

Travel Notes

Compiled

By

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TRAVEL NOTES

To The Memory of
ETHEL SEWELL

With Thanks to
RO DALLOW, KEN HERRERA, CHERYL TURNER, KELLY SWAN.

INTRODUCTION

As I get older the desire to actually physically go anywhere decreases. The sheer thought of battling through an airport makes me feel tired. But my pleasure in reading *about* Other Places remains. So this book is a few random places which have caught my eye for various reasons, their names, their topicality, just a vague curiosity. But I hope something in the book will resonate with other armchair travelers.

J. L. Herrera
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“If our lives are dominated by a search for happiness, then perhaps few activities reveal as much about the dynamics of this quest – in all its ardour and paradoxes – than our travels. They express, however inarticulately, an understanding of what life might be about, outside the constraints of work and the struggle for survival. Yet rarely are they considered to present philosophical problems – that is, issues requiring thought beyond the practical. We are inundated with advice on *where* to travel to; we hear little of *why* and *how* we should go – though the art of travel seems naturally to sustain a number of questions neither so simple nor so trivial and whose study might in modest ways contribute to an understanding of what the Greek philosophers beautifully termed *eudaimonia* or human flourishing.”

Alain de Botton in *The Art of Travel*.

“The sole cause of man’s unhappiness is that he does not know how to stay quietly in his room.”

Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*.

“All of us have a landscape of the soul, places whose contours and resonances are etched into us and haunt us.”

Colm Tóibín in his essay ‘A Guest at the Feast’.

Travel Notes

A is for ARCHANGEL:

I wondered if the Soviets, committed to an atheistic view of the world, changed the name of Archangel when they gained power. The answer is no. Instead Stalin destroyed all the city's ancient churches. I'm sorry he didn't vent his displeasure in a simpler way—i.e. by changing the city's name. But as Jonathan Miles said in *St Petersburg*, "The state became intolerant of such a popular rival, and Stalin not only demolished churches, but also exiled or imprisoned priests." The city was named for the Archangel Michael who supposedly came there to war with and defeat the Devil. The *Britannica* says "Founded in 1584 as the fortified monastery of the archangel Michael, it was the principal port of Russia until the founding of St. Petersburg in 1703". For Michael, seen as the 'defender' of ancient Israel, it seems rather a long way from 'home'. But I found the Archangel Michael was the patron saint of Russia. He had churches, monasteries and cathedrals in widely spread places, many very beautiful, most of them destroyed under Stalin. What the Soviets hurriedly built, barracks, housing, roads and docks, are in many places including Archangel increasingly dilapidated.

Archangel gained some fame as one of the destinations, along with Murmansk, for the Arctic convoys in WW2 as it is the principal port on the White Sea. A White Sea at first sounds attractive, all those 'white horses' thundering on shore but I suspect it got its name from the icebergs floating in it.

"In the late sixteenth century, when Ivan the Terrible set up trade with England through the port he established at Arkhangelsk, the voyage to and from that often ice-bound haven involved perilous navigation round the far-flung North Cape of Norway. Aware that Russia had much to sell abroad – grain, hemp, hides, tar, timber, rhubarb, caviar and isinglass – Peter sought a more accessible sea port. His thoughts turned to the mouth of the short River Neva, which ran seventy kilometres through the sodden clays and marshy wilderness between Lake Ladoga and the Gulf of Finland. The choice was, in many respects, ridiculous. Nearly sixty degrees north, the site was – as the poet Anna Akhmatova later put it – 'particularly well suited to catastrophes'."

From *St Petersburg* by Jonathan Miles.

I discovered that an amazing hoard of silver was unearthed in a paddock near Archangel. When I went looking to know more about it I found that other hoards of silver have been unearthed in other places in Russia. The intriguing thing about the Archangel hoard is that, unlike many ancient treasures, it didn't come from a grave. The silver—many coins, along with jewelry such as bracelets, pendants and torques, and other objects useful and ornamental—ranges in dates from the 900s to the 1200s. The coins, sourced from many parts of Europe even from as far away as Britain in the time of King Canute, help to provide clues to how the silver came to the far north of Russia. Silver was traded for furs. So the hoard is believed to be the income of either a rich trader or a community of traders and in a world without safes or banks burying wealth was often seen as the safest option. Now it is timber and fish, rather than furs, which fuel the city's trade.

The Arctic Convoys brought war materials to the Soviet Union during WW2, sailing round the north of Scandinavia to reach Archangel. Stalin had had many of his most experienced military men executed in the Great Purges of 1936-38. He had turned the country's much reduced military might against his small neighbours, Poland, Finland, and the Baltic States, in the belief Hitler would leave the USSR alone. When he found Hitler had no intention of abiding by their Pact he demanded the Western Allies send him all kinds of material help. Many people, fully aware that Stalin would not have lifted a finger to help Hitler's victims if Hitler had not invaded the USSR in 1941, resisted the political and media campaign to re-position Stalin as their newest ally, a jovial moustachioed 'Uncle Joe'.

The Convoys took British and Canadian war materials via Iceland, and later from Scotland, round the north of Norway to the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel. The Imperial War Museums site said the Convoys took "Over four million tons of supplies to the Russians. As well as tanks and aircraft, these included less sensational but still vital items like trucks, tractors, telephone wire, railway engines and boots."

It was an horrendous voyage each time with German U Boats, gale force winds, icebergs, hurried loading and unloading, ships not built to withstand polar conditions. I knew I had long ago read a dramatic novel dealing with one such Convoy but I couldn't just call it to mind. A little bit of research reminded me that it was Alistair MacLean's 1955 novel *HMS Ulysses*. So was a copy still around?

Yes, indeed. Although he was in the Royal Navy in World War Two he was not part of an Arctic Convoy and needed to research the experiences of the men who had been. In the book he says of *HMS Ulysses*, "She was known and cherished by merchant seamen, by the men who sailed the bitter seas of the North, from St John's to Archangel, from the Shetlands to Jan Mayen, from Greenland to far reaches of Spitzbergen, remote on the edge of the world. Where there was danger, where there was death, there you might look to find the *Ulysses*, materializing wraith-like from a fog-bank, or just miraculously being there when the bleak twilight of an Arctic dawn brought with it only the threat, at times almost the certainty, of never seeing the next."

The Captain tells his crew, 'But first, gentlemen, the job on hand. It's the mixture as before – Murmansk again. We rendezvous at 1030 Wednesday, north of Iceland, with a convoy from Halifax. There are eighteen ships in this convoy – big and fast – all fifteen knots and above. Our third Fast Russian convoy, gentlemen – FR77, in case you want to tell your grandchildren about it,' he added dryly. 'These ships are carrying tanks, planes, aviation spirit and oil – nothing else.'

MacLean throws everything at his convoy, frostbite, air and U-boat attacks, terrible accidents, internal tensions, and horrific storms, but he has the ship's doctor Brooks tell the Admiral what the men he sends out on every mission face. 'Fear, suspense, hunger ... These are the things that break a man, that destroy him as surely as fire or steel or pestilence could. These are the killers.'

'But they are nothing, Admiral Starr, just nothing at all. They are only the henchmen, the outriders, you might call them, of the Three Horsemen of the Apocalypse – cold, lack of sleep, exhaustion.'

'Do you know what it's like up there, between Jan Mayen and Bear Island on a February night, Admiral Starr? Of course you don't. Do you know what it's like when

there's sixty degrees of frost in the Arctic – and it still doesn't freeze? Do you know what it's like when the wind, twenty degrees below zero, comes screaming off the Polar and Greenland ice-caps and slices through the thickest clothing like a scalpel? When there's five hundred tons of ice on the deck, where five minutes' direct exposure means frostbite, where the bows crash down into a trough and the spray hits you as solid ice, where even a torch battery dies out in the intense cold ... And do you know what it's like to go for days on end without sleep, for weeks with only two or three hours out of the twenty-four? Do you know the sensation, Admiral Starr? That fine-drawn feeling with every nerve in your body and cell in your brain stretched taut to breaking point, pushing you over the screaming edge of madness. Do you know it, Admiral Starr? It's the most exquisite agony in the world, and you'd sell your friends, your family, your hopes of immortality for the blessed privilege of closing your eyes and just letting go.'

Was Stalin grateful to the men of the convoys? Given his regular complaints that enough wasn't arriving ... But perhaps the ordinary people of Murmansk and Archangel hailed the ships as they arrived, understanding the terrors of each voyage ...

A is for ALHAMBRA:

I wasn't going to write about the Alhambra but I noticed that Washington Irving had written a book he called *Tales from the Alhambra* which I thought might be interesting. Irving became American Ambassador to Spain in 1829 and he took a trip south to the Alhambra during his time there. The first thing that struck me about his journey south was: "In ranging over these boundless wastes, the eye catches sight here and there of a straggling herd of cattle attended by a lonely herdsman, motionless as a statue with his long slender pike tapering up like a lance into the air or beholds a long train of mules slowly moving along the waste like a train of camels in the desert, or a single herdsman armed with blunderbuss and stiletto, and prowling over the plain. Thus the country, the habits, the very looks of the people, have something of the Arabian character. The general insecurity of the country is evinced in the universal use of weapons. The herdsman in the field, the shepherd in the plain, has his musket and his knife. The wealthy villager rarely ventures to the market-town without his *trabuco*, and perhaps a servant on foot with a blunderbuss on his shoulder, and the most petty journey is undertaken with the preparation of a warlike enterprise."

And of the Alhambra itself: "The Alhambra is an ancient fortress or castellated palace of the Moorish kings of Granada, where they held dominion over this their boasted terrestrial paradise and made their last stand for empire in Spain. The palace occupies but a portion of the fortress, the walls of which, studded with towers, stretch irregularly round the whole crest of a lofty hill that overlooks the city and forms a spur of the Sierra Nevada or Snowy Mountain.

"In the time of the Moors the fortress was capable of containing an army of forty thousand men within its precincts and served occasionally as a stronghold of the sovereigns against their rebellious subjects. After the kingdom had passed into the hands of the Christians, the Alhambra continued as a royal demesne and was occasionally inhabited by the Castilian monarchs."

