Civil War with the forced exile from Barcelona of a doctor and his pianist sister-in-law and their journey on a refugee ship for Chile chartered by Pablo Neruda. This sprawling novel spans four generations and showcases Allende at her very best.

**WEATHER**

Jenny Offill (Granta, £12.99)

Offill’s 2014 novel *Dept. of Speculation* was a towering achievement and this long awaited follow up promises to be widely and well-reviewed. Lizzie is a librarian at the university where she had been forced to drop out as a student to help her brother with his addiction issues. When her old tutor asks her to help answer the mail for her doom-laden global affairs podcast it opens up all sorts of memories and repressed trauma. Published in February.

“Status, origin and political ideology play no role with us. What matters is togetherness and companionship.”

As the Netherlands staged a remarkable post-war social and economic recovery the hobby clubs became victims of their own success. Recovery induced prosperity and prosperity meant the make-do-and-mend culture that underpinned the clubs no longer applied: kids could just have a brand new radio rather than build one of their own from spare parts. The last hobby club just about limped into the 1970s but by then de Vries was a literary industry, writing books that broke down scientific and technical projects and discoveries into language anyone could understand and making knowledge, from basic wireless sets to nuclear fusion, accessible to anyone.

A great polymath, de Vries had a burning enthusiasm that lasted until his death in Amsterdam in 2002. He wrote more than 50 books from popular technical guides to anthologies of children’s literature to explorations of Victorian erotica, not to mention the scrapbook of human depravity that had me spellbound as a small boy.

He was 23 years old when his entire family was wiped out. He was both a Holocaust survivor and a Holocaust orphan, a burden that fired a passion for life and a determination to wring the best out of it for the good of all, whatever their background or politics. Two years in hiding, knowing the knock of discovery could come at any moment and lead to almost certain death, gave de Vries a determination to make the most of the rest of his life. He also had a passion for knowledge for knowledge’s sake whether that be teaching youngsters about diamonds or unearthing advertisements for bizarre Victorian household contraptions: de Vries saw both as equally important contributions to making the world a better place. After all that time spent in confined silence it’s probably no coincidence that radio became his chief passion, a medium that knows no boundaries and thrives on the freedom of the air.

“Wireless creates friendships between all parts of the world,” he wrote, “countless small, modern expeditions that take the romance of voyages of discovery and give them a new life.”

Friendship, romance, discovery: that’s how a book of gruesome Victoriana ended up leading me away from a desire to escape current affairs to a feeling that even at the darkest times there is still every reason to hope, every reason to remain optimistic about the future.
EUROFILE  POEM AND PUZZLES

a poem for europe

CLAIRE LYNN teaches English and Creative Writing around Northumberland. Her poems have been published in Virago anthology The Nerve, the Bridport Prize anthology (1999), the Ver Prize anthology (2017), the Wasafiri New Writing Prize 2017, Marsden the Poetry Village Anthology 2019 and various magazines.

Tell Me Lies about Brexit
after Adrian Mitchell

I was run over by a bus one day
Ever since the accident I’ve thought this way
So fill my skull with porridge;
Tell me lies about Brexit.

Saw a promise of millions for the NHS
Never imagined it could lead to this mess
So fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

The Will of the People must be obeyed
Not questioned, not analysed, never betrayed
So fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

We’ll trade with the world and Take Back Control
Or is that our children’s future you don’t see?
So tow my country westward
Fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

Free from those shackles, we’ll make better law
On workers’ rights, finance, farming and more
So wash my food with chlorine
Tell my country westward
Fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

With Dunkirk spirit we’ve fought this new fight
WHO could have guessed we’d unleash the Far Right?
So bind my hands with burning
Wash my food with chlorine
Tell my country westward
Fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

You put your hard border in, take your hard border out
You worry you’ve been DUP’d and you turn it inside-out
This way, that way, forwards backwards, over the Irish Sea
Duty-free rum to gild my tongue and that’s the lie for me
So choke my blood with toxins
Bind my hands with burning
Wash my food with chlorine
Tell my country westward
Fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

A clean break now will heal this breach
And we’ll live and prosper each and each
So blind my eyes with duct tape
Choke my blood with toxins
Bind my hands with burning
Wash my food with chlorine
Tell my country westward
Fill my skull with porridge
Stuff my ears with bullshit
Wait my nose with true-blue Borage
Tell me lies about Brexit.