"The fortress in fact was a little town of itself, having several streets of houses within its walls, together with a Franciscan convent and a parochial church." "The desertion of the court, however, was a fatal blow to the Alhambra. Its beautiful halls

became desolate and some of them fell to ruin, the gardens were destroyed and the fountains ceased to play.” *Contrabandistas* and other rogues moved in. It took a concerted effort on the government’s part, and the destruction of most of the dwellings, to clear them out. Then came the French occupation. According to Irving they repaired roofs, cultivated gardens, restored the water supply, but as the French left at the end of the Napoleonic Wars they blew up some of the towers to make it no longer fit-for-purpose as a fortress. It seems they had planned a much wider scale destruction, only to be foiled by a Spaniard who cut the fuse wire. Thus, “To our left we beheld the towers of the Alhambra beetling above us; to our right on the opposite side of the ravine we were equally dominated by rival towers on a rocky eminence. These, we were told, were the Torres Bermejas, or Vermilion Towers, so called from their ruddy hue. No one knows their origin. They are of a date much anterior to the Alhambra; some suppose them to have been built by the Romans, others by some wandering colony of Phoenicians.”

The Alhambra Irving visited was a curious mixture of grandeur (“We found ourselves in a great court, paved with white marble and decorated at each end with light Moorish peristyles; it is called the Court of the Alberca.”) and dereliction, but the people he met inside its walls come across as friendly and kind. Gardens and fountains are sometimes beautifully cared for and sometimes places of rubble and weeds.

“Let us approach the battlements and cast our eyes immediately below. See, on this side we have the whole plan of the Alhambra laid open to us and can look down into its Court of the Alberca with its great tank or fish-pool, bordered with flowers; and yonder is the Court of Lions, with its famous fountains and its light Moorish arcades” and looking west there is a range of mountains bounding the Vega while to the south are green gardens and orchards and to the north are the snowy peaks of the Sierra Nevada.

It is one thing to invade a country and another thing to occupy it. Invasions fall roughly into three categories. They exterminate or reduce the existing population to a powerless remnant so they can then do what they want with their new possession. Or they gradually integrate and assimilate, intermarrying, learning local languages, taking on local ways and customs. Or they remain an alien enclave within a wider society, protected by castles and fortresses and punitive forays.

Though the Moors had been in Spain for 600 years they remained largely within the third category. Roman England remained Roman England whereas Norman England gradually became England. So the question might be: why did the Moors cling to their sense of ‘separateness’? The obvious answer would seem to be religion but I think that the fact their focus remained towards North Africa also played a part. They never saw themselves as either Spanish or European. As Irving puts it, “the Moslem empire in Spain was but a brilliant exotic that took no permanent root in the soil it embellished. Severed from all their neighbours in the West by impassable barriers of faith and manners, and separated by seas and deserts from their kindred of the East, they were an isolated people. Their whole existence was a prolonged, though gallant and chivalric, struggle for a foothold in a usurped land.”

“In traversing the wild *sierras*, the scenes of ancient fray and exploit, you cannot see a Moorish *atalaya* or watch-tower, perched among the cliffs or beetling above its rock-built village, but your muleteer, on being closely questioned, will suspend the smoking of his *cigarrillo* to tell some tale of Moslem gold buried beneath its foundations;

nor is there a ruined *alcázar* in a city but has its golden tradition, handed down from generation to generation among the poor people of the neighbourhood.” And it is true “that from time to time hoards of gold and silver coin have been accidentally dug up, after a lapse of centuries from among the ruins of Moorish fortresses and habitations”, while stories are told of people who suddenly and mysteriously became rich but Irving suggests that it is the poor who have clung to the stories of great wealth protected by magic spells or mythical creatures and which might become theirs if they can but unlock the secrets by which the gold is hidden away.

It might be suggested that if the Moors left behind any great ‘treasure’ it is in their architectural heritage which has been a boon to modern day Spain’s tourist industry.

So what of the Alhambra now? I came upon a book in an op-shop called *All Granada* put out as a Spanish tourist publication. The illustrations of the Alhambra are very attractive but this is a repaired, restored, cleaned complex, its gardens restocked, its lawns mowed; delightful for the tour party but remote from its earlier atmosphere as a ‘Moorish fortress’.

It also reminds potential visitors that the Alhambra has a pre- and post- history. “It appears that the lands of Granada had contact with people of an advanced civilisation from pre-historic times.

“The earliest historical records however relate to the Turdulos who were one of the most civilised of the Iberian tribes and eventually minted coins on which Granada appears under the name of *Iliverir*. Later came the Phoenicians, Greeks and Carthaginians. The latter established themselves nearby in an important aboriginal settlement, and this has recently been confirmed by the discovery of an Iberian sculpture, the Dama de Baza, in the province of Granada.

“The arrival of the Romans in the fertile plains around Granada marked an important period in history, and a Roman Town — later to become the city of the Alhambra — was established. It was there that Saint Cecilio founded an Episcopal See in the year 62, and a little more than two centuries later the first Catholic Council in the whole of the Iberian Peninsula was set up.

Ancient *Iliberis* — the Roman name for *Iliverir* — grew in importance under the Visigothic Monarchy and reached its highest point with the arrival of the Arabs.”

“The Alhambra is surrounded by walls within which took place not a few of the bloody battles which form part of the history of the kingdom of Granada. According to Arab chroniclers the name Alhambra is derived from the fact that the ancient fortress was rebuilt at night by the reddish glow of flickering torches. It seems however that the origin of the name comes rather from the colour given to its walls by the ferruginous soil on which the Alhambra is built. In accordance with this theory the name of *Alhambra* comes from the combination of the Spanish version of two Arab words *Calat-alhamrá*, meaning the red castle.”

B is for TORA BORA or did I mean BORA BORA?:

Bora Bora is a place of sand, sun, and coconut palms, an island in French Polynesia, 225 kms north-west of Tahiti. Visitors are normally welcome.

Tora Bora caves are limestone caves in the White Mountains of eastern Afghanistan. There is something of an irony in that the CIA provided help to extend the

complex of caves when it was used as a base by Afghan soldiers fighting against the Soviet invasion. But when Osama bin Laden moved in they became a kind of ‘devil’s lair’. The Western media invested the caves with massive technology and comforts for the Al-Qaeda fighters.

“At the height of the battle, the Western media made some extraordinary claims about Tora Bora, which was frequently described as ‘impregnable’. London’s reputable *Times* newspaper, for instance, produced a schematic of a veritable mountain fortress. The blueprints showed a base worthy of a James Bond villain, replete with a hydroelectric power station, wiring for lights, power and ventilation, offices, bedrooms and communal rooms, underground armouries and secret exits guarded by booby-trapped steel doors. In other publications, there were descriptions of tunnels large enough to drive tanks through. On sober reflection, it seems as though news editors had given their journalists and graphics departments free range to exercise their imaginations, just as long as they came up with something engaging to print alongside the images of war.”

Daniel Smith in *100 Places You Will Never Visit*.

But after they were bombed by the Americans and Western reporters got to see inside they were surprised, and sometimes embarrassed, to find that they were primitive in the extreme. Anyone living there had to be obsessed by the cause they were fighting for to live in the cramped, simple, comfortless caves of Tora Bora.

Hamida Ghafour in *The Sleeping Buddha* writes, “The colourful campaign posters plastered on trees, lamp posts stripped of bulb and wire, crumbling walls and windows lend a false cheery air to the city. (Kabul). The Tora Bora caves are 35 miles south. The tunnels are still littered with shrapnel, daisy-cutter bombs and shooting targets printed by the National Rifle Association – the remains of al-Qaeda’s last stand against the Americans. Most of the Taliban have removed their black turbans and returned to their villages.” “When the Russians left, a hardcore group of jihadis, including Egyptian-born Ayman al-Zawahiri and (Saudi-born) Osama bin Laden, debated what the next move should be. It was decided to create a ‘base’ – al-Qaeda was founded in 1996 in a mujahideen camp in Khost. In the words of one American general in Kabul, the Taliban were a ‘wholly owned subsidiary’ of al-Qaeda.”

Ghafour, related to Afghan royalty, lived in exile in Canada for many years and came back to Afghanistan in 2003.

“Afghanistan was, and still is, an extreme example of the debate within the Muslim world about modernity, its relationship with the West, the role of religion and the role of women.”

But after the monarchy was abolished and the replacement President Daoud was assassinated it ushered in increasing complexity. Two books underpinned the confusing struggle. “A stream of young Afghans had been sent abroad to be educated in the Daoud years. Now they were returning home with new ideas by which to judge their society. The students sent to Egypt had been exposed to the writings of Sayyid Qutb. One of Qutb’s disciples was a young student named Burhanuddin Rabbani – who would later become a key leader in the mujahideen. Rabbani translated Qutb’s radical writing into Dari. Qutb, who was executed by Nasser, claimed that Western civilization was devoid of values and urged violence against non-believers.” While “On the other end of the political spectrum, Karl Marx’s ideas were enthusiastically embraced by impressionable university students.” More than 6,000 students studied in the USSR between 1956 and

1978. “The People’s Democratic Party of Afghanistan was funded heavily by the Soviet Union. They were unhappy with the slow change in society because of personal rivalry between the founding members. Immediately the party broke into two factions, Parcham and Khalq. The founders fought over matters like whether they should eat on the floor in solidarity with the Afghan peasantry or at the table like comrades in other communist states.”

Marx was the first to come out on top. “The overthrow of the monarchy in 1973 set in motion the cataclysmic chain of events that would usher in the communist revolution.” The tanks rolled into Kabul. Not only royalists but clerics and intellectuals were jailed and executed, landlords were forced to hand over their farms to their tenants, men deserted the army, land went out of cultivation because of confusion and mismanagement, and people began leaving to find refuge in Pakistan. “The 20-month period between the Afghan communists seizing power in April 1978 and the Russians arriving was chaotic and confusing.” The leader of the communist takeover, Taraki, was killed by his rival Hafizullah Amin. “The Soviets doubted a tribal society was ripe for a revolution. But the Afghan leaders were making a mess and Moscow felt it had no choice but to invade.” This ushered in renewed fighting, division, and community breakdown. “The Russians also expected to go within a few weeks, after cleaning up the mess left by their Afghan protégés. Instead they stayed for nine years and by 1992 would have sent between \$36 billion and \$48 billion worth of military equipment to prop up their regime. (In 2004, the Russian government demanded that Afghanistan repay the money. Karzai was outraged and responded that he wanted reparations for widows and orphans. The Paris Club settled the dispute and Russia withdrew its demand.)” All the time the communists were in power the resistance founded by Ismael Khan was growing. And it seemed to unite Afghans across tribal lines. And in the struggle against the Russian version of Marx the growing strength of the mujahideen, initially armed by Pakistan, pushed aside the moderate elements in favour of the extremist views of Sayyid Qutb. The Americans, even less knowledgeable about Afghan society than the Soviets, thought that their various apostles of capitalism, could now be inserted into the mess.

“The mujahideen factions may have been united in their hatred of the Soviets but little else.” They set out on an orgy of destruction, blowing up infrastructure, destroying documents, looting and killing. “The foreign occupier had gone, another in a long line of foreign invasions to be repelled, but the men continued to fight with each other, or kill civilians. Thousands of self-proclaimed commanders sprang up in every town and village with hundreds, sometimes thousands, of followers.

“ ‘In Washington they recently asked what is the solution? And I told them don’t repeat the old mistakes. These warlords, they are like, what do you call it? Black-market dealers. They get money from Arabs, they get money from Pakistanis, from Russia. Whoever will pay them more.’ ” But instead of looking for ways to make every Afghan into a capitalist, whether a Rockefeller or the heroine of *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, the Americans set aside this ideology in favour of weapons and helicopter-gunships to be used against the victorious mujahideen as its beliefs morphed with those of the Taliban in the wake of 9/11. But who was who? “America needed the Afghan warlords to negotiate their tough and familiar terrain and they were given millions of dollars and weapons.” And Pakistan, Saudi Arabia and Iran all had their own competing interests in Afghanistan.

Andriy Bondar wrote an essay for *Ukrainian Writers Respond to War* and made some interesting comparisons. “It so happens that the backdrop of Russia’s war against Ukraine makes us see Afghanistan in two different ways at once. On the one hand it is a Central Asian country, remote enough not to evoke intense emotions in the context of our current dramatic experiences in Ukraine. On the other hand, it is close enough and significant enough for us not to be able to neglect it.

“Afghanistan is a symbol both of several defeats and of the inability of any foreign force to cope with a contradictory and understudied cultural, political and tribal entity.

“The history of the last forty-something years has shown that the powers-that-be have learned little from breaking their teeth on this incomprehensible country. Afghanistan withstood almost a decade-long invasion of the so-called ‘limited contingent of Soviet forces’ (1979-89), the end of which, in fact, crowned the collapse of the ‘greatest geopolitical catastrophe’ of all time – the Soviet Union. Last year Afghanistan saw a great renaissance of the Taliban, the most conservative Islamist movement, which finally showed the Western world the futility of attempts to artificially launch modernization into a feudal society characterized by almost total religious obscurantism.

“Afghanistan proves the enduring truth of old principles: it is impossible to defeat and conquer an enemy you do not know, do not understand and, most importantly, do not feel; it is impossible to defeat an enemy if you do not fully understand why you need to defeat it and what you will do with it after the victory; and, finally, it is impossible to impose on the conquered country values that it does not share either *en masse* or at the level of its political elites – if, of course, it is appropriate to apply such a risky term as ‘elite’ to the Taliban leaders (which I personally doubt). And not because I have become a captive of another orientalism but, on the contrary, because Afghanistan itself has proven by its very existence the inability and historical weakness of any orientalist approaches on the grand chessboard.”

Is ‘impossible’ too strong a word?

“The point here is not in the fundamental cultural and political ‘superiority’ of some and, accordingly, ‘underdevelopment’ of others, but rather in the fact that this superiority mistakenly attributes to itself the ability to freely edit the incomprehensible in its own way and to organize it according to its own rules and principles.

“The ‘superiority’ of Soviet culture over the mujahideen in the eighties was based on socialism. It presumed the existence of a universal method of building the state and society, capable of leveling the contradictions inherent in history and culture, and abolishing all biases, forming the foundations of the inexorable progress of the Soviet model with the inevitable celebration of the triumph of the most progressive system. The ‘superiority’ of Western (mostly American) culture over the Taliban rested in democracy. It assumed that if a ‘prejudiced’ society was exposed to the democratic procedures of freedom of expression, to painted bright signs on newly created institutions, and was provided with modern weapons it would certainly overcome the darkness in itself and around it, and therefore would reveal to the world another miracle of the victory of democracy and freedom over autocracy and the enslavement of the individual.

“None of these imaginary ‘superiorities’ has changed the main issue: even clearly demonstrating the civilizational, cultural, institutional and technological beauties of its

model, it is impossible to invent the traditions of democracy and to eliminate contradictions formed over the centuries, so therefore it is impossible to do what is inherent in every foreign invasion – to transplant its idea of the meaning of existence and human happiness onto a foreign sandy soil.”

And while everyone’s attention was on violence and politics a different kind of looting was going on. “Fragments of Afghan heritage, a jigsaw of human history over the last 50,000 years, are buried beneath the soil of Afghanistan. In a cave next to the Balkh river were found tools so fine archaeologists called their creators the Michelangelos of the Upper Palaeolithic. A human head carved in light relief on the surface of a pebble dating back 20,000 years is one of the earliest known representations of man. The pebble is missing.” (Wilfred Thesiger said of Balkh, “We passed Balkh, Mother of Cities, a grave mound of the past, its monument a crumbling dome and ruined minarets, still of a beauty beyond belief’.) “At Ai Khanoum, one of Alexander the Great’s great orientalized cities, a gymnasium and temple dedicated to Zeus were discovered. What the Taliban did not bulldoze thieves took away. The ‘Pompeii of Central Asia’, Kharwar, a stunning ancient city to the south, stretches for 25 miles and was discovered in late 2003. But when nine policemen were sent to protect the site, four were killed. Local police complained that smugglers arrived in Kharwar with specific orders from clients abroad.

“There is some good news: in 1978 a Russian archaeologist found 20,000 gold pieces, known as the Golden Hoard of Bactria, buried in a royal grave in northern Afghanistan. After the Soviets left, no one knew what had happened to the gold. It turned out it had been taken from the Kabul Museum and hidden in a vault in the palace on the orders of Dr Najibullah, the last communist president. The gold survived because the uneducated Taliban hadn’t even heard of it as they looted the palace, and its guardian resisted three months and 17 days of torture to keep it safe.” But the whereabouts of the Hoard are now a mystery. Have these amazing artifacts been stolen, moved, destroyed? No one is saying. The Hoard itself has been studied and photographed and even put briefly on show in the US so there has been research into its origins. It shows Chinese, Indian, Greek and other influences. And it appears to have been created in an ancient Bactrian kingdom as much as 3,000 years ago. I associate Bactria with camels but in fact it was an area in the north of Afghanistan and over the modern border into Turkestan with the most populous ancient city believed to be Gonar Tepe. Places as far away as Gobekli Tepe in Turkey may have links but Tepe (or Depe) simply means ‘hill’ or ‘tell’. So you can find various tepes on ancient maps of the Middle East such as Tepe Siyalk, Tepe Giyan and Tepe Gawra in what is now Iran. This once fertile farming area is now the Karakum Desert and the man who found the amazing collection was a Russian of Greek origin, Victor Sarianidi, who wrote a book about his discovery, *The Golden Hoard of Bactria*.

“Looters are digging and scraping for antiquities across the country. They sell to unscrupulous art dealers in Asia, Europe, North America and the Middle East. Sometimes smugglers don’t bother to disguise their activities. In 2003, police seized a six-tonne Buddha as it was dragged across a railway station in Peshawar. All these pieces of our human history are disappearing.”

The world suddenly sat up and took a bit of notice when the Bamiyan Buddhas came under threat. “The vast empty niches that were home to the Bamiyan Buddhas

remain silent, two permanent reminders of Taliban savagery. They were carved into the Hindu Kush mountains nearly 2,000 years ago and dominate the Bamiyan valley, overlooking its tiny capital and main street selling low-quality emeralds.” To get to Bamiyan involves climbing over a high pass to look into a green valley sprinkled with apricot orchards. The Kushan dynasty ruled here where “its great Buddhist king Kanishka began his reign in AD 125. At the time, Buddha had not been represented in person. His presence was indicated by footprints, a bodhi tree, an empty throne. Kanishka called a Loya Jirga to humanize Buddha and make the religion more popular. The skills of the Roman artists he invited merged with eastern philosophy to create the human form of the Buddha. Then, between the third and fifth centuries, the Bamiyan Buddhas were built. Folds of Roman-looking robes draped across their colossal figures. This visionary king’s statue stands outside the Kabul museum. His splayed feet and pantaloons have recently been pieced together after the Taliban took a pickaxe to them.”

In fact the Buddhas had suffered from wind and water over the years. When Genghis Khan fell upon the Bamiyan valley he massacred most of the inhabitants but left the Buddhas alone. Peter Hughes in *A History of Love and Hate in 21 Statues* wrote, “Six hundred years before the arrival of the Mongols, the Chinese monk Xuanzang left us the oldest surviving account of the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Xuanzang travelled across the treacherous ‘snowy mountains’ of the Hindu Kush before arriving in 629 in the Buddhist kingdom of Bamiyan, where he found a vibrant community of ‘several tens of monasteries with several thousand monks’. Carved into the mountains, he marvelled at ‘a stone statue of the standing Buddha. It is 140-50 feet high, of a dazzling gold colour and resplendent with ornamentation of precious substances. To the east of it is a monastery built by an earlier king of the country. East of this is a standing image of Shakyamuni Buddha, more than 100 feet high, made of brass, the pieces of which have been cast separately and then assembled to make up the statue.’ ” The clay garments were painted red, pink, orange, blue and white and the Buddhas wore wooden masks. By the time the Taliban arrived the statues had lost their masks, their colours, and their ornamentation.

Ghafour continued with, “On February 2001 Mullah Omar issued a decree for the destruction of the Buddhas: ‘all the statues should be destroyed because these statues may have been used as idols and deities by non-believers before. They are respected now and may be turned into idols in the future too.’

“The demolition took four days. Rockets and bombs were set off but it was not enough. A car laden with explosives was sent from Kabul. Men swung from ropes and lodged the ammunition in the crevices of the larger Buddha. Explosives were carried up the cliffs and set in the smaller Buddha. When it was over, 1,700 years of history crumbled to the valley floor.” Then “The Taliban’s henchmen went to work on idols, shrines and tombs in Kandahar, Kabul, Herat, Jalalabad and Ghazni. ‘The destruction work is not as easy as people would think,’ Qudratullah Jamal, the information minister, later remarked to a Reuters journalist.” Yet there is something quixotic about the whole process. Buddhism is based on non-attachment, that the material world is an illusion, its believers were not encouraged to venerate images. And by the time the Taliban arrived there were no Buddhists left in Bamiyan and hadn’t been for centuries. What the Taliban was destroying was not a religious symbol of another religion but an intriguing part of Afghanistan’s past and history.