Cryptic 1

Across
3. The one who should get the post (9)
8. A bit of cover necessary for a bird (4)
9. Drawing of doorway with beam inside (9)
10. A camera attachment for the television enthusiast (6)
11. A profession of faith, beginning, I believe (5)
14. Make a cut – it’s almost serious (5)
15. Timber trade (4)
16. Clean up a gambling enterprise (5)
18. Make a discovery – made to pay the penalty, we hear (4)
20. Tania changes her name (5)
21. By which one breathes in water – small quantities (5)
24. It’s a dreadful shame about one club (6)
25. At-home sometimes affected by interference (9)
26. Clothes fasteners belonging to Margaret (7)
27. Speed of departures? (5–4)

Down
1. Doesn’t continue signs of the fall (6,3)
2. Having a deadening effect is frightening (9)
4. Where the drought comes from – put up the screen (4)
5. Paddle, part of the turbine (5)
6. The main colour has become scorched (6)
7. The Spanish having an air of vivacity (4)
9. Makes close observations of noblemen (5)
11. They operate ships for one trip, we hear (5)
12. Pleased to be carrying little weight in exploit (9)
13. Uncomfortable when not standing at attention (3–2–4)
17. Opening up an unbeliever (5)
19. Amuse Diana Green (6)
22. Not so punctual (5)
23. Before the start of the entertainment the girl is present (4)
24. The kind of point for an old assembly (4)

Cryptic 2

Across
1. Harmony current with 100 or 500 (6)
4. The cobbler is working finally (2,4)
9. Incidental to growth in the darkroom (13)
10. Blow up general (7)
11. Made a proposal full of emotion (5)
12. Cat in caper (5)
14. Many are beaten, but it was a near thing (5)
18. Number one has points – it’s sound (5)
19. Shyness apparently makes one wait again (7)
21. Possibly a shocking, boring tool to use? (8,5)
22. It offers interest by instalments (6)
23. The entire property taken in the form of complete groups (6)

Down
1. He was warned to be different (6)
2. Presumably one can put a polite construction on his design (5,8)
3. Is his government on straight lines? (5)
5. Warm bit of weather Malta has (7)
6. Actual engagement marked by no passive liturgy (6,7)
7. Guided also round Spanish town (6)
8. Hurry Veronica isn’t well (5)
13. In it are possibly no movements (7)
15. If not the United Nations won’t get so much (6)
16. Drill a body of attendants (5)
17. The parcel lost contains musical instruments (6)
20. They cannot be taken with impartiality (5)

Cryptic crosswords sponsored by www.dormontestate.com
Sudoku — medium 1

5 2 1 3
9 2 3 4
4 6 7 1
1 7 2 5
9 6 5 4
5 1 8 2
8 6 9 1

Sudoku — medium 2

8 3 7 9 5
4 9 5 8
6 2 3 5 7
8 6 7 9 1
5 7 2 1 4
7 1 3 4 5

Sudoku — hard 1

4 8 9 3
7 6 2 5
9 1 2 8
4 3 5 8
7 2 5 6
3 8 9 1
9 1 3 4
6 7 1 2

Sudoku — hard 2

2 8 1 9 6
3 5 7 8 6
4 9 5 2 8
3 8 9 1 4
7 4 1 6 9
8 3 9 2 1
7 1 9 6 2

Numberfit

Fit the listed numbers into each grid.