And beyond the destruction the looting went on. Probably more of Afghanistan's past has been smuggled out and sold than has been destroyed.

Rumours persist of other Buddhas hidden or covered over by the soil of centuries. "Afghans say on a full moon the pale outlines of the Buddhas' figures are still visible." And Bamiyan itself cannot be destroyed. "The light in the morning was lucid. In the afternoon it has changed as the sun has passed through the sky, glowing warm and flooding the fields and the mountains in gold, caramel and pink."

The Tora Bora caves, despite American bombing, also survive. Caves are tough things. And beyond fleeting human occupation they can be home to fascinating formations, mysterious underground rivers, and creatures like glow worms, unusual spiders, transparent fish. But although these are limestone caves formed by water trickling down through areas of the White Mountains in eastern Afghanistan close to the border with Pakistan it seems they have little to offer in the way of natural formations and mysterious creatures. The White Mountains themselves reach to 4,000 metres with steep snow-capped peaks.

Max Blumenthal in *The Management of Savagery* wrote: "The doomed American occupation of Afghanistan followed one of the most consequential military failures in the country's history, as the forty-four-year-old bin Laden and about 1,000 loyalists escaped the American siege of the Tora Bora cave complex with only fifty-seven captured. The precipitous incline from the road to the caves made a direct infantry approach nearly impossible, while the caves themselves rendered even enormous 15,000-pound American daisy cutter bombs ineffective.

"Bin Laden knew these fortified caves well; they had been constructed with the help of the CIA during the anti-Soviet jihad in which he fought during the 1980s. In those halcyon years, he flew in earthmoving equipment from his father's Saudi BinLadin Group and impressed his underlings by trundling around in a bulldozer across the rocky heights as they dug out a network of tunnels and depots. "He knew every ridge and mountain pass, every CIA trail," wrote journalist Mary Anne Weaver. "For this was the area where bin Laden had spent more than a decade of his life."

"By the time the main American assault began at Tora Bora in December 2001, about seventy US special forces soldiers had been relegated to a supporting role for a collection of local warlords that George Friedman, the founder of the private intelligence firm Stratfor, described as "a shifting kaleidoscope of brigands, fanatics, and opportunists, all with agendas and grievances going back generations." Rented with wads of cash flown in by the CIA, the warlords began cutting deals with Al Qaeda, capitulating one after another rather than sending their men to die in a futile battle on behalf of a foreign invader.

"Bin Laden slipped across the Pakistani border, traveling by horseback over the same paths the CIA had carved out for him and the mujahedin during the anti-Soviet jihad. His loyalists dispersed with plans to regroup, just as the Taliban had done after being driven from Kabul by the Americans. The Bush administration, for its part, did not publicly admit to its failure at Tora Bora or to bin Laden's escape until April 2002, four months after the assault."

The country may have a tourist destination waiting for exploitation but it doesn't seem likely they will be offering tours in the near future.

AND B is for BIKINI:

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says, “Bikini is an atoll in the Ralik (western) chain of the Marshall islands in the central Pacific Ocean. ... Bikini was a site for peacetime atomic explosions conducted for experimental purposes by the United States between 1946 and 1958. The population of the island, numbering less than 200, was moved to other islands before the tests began ... The word “bikini,” describing a very brief two-piece swimsuit for women, which came into vogue at the time of the atomic tests, has entered the international vocabulary.”

Serhii Plokhy in *Atoms and Ashes* wrote “But Al Graves never doubted the validity of the project or the morality of what he was doing. In the neckbreaking race to test new weapons, he opened a new front in the Marshall Islands, where the United States had first tested atomic bombs in the summer of 1946 in order to assess their impact on Navy targets.

“The prototype of the hydrogen bomb was first tested in the Marshall Islands in the fall of 1952. It was executed by Joint Task Force 132, under the command of Major General Percy W. Clarkson. A native of Texas and a veteran of both world wars, Clarkson was appointed deputy commanding general of the US Army Pacific in 1950. In 1953, at the age of fifty-nine he became commander of Joint Task Force Seven, charged with conducting the thermonuclear tests. Clarkson’s second in command, Al Graves, served as scientific director of the operation. The two of them made all major decisions on military, scientific, and civil aspects of the operation, which was called Ivy Mike.

“The Ivy Mike test was like no other before and after it. An 82-ton thermonuclear device, housed in a two-storey building with a refrigeration plant attached to it to keep deuterium (heavy hydrogen) liquid at a temperature of -417°F (-249°C), was built on Elugelab Island in the Eniwetok Atoll. The building that housed the bomb exploded on November 1, 1952. The fission reaction pressurized liquid deuterium, triggering a fusion reaction that ignited another fission reaction of 4.5 tons of natural uranium, which contributed most to the blast. The yield was astonishing: 10 megatons of TNT—more destructive power than the planet had ever experienced. Elugelab Island disappeared from the earth, replaced with a crater 1.2 miles (close to 2 kilometers) in diameter and 165 feet (50 meters) deep. A neighbouring island lost its vegetation, while the radioactive dust of vaporized coral descended on ships dozens of miles away.”

The first European to chart the group of coral atolls which make up the Marshall Islands was a Russian, Otto von Kotzebue, in 1825. But the islands had been inhabited by Micronesian people for centuries before then. They were coral atolls, Bikar Atoll, Utirik Atoll, Rongerik Atoll, Rongelap Atoll, Kwajelein Atoll (the world’s largest coral atoll), Taka Atoll, Bikini Atoll and many more. Their people in a matriarchal society lived from the sea, and from coconut palms, pandanus palms, arrowroot, vegetables, chickens. Their first colonial power was Germany which lost its colonies in the wake of WWI. The Marshall Islands were given to Japan which was driven out by the USA in 1944. And in 1947 the United Nations made the Marshall Islands a Trusteeship Territory administered by the USA.

You might like to take a moment to think on this. A key aspect of trusteeship was that a more ‘developed’ nation took over the care of a country and prepared its people for independence. It didn’t wipe its territory off the map, it didn’t constantly and casually

relocate its people, it didn't turn them into atomic guinea pigs, it didn't designate their homeland the Pacific Proving Ground of the US Atomic Energy Commission.

Or as Neil deGrasse Tyson and Avis Lang put it in *Accessory to War*, "Twenty-three nuclear bombs were detonated by the United States at Bikini Atoll in the South Pacific between 1946 and 1958. Displaced people. Radioactive terrain. Incinerated flora and fauna. A steep price to pay for data." And the Americans got the data; the islanders the devastation.

In 1946 the Bikinians had been hurriedly moved to Rongerik, from there they were moved to Kwajalein and then to Kili Island. The Americans now looked to explode a bomb rather than a ground-based device. "For \$10 the US government acquired the exclusive right to occupy and use the Bikini Atoll "for an indefinite period of time." It turned out later that the native culture did not permit elders to refuse an offer made by a more powerful party." So it was all-steam ahead for Graves and Clarkson and their team though under the greatest secrecy. They had moved above ground tests off mainland USA because of increasing concern about fallout. But now they believed what did not simply blow away over the Pacific would rise into the stratosphere where "there would be enough time for the irradiated particles to lose their radioactivity before making their way into the troposphere and eventually falling to the surface of the earth." So "At 6.45 A.M. on March 1, 1954, exactly as planned, Shrimp exploded off Namu Island, sending thousands of tons of water, sand, and vaporized coral into the atmosphere and then into the stratosphere. It left a crater 250 feet deep and 6,500 feet in diameter."

Even as they were congratulating themselves they realized that things had gone wrong. Everything at Bikini Atoll had been destroyed but far from blowing away over empty sea the cloud had blown towards Rongerik and Rongelap Atolls, both inhabited, and the explosion had been far more powerful than expected and released massive amounts of radiation. The US immediately set out to hurriedly move everyone off the two atolls. But already the irradiated coral was falling over the islanders. They were warned not to drink from their cisterns and wells but they had no other source of fresh water. Green leaves turned white. Children began rolling in agony as their skin burned and itched. "On March 3, the day the people of Rongelap were evacuated to safety (on Kwajalein) the JTF radiation monitors realized that radioactive contamination also threatened the people of Utirik, an atoll further east of Rongelap, approximately 300 miles (480 kilometers) from Bikini." They too were hurriedly moved. It was found that the people from Utirik had suffered more than four times the accepted level of radiation while Rongelap fishermen had absorbed more than thirty-three times the acceptable limit.

But American press releases presented it as a routine test saying no one had suffered from radiation burns. And everything was under control.

But it wasn't. "The Cold War was in full swing, and the coverup included not only suppression of facts and misleading statements but also outright lies. It was blown away on March 16 by revelations outside the United States."

A Japanese fishing boat, the *Daigo Fukuryu Maru* or *Lucky Dragon* had been fishing more than 70 miles from Bikini Atoll and well outside the American patrolled security zone. When it returned to Japan its crew "were suffering nausea, headache, fever, itchy eyes, burns, and swelling; their gums were bleeding, their white and red cell blood counts were low and falling." Japanese doctors familiar with the health impact of

radioactivity realized what must have happened. But that was only the beginning of the scandal as other fishing boats which had been nowhere near Bikini were also returning with radioactive tuna. Many tonnes of fish were destroyed before the panic gradually subsided. General Clarkson's response was to push for the acceptable exposure levels to be raised so that he could continue on with his tests.

The Utirik people were sent home but the Rongelap people were shipped first to Majuro Atoll and then back to Rongelap in 1957. But not only did they suffer the long-term effects of exposure they were sent home to a place where the food they grew or caught was contaminated. "Another discovery that was kept secret concerned children. Almost every child under the age of ten who was exposed to the Castle Bravo fallout ended up with a thyroid problem ranging from reduced thyroid function to thyroid tumors. Seventy-seven per cent of that group had thyroid tumors, as opposed to 2.6 percent among the unexposed group." And of the three babies born soon after exposure one was born with a birth defect and another was born with a thyroid tumor.

"The Marshallese refused to be mere victims of fallout, and some of them decided to fight back. On May 6, 1954, with Operation Castle still under way, a group of islanders filed a petition to the UN Trusteeship Council, claiming that nuclear testing was incompatible with the trusteeship obligations of the United States. Concerned about the danger posed by nuclear tests and the "increasing number of people removed from their land," they demanded an end to the testing."

"Many of the islanders, including the Rongelap magistrate John Anjain, believed that the fallout had been deliberate, and that they had been guinea pigs in the Atomic Energy Commission's laboratory. The United States government tried for decades to bribe its way out of the embarrassing situation, since Washington had irradiated the population of territories entrusted to its care by the United Nations in order to prepare the islands for independence. Instead the nuclear tests had destroyed the native population's livelihood, making inedible the sea-food, fruits, and vegetables on which they had relied."

It would be nice to record that the UN acted immediately in support of the Marshall Islanders and stopped any further testing but alas ... It was a stick for the Soviets to beat the Americans with whilst not wanting their own nuclear testing looked at. And at no time did the UN accept that it had a special obligation towards all indigenous and tribal people who held no seat in the UN and were often at the mercy of more powerful entities.

In 1982 the Islanders became independent as the Republic of the Marshall Islands but it did not take away the problems with contamination.

C is for CAPE VERDE (CABO VERDE):

Two friends of mine went on a cruise which took them to the Cape Verde Islands and they included one of their photos in their annual calendar. They titled it 'View from the old fort Forte Real de São Filipe in Cidade Velha, San Antonio, Cape Verde Islands'. It shows green in the valley bottom and dry butte-reminiscent hills. The problem in the islands, turning once verdant places into semi-desert, was goats; or perhaps I should say, too many goats and not enough control.

When a gr-gr-grandmother of mine was sailing to Australia on the S.S. 'Great Britain' in 1853 it called into the coaling station on the Cape Verde island of St Vincent

(São Vicente). My mother's cousin, Margaret Reeves, wrote of the family in *A Strange Bird on the Lagoon*, "On the trip that brought great-grandmother to Australia the ship made another fast run, and the loss of only four lives was considered wonderful. Some overloaded ships of the time were losing as many as 120 lives on a voyage.

"Small comfort, nonetheless to poor great grandmother. Two of those four deaths were her own children, four year old Adele, and ten month old Eliza, who both died of diphtheria early in the voyage.

"Robert Saddington, a passenger in the same ship, kept a diary which has been preserved in the Mitchell Library. In it he records, on Tuesday 22 August, only eleven days after they had set sail, the death during the afternoon of one of the Cameron children. The ship was approaching St. Vincente in the Cape Verde Islands, and the little body was buried on the island. Saddington gives an account of all the passengers going ashore, and of the excitement caused, when they returned to the ship, by a shark that the crew had just caught, which was flopping on the deck.

"The commotion was taking place on the after-deck, just over great-grandmother's berth, and when it was realised that the noise was disturbing the grieving of an anxious mother (for Margaret had one child dead, and one gravely ill that day) Mr Gray, the first mate, ordered the shark thrown overboard.

"The first little body was taken to shore on 24 August, and interred by the monument. The flags were flown at half-mast, and the captain and many of the passengers attended the service. Robert Saddington refers to the dreadful noise involved in the coaling of the ship, and no doubt poor great-grandmother noticed it too. In the early hours of Thursday, 25th, the second child died. It was interred the same evening by the side of its little sister.

"Margaret was 31 years old when she stood, aching with weariness and grief, beside those tiny graves.

(Her granddaughter Helen wrote): "When she was an old woman, almost 99, and was preparing to leave her house, "Fairholme", which was being converted into a school, her daughters found a discoloured handkerchief wrapped around a handful of earth. Her daughter, Elizabeth, who had long forgotten it, recognised it as earth from her sisters' graves, which her mother had once shown her. Soon afterwards the little parcel was buried with her in her own coffin." She had carried that little parcel of Cape Verdean earth with her for nearly 70 years.

But there are two puzzles in this, one a personal puzzle: when I visited the Migration Museum in Melbourne a few years ago I found Eliza listed as arriving in Melbourne with the family. So Adelaide (Adele) died and was buried in Cape Verde but Eliza was apparently still present when the ship docked in Melbourne but then disappears from family annals. Someone got something wrong but I haven't, so far, found just what happened. And the other puzzle was: how did an island in the mid-Atlantic become a coaling station? It had no coal of its own so how did it get there? I came upon an interesting paper by Miguel Suárez Bosa looking primarily at the Canary Islands as a coaling station but also other mid-Atlantic islands. "But a generalised use of coal was only possible when two circumstances coincided. The first of these were technological advances in steam navigation (the high pressure boiler, the propeller, the turbine) that enabled a powerful source of energy – in this case coal – to increase the sailing range of ships, while at the same time lowering consumption rates and increasing cruising speeds. The second factor was the availability of construction technologies and materials which

enabled the large infrastructure required by bigger and more complex vessels to be constructed. However, given the limited sailing range of steam ships, conveniently located supply stations along the length of trading routes were essential in that they allowed ships' holds to be occupied by merchandise rather than by huge amounts of fuel. The Iberian Atlantic islands (Madeira, the Canary Islands, Cape Verde, and to a lesser degree the Azores), situated as they were at a mid-point on the Atlantic trading route, proved to be ideal servicing stations." Las Palmas in the Canaries and St Vincent in Cabo Verde were key to the ships making the long voyage to the Australian, New Zealand and Pacific colonies. And the coal? It came from England and Wales.

The islands were a Portuguese territory up until 1975 when they achieved independence. But I think it would be nice if Australia gave some recognition to the key role St Vincent played in Australian history.

D is for DEN HAAG:

Den Haag (The Hague) is associated in most people's minds with international law. But two friends visiting, one of them Dutch, said they had never seen so much dog poo on the streets as in The Hague! I wasn't sure what to read into this. I don't suppose international lawyers do a lot of walking, with or without dogs. So are the local people dog lovers or are there a lot of strays on the streets?

The Hague is both the home of the Netherlands Parliament and the home of international law in the impressive Peace Palace. I wasn't sure just what this involved, apart from seeing occasional cases being argued there, from Slobodan Milosevic going on trial to East Timor trying to get a fair and just maritime boundary.

The *Britannica* says that a need was identified long before there was a permanent place for dispute resolution. "Of the multilateral conventions providing for arbitration those that stand out are the Conventions for the Pacific Settlement of International Disputes concluded at the first and second peace conferences held at The Hague in 1899 and 1907." This began the process of creating the nuts-and-bolts of international arbitration. But it was a matter of lawyers coming to The Hague to try to hammer out the way the process would work then going home. It was not until 1922 that the members of the League of Nations set up the Permanent Court of International Justice and provided a home for it in The Hague. "The court held its first meeting at The Hague, its seat, on January 30, 1922. It held regular meetings thereafter until its work was interrupted by World War II. Its last meeting, an administrative one, was in October 1945."

After the War the League was dissolved and along with it the Permanent Court but the newly formed United Nations put in place a new court via Article 92 of the U.N. Charter which states: 'The International Court of Justice shall be the principal judicial organ of the United Nations. It shall function in accordance with the annexed Statute, which is based on the Statute of the Permanent Court of International Justice and forms an integral part of the present Charter.'

The president and the registrar are required to live in The Hague but the judges are appointed by the U.N. and come to the city as needed. The languages used are French and English. "Cases are brought before the court either by the notification to it of a special agreement concluded by the parties or by the unilateral action of one of them through a written application addressed to the registrar. The proceedings are in two parts, written and oral." Both the U.N. General Assembly and the U.N. Security Council can

ask the Court for advisory opinions. But the most obvious problems are that its judgements depend on the goodwill of the parties for their implementation. The Court cannot send its bailiffs around to, in effect, clear your house of furniture or garnishee your wages! It is predominantly a matter of moral suasion and fear of bad publicity to get states to comply. And the other obvious problem is that people who are not nations or international bodies, such as oppressed minorities, tribal peoples, or colonies struggling against a colonial power, have no easy way to bring a case to the Court.

The Peace Palace, built in 1913, was a gift from American steel magnate Andrew Carnegie. You can take a guided tour. But the Lonely Planet Guide to *The Netherlands* suggests two nearby ‘attractions’ which might be of greater interest unless you are intrigued by seeing where bureaucrats work. The nearby *Gevangenpoort* or Prison Gate Museum “provides illustrations of dubious past approaches to maintaining peace and justice.” And, more relaxing, “Nestled between the Peace Palace and International Court of Justice, a modest flame has been burning within a stone pillar since 2002. Descending from a light ceremoniously ignited in Wales by the World Peace Flame Foundation in 1999, across seven lights kindled on five continents, it is a quiet symbol of global unity.”

The Peace Flame is surrounded by a small garden which has stones from every UN-recognised country and it includes such items as a Berlin Wall remnant and a fragment from Nelson Mandela’s prison on Robben Island.

One thing I had never associated with The Hague was beaches. But it certainly does have them. People, which may or may not include international lawyers, flock to the beaches at Scheveningen on the North Sea in the summer. They are not the places Australians think of when ‘beaches’ are mentioned, long stretches of squeaky white sand, but they have the necessary and pleasant accoutrements of beaches, piers, seagulls, children building sandcastles ...

E is for ESTONIA:

I must admit I get the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, mixed up. Which is where? So when my son suggested Estonia as an E place for an armchair traveler it seemed to be the moment to rectify my ignorance. Estonia is the most northerly of the three nations, and has Russia on its east, Latvia to its south and the Baltic curving round its coastline and containing many small islands. Across a narrow stretch of water is Finland.

The Lonely Planet guide to *Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania* is enthusiastic: “ ‘Eesti’, as it’s known to its people, is a pint-sized gem. Squeezed in between Latvia, Russia and the Gulf of Finland, its sparsely populated territory spills out into the Baltic in the form of over 2000 islands. The dark, quiet forests that cover more than half its face shelter elk, boar and bears, while the islands harbour stout medieval churches and their own distinct cultures. The incomparable, heritage-listed capital, Tallinn, is one of Europe’s best-preserved medieval cities, while the historical streets of smaller centres such as Tartu also buzz with life.” And they say of Tallinn, “There was a time when sturdy walls and turreted towers enclosed most of Europe’s cities, but wartime bombing and the advent of the car put paid to most of them. The Old Town of Estonia’s capital is a magical window into that bygone world”.

Michael Palin in *Pole to Pole*, visiting just before the USSR imploded, saw the omens as he arrived. “Rising around soft brown city walls are the spires, turrets and towers of a medieval city, but the docks present a dejected picture. In marked contrast to the bustling cosmopolitan harbour we left three hours ago (Helsinki), our only companions on the Tallinn waterfront are rusty-hulled colliers and cargo ships in need of a coat of paint. All bear the hammer and sickle on their funnels.”