Numberfit 1
2 digits: 33 – 95
4 digits: 23536 – 324335 – 533425 – 545436

Numberfit 2
4 digits: 4255 – 5369 – 8626 – 9415
5 digits: 43825 – 72211
7 digits: 123992 – 1239420 – 1252417 – 2861541
9 digits: 286659721 – 287674279 – 387665972

MODERN GREEK’S ISLAND STORY

PETER TRUDGILL on the archipelago which helped develop the language now spoken in Greece.

Great Britain started decolonising its imperial possessions in a significant way in 1947, when British India became the two independent states of India and Pakistan. But there is a very interesting example of British decolonisation which comes from well before that time.

In 1864, the Ionian Islands were voluntarily transferred out of British control to the new Greek state, which had been founded in 1830. The islands which were transferred in this way were Kerkira (Corfu in English), Paxi (sometimes Paxos in English), Lefkáda (Lefkada), Ithaki (Ithaca), Kefalonia (Cephalonia or Kefallinia), Zákynthos (Zante) and Kythira (Cythira).

Kythira lies off the south coast of the Peloponnese in the Greek mainland and Crete, but the other islands are all situated off the west coast of Greece in the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy. These seven islands are also sometimes known collectively as the Heptanese or Heptanesian Islands, from the Ancient Greek ἑπτάνησις, ‘seven’ and ἀνήσις, ‘island’. Unlike the rest of Greece, the different Ionian Islands spent very little time – or none at all – as part of the Turkish Ottoman empire, and instead fell mostly under the control of the Venetian Republic until the end of the 18th century when Venice was overrun by Napoleon, pictured, and the Ionian Islands became French possessions.

With the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, the Treaty of Paris placed the islands under the protection of Great Britain. The period during which the Ionian Islands constituted a kind of British colony thus lasted for nearly 50 years – which was long enough for the game of cricket to establish something of a foothold on Corfu.

These islands, then, have had a rather different history from most other areas of Greece, with considerable Italian influence and a traditionally much greater cultural orientation towards western Europe. In the struggle for Greek independence from the Ottoman empire, the quasi-independence of the Ionian Islands under Britain was very influential in showing that Greeks could in principle be free, and that Greeks were very capable of governing themselves.

The linguistic relevance of these islands has to do with the role they played in the development of the modern Greek language. In Greece, under the rule of the Turks starting in the 1400s, contemporary Greek rapidly lost its status and came to be confined almost entirely to its spoken form.

In all types of writing, either Turkish was used, or else an archaic, elitist and limited mediaeval type of Greek which had little connection to the everyday spoken language of ordinary people.

In the run-up to independence, however; activists started looking for ways to develop written Modern Greek so that the newly independent nation could have its own standard language like the nation states of western Europe. There were all sorts of crackpot ideas about this, such as the suggestion that people should go back to writing Ancient Greek (imagine if someone had suggested that English speakers should start writing in Anglo-Saxon).

The only sensible proposal was that the language question should be solved by simply using a written version of everyday spoken Greek, as in western European countries. This is what eventually happened, although it took until the 1870s to get the idea sorted out properly. But the movement in favour of this proposal was greatly strengthened by the fact that poets in the Ionian islands of western Greece, which had remained out of Turkish control, had already been writing in their own modern dialect for a considerable time.

The first attempt at developing a vernacular-based Greek standard language came in 1814, proposed by the scholar Yannis Vilars from Ioannina on the Greek mainland far from Corfu, who wrote a Romain (Greek) Grammar in which he suggested norms for spelling and grammar based on spoken dialects. This was the forerunner of what was later called Demotic Greek, which is the basis of today’s Modern Standard Greek.

QUASI

Pronounced “kwah-zi”, or “kwah-zee”, this was originally Latin for “as if”, from quam, ‘as’ plus si, ‘if’. Since the 1600s it has been used in English as a prefix with the rather complex meaning ‘resembling but not really the same’. Quasi-independence means ‘having some but not all the properties of independence’.
NEED FOR SPEED:
Maria Teresa de Filippis, the first female to compete in Formula One, in her Maserati at Silverstone, 1959.