And the mixture of ancient past and recent past is everywhere. “On the way up to the Toompea Castle huge blocks of rock and concrete lie across the road, moved there by the civic authority in response to the recent military repression in Lithuania. The present feels tense here and yet the past, in the shape of an extensive and beautifully preserved Old Town, seems serene and comforting. Not a modern or unharmonious building intrudes on long cobbled streets lined with merchants’ houses and guild halls. At the centre is Raekoja Square, a wide and handsome area bounded on one side by the imposing and elegant fourteenth-century Town Hall. A weather vane called Vana Toomas (Old Tom) has topped the building since 1530.”

The Guide also gives a potted history of Estonia. It had some human settlers as long ago as 10,000 years ago but it was the arrival of Finno-Ugric people (related to the people who settled Finland and Hungary) around 2,500 years ago which gave Estonia its predominant language and culture. Vikings, mainly Danes, tried to incorporate it, and Tallinn comes from Taani linn or ‘Danish town’, then Germans seeking trade. Denmark sold northern Estonia to the Teutonic Order, but Swedes, Danes, Poles and Lithuanians all coveted a slice of the country over the next few centuries. Sweden dominated but was defeated by the Russian Tsar Peter the Great. Russia then held on to it but Estonia managed a brief moment of independence from 1920 to 1940. The country suffered bombing from both the USSR and Nazi Germany. And post-war saw the USSR develop it as a major Baltic port, bringing in large numbers of ethnic Russians and ringing its cities with undistinguished concrete apartment blocks. But in 1991 the USSR imploded and Estonia regained its independence.

Some of the least attractive Soviet memorials linger on. You can visit prison cells at the KGB Cells Museum, “Chilling in parts, the museum has created a highly worthwhile exhibition covering deportations, life in the gulags, the Estonian resistance, and what went on here ... Temporary exhibitions visit, and occasional ‘Dark Nights’ show how terrifying the cells could be” (and a dark Estonian joke went that the building had the best views in Estonia – from here you could see all the way to Siberia) and the Maarjamäe War Memorial; “The obelisk was erected in 1960 to commemorate the Soviet troops killed in 1918 – hardly a popular sentiment, as the war was against Estonia and all Estonian monuments to *their* dead were destroyed shortly after the Soviet takeover” and at Sillamäe “Only unfinished uranium was processed at the plant, though the eerily abandoned buildings on the city’s western border are testament to Soviet plans to process pure nuclear reactor-ready uranium. Only the disbanding of the USSR saved Estonia’s ecology from this fate. Uranium processing ceased in 1989 and today the radioactive waste is buried under concrete by the sea. Fears of leakage into the Baltic have alarmed environmentalists; EU funding has been channelled towards ensuring the waste is stable and safe, at enormous cost.” The Sillamäe Museum contains more information.

You might wonder why I am focusing on unattractive ‘attractions’ but I am always interested in how nations and societies treat those aspects of their past they would prefer to forget. Do they obliterate, overwhelm, overlook, sanitise, re-write, re-interpret, present it as a past that can no longer influence the present or as a moral tale to be brought out regularly or in the understanding that between the poles of black and white ordinary people often live in complex grey areas where they struggle to survive and keep their families safe. I don’t really have enough information to pronounce but I got the impression that Estonia is safely walking that difficult path between preservation and forgetfulness.

If you are sated by beautiful churches, castles, and museums you could visit the Tallinn Zoo to see “a broad collection of rare goat and sheep species” or the Tartu Toy Museum or the Nuku puppet museum or the Town Council Pharmacy, the oldest pharmacy in Europe, or the Vilsandi National Park with its flocks of barnacle geese and “32 species of orchid”.

Estonia doesn’t have the rugged terrain, extensive caves, high mountains, inaccessible valleys which might have aided a guerilla campaign. But it did have those extensive forests and they were used in a long running campaign to liberate Estonia from Soviet rule. “Today the sleepy marshes and quiet woodlands of Estonia shelter mainly wildlife, but between 1944 and 1956 wild places often now set aside as national parks and nature reserves accommodated the national-liberation movement known as the Metsavennad (or Metsavendius; Forest Brothers). The Brothers, fierce resisters of the Soviet occupation, were compelled to live an underground existence in the woods, where some remained for years. They knew their terrain well, exploiting it to survive and continue their fight to restore the republic.”

When the Soviet Foreign Minister Molotov and the German Foreign Minister Ribbentrop met to carve up eastern Europe between their two countries in 1939 they didn’t bother about such niceties as asking the countries they proposed to carve up if they were agreeable. The USSR could have the Baltic nations plus half of Poland. But Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet claim and after years of fighting the Soviets had tightened their grip on the Baltic nations. The Estonians fought a long guerilla war against the Soviets, always hoping help might come from the West. At least 30,000 Forest Brothers with their supporters kept up their harrying, blowing up railways and other acts of sabotage, but gradually the Red Army’s grip tightened with mass deportations to the Soviet gulags.

It was only in 1980 that the resistance finally came to an end, most of the Brothers dead or in exile and their support disrupted and deported. Unsurprisingly, they are still seen as an heroic defense of the nation’s right to exist.

E is also for EXMOOR:

Arthur Ransome wrote of coming down to breakfast and finding a large parcel containing a book called *The Far-Distant Oxus* “a complete book, carefully written, in two different handwritings, on both sides of the paper” by Katharine Hull aged 15 and Pam Whitlock aged 16. He was rather sceptical. Children liked to tell him they too were writing an adventure story. But he had never seen a full-length novel written by two

children. “Well, my suspicions were entirely unjustified. They really had written the whole thing themselves. One day in the summer term of 1936, Miss Whitlock and Miss Hull (then aged fifteen and fourteen) were caught out in a rainstorm and took shelter together. They were at the same school (which, judging by this astonishing result, must be one of the very best girls’ schools in England). Until the day of the rainstorm they had not known each other very well. They talked, and presently “it was revealed” that they had both, for a long time, wanted to write a book about children, and ponies, and moors. They decided to go into partnership.”

They found by trial and error the best way to write their book (by doing alternate chapters after they’d talked and planned it through) but their biggest problem was how to get enough paper to write on. “Exercise-books suffered and they could not afford not to write on both sides of each sheet.” But Ransome overlooked the problems, read the book, was impressed, and took it into Jonathon Cape with the recommendation that he publish it. Cape agreed and it came out in 1937.

Children’s books were predominantly episodic back then, a string of adventures, often leading up to some kind of crisis. Think of *Anne of Green Gables*, the Swallows and Amazons adventures, *Five in a Secret* by Arthur Judd, the William books, *The Railway Children*. It has been said they are about middle-class white children but the same formula was just as successful when the children were replaced by animals having adventures, such as *The Wind in the Willows* and *Winnie-the-Pooh*. The key thing was to remove the adults to the background and make the children the key figures. Enid Blyton later on removed adults altogether in some of her series. The Famous Five, the Barney books, the Secret Seven, all had children having the adventures with minimal input from adults. And it isn’t hard to see why they were so popular. They give a sense of freedom, excitement, achievement, and the sun shines. *The Far-Distant Oxus* is a gentler version of the formula and like the later Barney books has a mysterious outsider, a boy Maurice with a pony and a dog and who is older and wiser but equally ready for adventure.

The book is set on Exmoor which is the less well known cousin of Dartmoor to its south which is famous for its prison, and its escaping prisoners, its strange standing stones, and for ‘the Hound of the Baskervilles’ bounding through the mist. Exmoor has its wildlife and its beauties. “A squirrel darted down from a hollow branch and nibbled at the crumbs left over from Maurice’s breakfast. A wagtail, hopping and paddling in a shallow pool, also noticed the bread and fluttered out on to the grass. A field-mouse, who had lain silent in a tuft of heather, crept cautiously out and joined in the feast. The place was no longer deserted, and the thrush returned to the roof of Peran-Wisa to continue its song of approval of life.” The two moors share heather and bracken, birds and mice, cow parsley in the hedges and mushrooms in the grass, but what they most notably share is ponies. The Dartmoor pony and the Exmoor pony are treated as two distinct breeds now, but both are small and tough.

It is the Exmoor ponies which give the children their first big adventure. They have become friendly with a mare and foal. “They had grown to know the foal well during the last ten days. It had often come down to drink below the falls and had shyly edged up to them, hoping for the usual apple. Often, too, when they had ridden on the moors, the foal had heard Dragonfly’s neigh and had come trotting up to follow them like

a dog. It was strange how attached Ruksh had become to Dragonfly. Often in the mornings Maurice had seen them together, nuzzling at each other's soft, velvety noses, and Dragonfly would flick flies from the bay foal with his flowing tail, while Ruksh would vainly try to do the same with his ragged little wisp.

“Peter and Jennifer conjured up awful visions of the terrified foal being shouted at by the village boys, who always assisted in the rounding up, and at length, exhausted and bewildered, being shut up with many others ready for sale. The Hunterlys, who did not know much about round-ups, thought of the pit ponies they had seen in Somerset, which they had been told came from the moors. Maurice thought rapidly of a plan of action—his idea of riding up the river was at once put aside for another time—today was going to be more serious.” The children come up with a complicated plan to get the foal away and back to the moors without anyone noticing. It succeeds. And fortunately, these days, the ponies of Exmoor, Dartmoor, and the New Forest have some protection.

You may have been wondering why the children would name a stream the ‘Oxus’ or their camp ‘Peran-Wisa’ or why they would float their homemade raft down the ‘Oxus’ to the ‘Aral Sea’. In fact they took their names for places from Matthew Arnold’s poem, ‘Sohrab and Rustum’ based on an ancient Persian epic, and popular with schools of the early 20th century, and which includes the lines:

‘The shorn and parcell’d Oxus strains along
Through beds of sand and matted rushy isles—
Oxus, forgetting the bright speed he had
In his high mountain cradle in Pamere,
A foil’d circuitous wanderer—till at last
The long’d-for dash of waves is heard, and wide
His luminous home of waters opens, bright
And tranquil, from whose floor the new-bath’d stars
Emerge, and shine upon the Aral Sea.’

It is not hard to visit Exmoor once you get to England and the Lonely Planet’s guide to *Devon & Cornwall* sings its praises. “Britain’s smallest national park, Exmoor straddles the Devon-Dorset border. While it might not quite have the epic quality of Dartmoor, Exmoor has charms of its own, from a unique water-powered railway at Lynton to the panoramic viewpoint of Dunkery Beacon.” And they go on to extol the “photogenic landscape of medieval fields, ancient oak woods and plunging coombes (valleys), and is one of the best places in Britain to spot herds of wild red deer.”

It is not a national park in the sense of untouched wild places. It has been inhabited for a long time and unlike Dartmoor has a coastline on the Bristol Channel so has attracted fishing and sailing. It also contains a number of villages and ancient buildings such as Dunster with its 15th century church.

You can of course go and ride and trek on those Exmoor ponies but I thought I would mention two rather different things which appealed to me. “Take in the quintessential countryside of Exmoor via one of the area’s oldest clapper bridges, or cycle beside salt marshes and estuary in the countryside that inspired the classic children’s story, Tarka the Otter.” Henry Williamson’s story is a sad story because it is set in the days when otters were hunted with dogs but it is also a book of haunting beauty.

And “Exmoor holds the distinction of being named Europe’s first international Dark Sky Reserve, in recognition of the night-time inky blackness overhead. But what does that mean in practice? Namely, a whole host of local organisations striving to limit light pollution, plus, for visitors, some simply spectacular star displays.”

E is for EAST BERLIN but BERLIN has undergone some CHANGES:

“On June 24, 1948, in response to the Allies’ announcement of their plans to create a West German state, the Soviets imposed a ground blockade of West Berlin, arguing that given that the country was no longer to be jointly occupied but partitioned, Berlin, located in the Soviet sphere of occupation, would have to be placed under sole Soviet control.

“Some in Washington agreed with that logic. Not General Walsh, however, who argued along with (General) Clay against abandoning Berlin. On June 26, two days after the start of the blockade, the US government ordered its Air Force to start providing supplies to besieged West Berlin, using the air corridors negotiated back in 1945 with the help of General Kovalev. The logic of the decision was explained in Walsh’s telegram on the eve of the blockade. “There is no practicability in maintaining our position in Berlin and it must not be evaluated on that basis.... We are convinced that our remaining in Berlin is essential to our prestige in Germany and in Europe. Whether for good or bad, it has become a symbol of the American intent.” Two days after the start of the airlift, which produced the first indications that it might work, President Truman gave it his official blessing.

“In October 1948, three months after the airlift started, Walsh was recalled to Washington to become the US Air Force representative to the joint boards of defense for the United States and Canada and the United States and Mexico. The airlift continued, lasting in all for 321 days, with 272,000 flights carried out by American and British cargo planes, mainly C-47 Skytrains and C-54 Skymasters, landing at Tempelhof Airport every 45 seconds. The Soviets retreated in the face of American resolve, superior air power, and sheer economic strength demonstrated by the capacity to supply the besieged city with food, fuel, medicine, clothing and other necessities for almost a year. On May 11, 1949, Moscow announced the end of the blockade, and West Berlin remained under joint American, British, and French control.”

(I couldn’t help wondering, if that could happen in 1948, why more recent airlifts have been seen as difficult and, at times, virtually impossible.)

Lonely Planet’s *Best Trips to Germany, Austria & Switzerland* touches on Berlin. “Built on terrain once bifurcated by the Berlin Wall, the historic Potsdamer Platz quarter underwent a 1990s rebirth and is a showcase of urban renewal masterminded by international architects such as Renzo Piano and Helmut Jahn. Highlights include the glass-tented Sony Center, the Panoramapunkt observation deck and Wall remnants.”

“A symbol of division during the Cold War, the landmark Brandenburg Gate now epitomises German reunification. Modelled after Athens’ Acropolis and completed in 1791, it stands sentinel over Pariser Platz, a harmoniously proportioned square framed by banks and embassies.”

“Checkpoint Charlie was the principal gateway for foreigners and diplomats between the two Berlins from 1961 to 1990. This potent symbol of the Cold War has

largely degenerated into a tacky tourist trap, but the free open-air exhibit is one redeeming aspect.” (Its name came from Alfa-Bravo-Charlie ... it was the 3rd checkpoint opened.)

And Lonely Planet’s *Berlin* says, “To truly grasp the barrier’s inhumane layout and impact on people’s lives, swing by the outdoor Gedenkstätte Berliner Mauer along a one-mile stretch of its former course. Ponder the past while passing an original Wall segment, a guard tower, escape tunnels and border installation remnants.”

I am not sure that I would go anywhere to view any kind of wall but the Berlin Wall does have a kind of macabre fascination, given the way it featured in a variety of spy novels and films from the Cold War era. And unlike walls built to keep people out it was a wall built to keep people in.

Berlin goes on to say, “Shortly after midnight on 13 August 1961, East German soldiers and police began rolling out miles of barbed wire that would soon be replaced with prefab concrete slabs. Overnight streets were cut in two, transportation between the city halves was halted and East Germans, including commuters, were no longer allowed to travel to West Berlin.

“The Berlin Wall was a desperate measure launched by the German Democratic Republic (GDR, East Germany) to stop the sustained brain-and-brawn drain the country had experienced since its 1949 founding. Some 3.6 million people had already headed to western Germany, putting the GDR on the brink of economic and political collapse. The actual construction of the Wall, however, came as a shock to many: only a couple of months before that fateful August day GDR head of state Walter Ulbricht had declared at a press conference that there were no plans to build a wall.”

Ben Macintyre in his biography of Soviet double agent Oleg Gordievsky *The Spy and the Traitor* wrote, “Gordievsky’s time at university was nearing an end when he was sent to East Berlin for a six-month work-experience posting, as a translator in the Russian embassy. Thrilled at the prospect of his first trip abroad, Gordievsky’s excitement spiked when he was called into Directorate S for a briefing on East Germany. The communist-ruled German Democratic Republic was a Soviet satellite, but that did not make it immune from the attentions of the KGB. ... Gordievsky arrived in East Berlin on 12 August 1961, and travelled to a student hostel inside the KGB enclave in the suburb of Karlshorst.

“Over the previous months, the stream of East Germans fleeing to the West through West Berlin had reached a torrent. By 1961, some 3.5 million East Germans, roughly 20 per cent of the entire population, had joined the mass exodus from communist rule.

“Gordievsky awoke the next morning to find that East Berlin had been invaded by bulldozers. The East German government, prompted by Moscow, was taking radical steps to staunch the flow: the construction of the Berlin Wall was under way, a physical barrier to cut off West from East Berlin and the rest of East Germany. The ‘Anti-Fascist Protection Wall’ was, in reality, a prison perimeter, erected by East Germany to keep its own citizens penned in. More than 150 miles of concrete and wire, with bunkers, anti-vehicle trenches and chain fencing, the Berlin Wall was the physical manifestation of the Iron Curtain, and one of the nastiest structures man has ever built.

“Gordievsky watched in horrified awe as East German workers tore up the streets alongside the border to make them impassable to vehicles, and troops unrolled miles of barbed wire. Some East Germans, realizing that their escape route was closing fast, made desperate bids for freedom by clambering over the barricades or attempting to swim the canals that formed part of the border. Guards lined up along the frontier with orders to shoot anyone attempting to cross from East to West. The new wall made a powerful impression on the 22-year-old Gordievsky: ‘Only a physical barrier, reinforced by armed guards in their watchtowers, could keep the East Germans in their socialist paradise and stop them fleeing to the West.’ ”

Miserable as life in East Berlin was, it was a picnic in comparison to the misery Germany had inflicted on its neighbours such as Poland; and in short order, Poland had suffered the Nazis and the Soviets. Yet it is the East Berliners with their brave escapes or deaths-in-trying who get the remembrance. This, of course, doesn’t apply to East Berlin’s young people who had no responsibility for the war’s atrocities.

The Wall was called the ‘Anti-Fascist Protection Barrier’ and the Lonely Planet guide says it “consisted of a 45km-long inner-city barrier separating West from East Berlin and a 112km border between West Berlin and East Germany. Each reinforced-concrete segment was 3.6m high, 1.2m wide and weighed 2.6 tonnes. In some areas, the border strip included the Spree River or canals.”

And the exclusion didn’t stop there. “Continually reinforced and refined over time, the Berlin Wall eventually grew into a complex border-security system consisting of not one, but two, walls: the main wall abutting the border with West Berlin and the so-called hinterland security wall, with the ‘death strip’ in between. A would-be escapee who managed to scale the hinterland wall was first confronted with an electrified fence that triggered an alarm. After this, he or she would have to contend with guard dogs, spiked fences, trenches and other obstacles. Other elements included a patrol path with lamp posts that would flood the death strip with glaring light at night. Set up at regular intervals along the entire border were 300 watchtowers staffed by guards with shoot-to-kill orders. Only nine towers remain, including the one at Erna-Berger-Strasse near Potsdamer Platz.

“In West Berlin, the Wall came right up to residential areas. Artists tried to humanise the grey concrete scar by covering it in colourful graffiti. The West Berlin government erected viewing platforms, which people could climb to peek across into East Berlin.” I wonder what the guards in the watchtowers thought as they saw West Berliners peering over at them like patrons peering into the cages of dangerous animals in the zoo.

There is a slight irony in that it was a new brain-and-brawn drain which helped bring down the wall. People found that though they couldn’t escape to West Berlin they could now escape via Hungary with its newly-opened borders—and they did so in droves.

You can take a guided walking tour, you can visit the East Side Gallery to see some of that ‘colourful graffiti’, or you can take a bike ride and do the Berlin Wall Trail.

Berlin, and its wall, turned up regularly in the Cold War spy novels of writers such as John Le Carré and Len Deighton. Take for instance this reminder in Len Deighton’s *Spy Hook*: “We were in Leuschner’s, a once famous and fashionable café near Potsdamerplatz. It was shabby now and almost empty. It had been like this for many

years, for the great expanse of Potsdamerplatz – once the busiest traffic intersection in all Europe – was now a still and silent place where armed sentries patrol constantly between the massed barbed wire and, with a compassion not extended to their fellow-countryman, carefully restrain their attack-trained dogs from running into the minefields. And as the district became a backwater, Café Leuschner became the sort of place where men were cautious what they said to strangers, and policemen came regularly to inspect everyone’s identity papers.

“Once great luxury hotels stood here, adjacent to the mighty Anhalter railway terminal, that was the biggest in the world. The posters in the museum listed one hundred and forty-five trains arriving each day, eighty-two of them long-distance luxury expresses that came complete with cocktail bars, sleeping compartments and diners. Beneath the road, by means of a specially constructed tunnel, baggage porters, labouring under steamer trunks and cases made of the hides of crocodile and pig, and smartly dressed pages conducted the arriving passengers under the swirling traffic, directly into the plush foyer of the famous Excelsior Hotel next door. Here they would be conveniently close to the fine shops of Leipziger Strasse, the embassies, palaces and grand houses that adjoined the Tiergarten, and the government offices of the newly created German Reich and the Palace of its Emperor. By day the traffic seemed never-ending; and the nightlife continued until breakfast was served free to any reveller who was still awake.