Photo: Getty Images
GREAT LIVES
EUROFILE

GREAT EUROPEAN LIVES

BY CHARLIE CONNELLY

MARI A TERESA DE FILIPPI

NOVEMBER 11, 1926 – JANUARY 8, 2016

Privilege can have drawbacks. Take being the youngest of five children in a wealthy family whose vast fortune is built partly on being members of the aristocracy and partly on success in industry. The top jobs are long gone to your elder siblings by the time you’re out of short trousers. That’s just the way it works. If the youngest in this scenario happens to be a woman it’s worse, your destiny is even more stunted. A good marriage – in terms of marrying the ‘right’ person rather than it being a happy marriage – is about the best you can hope to achieve.

Maria Teresa de Filippis was the youngest of five siblings, the daughter of an Italian count who had made a fortune in engineering. She grew up at the sumptuous 18th century Palazzo Margrilli at the heart of a vast estate on the outskirts of Naples and enjoyed a childhood befitting her aristocratic status: Riding horses, playing tennis, attending balls and wintering in the most exclusive Alpine ski resorts. On the face of it that seemed to be the way she’d spend her life, the only interruptions being a strategically astute marriage and a few years of popping out her children.

But there was something in Maria Teresa de Filippis that meant this kind of quiet, pre-ordained life of groundhog luxury would never be for her.

The crucial moment came in her early twenties when two of her brothers teased her about her horse-riding, saying she’d never known real speed until she got behind the wheel of a sports car. Horses were girls’ stuff, they insisted, and her little sister was far too timid to know the genuine thrill of danger they felt behind the wheel of a car with a powerful engine.

Within weeks de Filippis had entered her first race, a 10km dash from Salerno to Cava di Tirreni that she won driving a souped-up Fiat 500. From there she became a regular fixture on Italian racing circuits, competing in everything from hill climbs to physically and mentally draining endurance races and even finishing second in the Italian national sports car championship in 1954.

Her talent and achievements soon brought her to the attention of Maserati who took her on as their test driver, spending her days throwing new Formula One cars around the company’s works track in preparation for use by the team’s ex-talismanic driver Juan Manuel Fangio. Fangio saw something in the lightning reflexes and daredevil attitude of the diminutive de Filippis – just 5ft 2in tall and nicknamed ‘Pilotino’, her driver’s seat required extra padding to help her reach the pedals – and went out of his way to advise and encourage her.

“He was like a father to me,” she recalled, “the one who taught me to think like a racing driver.”

The considered advice of a man who was arguably the greatest Grand Prix driver of all time didn’t always register, however; “You go too fast,” he always told me. “You take too many risks.”

He had a point. De Filippis could never be accused of lacking courage and she had the scars to prove it. She broke her shoulder after hitting a telegraph pole during a race in Argentina and once in Turin had to be rescued when she spun off the road and her car teetering over a sheer drop. She suffered permanent hearing damage as a result of a crash in Sardinia, yet her enthusiasm remained unimpaired.

Her passion for speed meant that by the mid-1950s she had built a formidable reputation through some remarkable driving. In 1958, for example, de Filippis competed in a sports car race ahead of the Grand Prix in her home city of Naples, the course passing through the familiar narrow streets around the seashore. Driving a Maserati 200S she was placed at the rear of the grid but somehow, on a wet day, she still managed to overtake opportunities, made her way through the field to finish second.

When Fangio withdrew from the sport after winning his fifth Formula One title in 1957 Maserati also retired its racing team from competition. Its drivers continued to race as individuals using the company’s cars, however, and in 1958 de Filippis was considered worthy of a crack at qualifying for the Monaco Grand Prix. She missed the cut by a shade under six seconds but a few weeks later qualified for the Belgian Grand Prix, becoming the first woman ever to compete in a Formula One race. Driving a Maserati 250F, the model that had served Fangio well she finished last but it was still a highly creditable achievement for a debutante when almost half the cars on the starting grid failed to finish at all. She took it in her stride, however.

“It was a fantastic experience but it didn’t feel like a big step up,” she said later. “I’d been driving cars with progressively bigger and bigger engines and in those days the top drivers took part in other events like hill climbing and endurance races, so I’d been competing against Formula One drivers right from the start.”

She missed out on the next Grand Prix in France, recalling that the French race director Toto Roche had scratched her from the list of entrants with the comment, “the only helmet such a beautiful woman should be wearing is found at the hairdresser’s”, but this was a surprisingly rare example of overt sexism faced by de Filippis during her career. Certainly the other drivers respected her obvious talent behind the wheel and the spectators adored her. When she’d finished second in that Naples race the crowd reacted as if she’d won.

She entered the Portuguese and Italian Grand Prix that season but failed to make the qualifying time for either, and the following season, 1959, entered the Monaco Grand Prix in a Porsche owned by her friend Jean Behra, narrowly missing the cut. She didn’t know it at the time but this would be her last appearance on a Grand Prix circuit.

Shortly after Monaco, de Filippis had been due to race at a sports car event in Berlin. Behra had just been fired by Ferrari when an argument with the team manager ended up with punches thrown so she gave her place to Behra in an effort to cheer him up. A few laps into the race on a rain-soaked track, Behra’s car skidded over the lip of a steep bank, threw the driver from the cockpit and slammed him into a flagpole, killing him instantly.

Coming less than a year after the death of her former fiancé Luigi Musso during the French Grand Prix, Behra’s death invoked a period of deep introspection for de Filippis. At 33 she was old enough to have lost that youthful sense of immortality and realised that it only took one patch of spilled oil or one split-second misjudgment to spell the end. She thought back to Fangio’s warnings, comments she’d taken as compliments at the time but in the light of recent tragedy took on a whole new meaning.

“I wasn’t frightened of speed and that’s not always a good thing,” she said. “I thought to myself, if I have no fear where do I end up? If I do not feel fear driving at 200kph where do I go from there?”

She spent that winter skiing and considering her future. Also on the slopes was Theodor Huscok, an Austrian chemical engineer with whom she fell immediately in love. De Filippis quit the track, married Huscok and for the next two decades concentrated on raising their daughter, not even visiting a race track.

“Too many friends had died,” she said in a 2006 interview. “There was a succession of them, Luigi Musso, Peter Collins, Alfonso de Portago, Mike Hawthorn, then Behra was killed in Berlin. That was the most tragic for me because it was in a race I should have been taking part in. So I didn’t go to the circuits any more. The following year I got married, then my daughter was born and family life became more important.”

Since de Filippis, only one woman has made it to the starting grid at a Formula One Grand Prix: her compatriot Letizia Lombardi who drove in a dozen races in the mid-1970s. Three others, Divna Galica, Desire Wilson and Giovanna Amati, have made it as far as the qualifying heats but so far only de Filippis and Lombardi have actually raced.

Interviewed shortly before her death de Filippis was asked whether she thought any other women might follow the pioneering trail she blazed.

“Yes, though there will always be only very few of them,” she said. “The physical strength needed in Formula One is not a feminine characteristic. Those ball necks, for instance. Not a pretty sight.”
WILL SELF

Multicultural Man ..
on St Kilda and synecdoches

Y
ears ago, when I was stopping for the winter in the
Orkneys, I became obsessed – after reading a book about
them – with the still more remote Hebridian archipelago
of St Kilda, and resolved to go there. Not an easy prospect: The
tiny group of cliff-built isles lies some 40 miles west of Lewis,
way out in the Atlantic. Permanent home now only to millions
of seafowl and thousands of Soay sheep, Kilda once sustained
a human community – one which, when its last surviving
elderly members were finally evacuated in the 1930s, had been
profoundly isolated for at least a millennium, if not more.
It was not until 15 years later that I embarked from Stornoway
on a 60ft ocean-going yacht crewed by a couple of hardy
Lewis men, that cruised down the east coast of the Long Isle,
then anchored for the night off of Leverburgh, before sailing
through the sound between Harris and North Uist out into the
open sea. It had been fairly blowy in the sound – but as the wind
picked up, and the skipper warned we might be “in for a bit of
a blow”, it occurred to me I’d never before been in seas this big,
in a boat this small.

We were out in the “bit of a blow” for around 10 hours, during
which the wins rose to a Force 11 on the Beaufort scale, and
we came within a couple of miles of our destination. Unable to
make landfall in Village Bay on St Kilda, due to the prevailing
winds, we eventually yawned back into more sheltered waters.
The “bit of a blow” had been such that one of our complement
– who’d worked on deep sea trawlers – told me later he’d felt
so violently, existentially nauseous he’d considered throwing
himself overboard.

I could identify. But I’d been perversely grateful for the
extreme sea sickness – because it somehow prevented me from
feeling utterly terrified, as the slim prow of the yacht sunk
depth down into the troughs between the waves, and these grey-
ghastly ramparts of water raised 20 and even 30 feet above the
deck. There was the nausus to act as a bizarre sort prophylactic
– and also the extreme beauty of the scene. During the peak of
the tempest, everything was both furiously in motion – an
ever-mutating fractal pattern of cloud, sea-spray and waves – while
at the same time being entirely static: a sea scene, caught by
my own inner Turner, who was clipped on alongside me to the
safety line.

Anyway, this experience returns to me whenever I hear
about migrants setting off in small boats to cross the
English Channel. We were five, in total, on a yacht
equipped with cabins and a galley, and crewed by some of
the finest seamen in the world – while 20 or more of them are
often crammed into a barely seaworthy dinghy, with room for a
quarter of their number. Embarking from the French coast by
night, I somehow doubt that the beauty of the lights coursing
through this, the busiest shipping lane in the world, counters
their acute fear: darkness, drowning... death – this is an all too
common sequence; whereas rescue, followed by asylum and a
new life remains a very remote prospect indeed.

GLIMPSE OF OUR FUTURE? A group of men on the archipelago
of St Kilda, c. 1880

Photo: Getty Images

But while the means of transit may be very different,
the similarities between St Kilda and Brexit Britain seem
inescapable. When I finally did reach the remote little
archipelago, I was only able to stay a couple of nights with
permission from the National (St) Trust – the body that, more
than any other, acts as the guardian of Britain’s physical
culture. The only exceptions to this draconian immigration
policy are the technicians and servicemen who run the missile-
tracking station on the main island of Hirta. There’s a sense
in which any island is a synecdoche – at once part of the main,
and a small-scale model of it; but in the case of Kilda/Britain
we should beware of becoming merely a triangulation point
for assessing the direction and range of missiles fired from
much larger landmasses, whether these be Benbecula or the
continental USA.

When the St Kildans asked to be taken off their remote
island by the Royal Navy, they were reduced to a pitiful
group of elderly men and women unable any longer to care
for themselves. What they had in abundance, of course, was
culture: a unique dialect of Gaelic, and a natural religion that
involved the quasi-worship of the multitudinous sea bird they’d
become dependent on for just about everything: using fulmar oil
as a catholicon, and the inverted carcasses of immature gannets
as a kind of shoe. During the final decades of the preceding
century, steamship companies further south would advertise
cruises to the islands as visits to ‘Britain’s Modern Primitives’.
I think it not implausible French, Belgian and Dutch tour
operators may soon be offering something similar; as our
population continues to age... and dwindle.

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