“Now the Anhalter Bahnhof is gone, except for a large section of old yellow brickwork that used to be the ticket hall. In summer it is lost amid a tangle of weeds. Behind it, as Werner and I had discovered in our schooldays, there is a vast no-man’s-land of rusting rails, collapsed roundhouses, skeletons of old sleeping cars and signal boxes complete with handles that could be pulled. No one has passed this way since the last train left for Magdeburg in April 1945. It remains empty except for a few tramps and fugitives who spend a night sheltering in the wrecked buildings but find them too inhospitable even for their stark needs.

“Grimy and neglected, this is a neighbourhood of derelict bombed buildings, roofless façades that might look like some phony cityscape built for a film, except that they are so filthy. Now this place, which once seemed like the centre of all Europe, is nothing. It is just a place past which traffic hurries to get to the newspaper offices of Kochstrasse, or to Checkpoint Charlie, which is only a short distance along this garbage-littered thoroughfare that skirts the Wall.”

There are very good reasons for ending oppression, reasons of human rights and human dignity, but I think there is an additional reason. The apparatus of oppression is so often desperately ugly. So with its dismantling always comes the hope that something that can offer beauty to the eye and uplift to the human spirit can be created in its place.

F is for FAN SI PAN:

Isn’t that an intriguing name? So what is it? Where is it?

In fact it is the highest mountain peak in Vietnam, standing 10,308 feet or 3,142 metres. There was a time when Vietnam was not on many tour itineraries but now I see holidays in Vietnam advertised regularly. So you can in fact go to see Fan Si Pan, you can even climb up it.

I was in two minds as to whether to echo John Cleese in 'Fawlty Towers' with 'Don't mention the war'. But I thought I would just mention this odd little snippet, not least because it goes against the accepted story. "In 1998, the sociologist and Vietnam veteran Jerry Lembcke published the results of his exhaustive research into the singular claim that antiwar protesters had regularly spit on returning vets. The spitters and hecklers, he found, were (with few exceptions) the hawkish veterans of previous wars, men who regarded the young GIs as losers, because they hadn't come back victorious. "We won our war, they didn't, and from the looks of them, they couldn't," a VFW member sneered on a videotape filmed during a Vietnam veterans' protest march through Valley Forge in the early 1970s, while his grizzled comrades barraged the marching ex-grunts with slurs and ridicule. In other words, the Vietnam vets were being attacked by their *fathers*. Lembcke's revelation, however, was met with a good deal of disbelief, when it wasn't ignored outright. The showdown between the two sons would remain the controlling myth of the post-Vietnam era."

Susan Faludi in *Stiffed: The Betrayal of Modern Man*.

She was writing about the USA. I have never come across research done on the same topic here. "In fact, between these brothers, determining who was "good" and who was "prodigal" was a far blurrier proposition than the country was willing to consider, nor was it self-evident which of the two types of sons would, in the end, break more deeply with their male elders and the system that those older men had created. After all, vast numbers of returning soldiers turned against the war, sometimes in more radical ways than their stay-at-home antiwar peers."

I wondered if a key feature was ever real concern for the ordinary people of Vietnam. Sometimes the people who most want to feel good and righteous aren't motivated by a desire to help ordinary people. Sometimes actions are motivated by a desire to help only those who agree with us politically, and sometimes actions are purely motivated by self-interest.

And perhaps the beginning of the war wasn't quite as I had always assumed? Brian Toohey in *Secret* wrote, "It might have been different if Dwight Eisenhower's farewell speech as US president on 7 January 1961 hadn't fallen on deaf ears. In the widely quoted speech, Eisenhower voiced his deep concern about the military-industrial complex's unwarranted influence and the danger to 'our liberties or democratic processes'. His warning followed the 1960 presidential election campaign in which John Kennedy used false intelligence to claim there was a missile gap with the Soviet Union that required huge sums to be spent on the military. There was no gap: the US Air Force claimed the Soviets had hundreds of intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), but in fact the Soviets had two and the US slightly more. After becoming president, Kennedy acknowledged there was no gap, but then committed troops to the war in Vietnam based on intelligence assessments that fatally ignored the importance of Vietnamese nationalism."

I came across the *Climber's and Hiker's Guide to the World's Mountains & Volcanos* by Michael R. Kelsey. "The highest mountain in Vietnam is Fan Si Pan (Fan Si Peak) at 3143 meters. It's located in the far north of the country along a big ridge or mountain range called Hoang Lien Son. This entire area is just a few kms south of the Chinese border. These mountains are the southeastern tail end of the greater Himalayan

Cordillera which are folded and uplifted. On the author's hike, he saw sedimentary rocks such as limestone, siltstone, shale & even some quartzite."

From Hanoi you can take a bus or train to the border city of Lao Cai. The author walked to the village of Cat Cat (another name to intrigue), crossed the bridge to the old and unused French hydroelectric power station, then headed up canyon to the west. In about one and a half hours he reached the "small log cabin in an area with many new trails made by wood cutters." The suggestion in this is to have some knowledgeable advice on which trails will take you where you want. An experienced fit climber can reach the peak in a day but most people take 2 to 3 days. "There's lots of thick bamboo high on the mountain and the summit ridge to wade through, but a trail does exist." So it is not like mountains where you rise above the vegetation into a world of scree and boulders. He doesn't say whether you might find some giant pandas eating that plentiful bamboo but he does suggest avoiding the rainy season of June/July to September.

G is for GÖBEKLI TEPE:

Gregg Braden in *Deep Truth* writes of the mysterious complex uncovered in what is now Turkey: "Physical evidence of the ceremonial complex at Göbekli Tepe, the earliest civilization documented on Earth, has been scientifically dated to 11,500 years ago, pushing the date of this site close to the end of the last ice age." He goes on to say, "This scientific evidence proves beyond a reasonable doubt that civilization is at least twice as old as previously believed. German archeologist Klaus Schmidt knew that he had found something extraordinary the first day he explored Göbekli Tepe (Turkish for "hill of the navel"). A single tree stands on the top of the highest hill at the site, and the locals tell a story that holds the tree to be a marker of sacred significance. Schmidt knew this story, and says that when he arrived, "I thought we might be onto something." As he looked over the site and saw the hillside covered with broken pieces of flint and evidence of ancient occupation, he remembers, "Within the first minute, I knew that if I didn't walk away immediately, I would be here the rest of my life." He stayed, and has been excavating the site since that pivotal day in 1994."

Braden points out that the site was already known to archeologists but that they had wrongly assumed the mounds of earth were simply burial mounds. But once excavations began whole stone temples were found. Strictly speaking we cannot be sure that they were temples, rather than astronomical observatories or even grandiose habitations. "Göbekli Tepe contains a number of circular temples that vary in size, but appear to have similar layouts. Each temple has two large T-shaped pillars in the center and is surrounded by smaller pillars that form the ring of the circle. Even though the site is not as large as Stonehenge, and does not contain the distinctive overhead slabs found there, as I pored over the first images of the excavations from Göbekli Tepe, the vertical stones arranged in circles certainly reminded me of the celestial markers and other observatory-like features familiar from Stonehenge.

"As of spring 2010, four of the circular temples and 50 of the pillars had been excavated. Earth-imaging radar, however, shows that another 15 to 20 circles still remain covered beneath the surface. The largest of the circular temples is about 98 feet across, and the tallest pillars are about 17 feet high. One of the things that make the site especially valuable to archeologists is that it appears to have been intentionally buried about 8,000 B.C.E." This means that the high relief carvings on many of the pillars have

remained intact. The assumption is that they are merely pictorial as writing had not yet been invented. Though that idea, too, may someday be challenged.

(I notice that people continue to say that Aboriginal civilization is the oldest continuous civilization on the planet. Sometimes they say culture. Civilization requires the creation of towns. Culture does not. But the statement, and I don't know how it has been worked out, is somewhat misleading. Unless a people were completely wiped out or taken into slavery where nothing from their past was permitted them then cultures are constantly evolving. The cultures of Africa, Asia, the Middle East and elsewhere, were constantly changing and being influenced by neighbouring 'nations' and tribes through trade, pilgrimage, climate-enforced movements, warfare and so on, so that cultures changed and developed over time. But it would be hard to prove that any one culture was not 'continuous'.)

Apart from other considerations, Turkey is off-limits to me as a traveler because of its refusal to acknowledge its killing of more than a million Armenians but I did go to a guide book to Turkey to see if they mentioned anything about Göbekli Tepe as it sounded so intriguing. *The Lonely Planet Guide to Turkey* says, "Around 11km northeast of Urfa, 'Pot Belly Hill' was first excavated in 1994 by a team led by Professor Klaus Schmidt. Their discovery of a ritual complex dated to the pre-pottery Neolithic era (around 10,000 BC) has turned the previously accepted theory that religion followed the evolution of agriculture on its head." I wondered about this. Surely they aren't suggesting that no nomadic, pastoralist or hunter-gatherer peoples ever had any religious beliefs?

The excavation has been covered with a "space-age style dome"; the pillars have stylized carvings of foxes and vultures (though no one knows whether they were significant or just there), the site was listed on the UNESCO World Heritage register in 2018, and "Geomagnetic surveys and ground-penetrating radar systems have identified another 16 ancient megalithic rings buried nearby". And undoubtedly this sophisticated complex was preceded by smaller simpler sites reaching back even further into antiquity.

And the other intriguing and unanswered question in there is: who created these complexes?

G is for GERALDTON:

I remember when I was at primary school someone brought along a bunch of Geraldton Wax flowers. I thought they were beautiful. I knew nothing about the town of Geraldton but I imagined these lovely flowers growing all over it.

As I was browsing in *The Oxford Companion to Australian Literature* I came upon this entry: "*Geraldton Express*, a weekly newspaper began publication in WA in 1878 as the *Victorian Express*; in 1884 it became the *Geraldton Express and Murchison Goldfields News* and in 1897 the *Geraldton Express and Murchison and Yalgoo Goldfields Chronicler*." The paper was said to 'aggressively' champion the 'cause of the miners' and to provide a 'regular literary supplement'. In 1896 the editor C. Andrée Hayward "assessed Australian literature, especially the work of the *Bulletin* writers; he also held regular literary competitions for local writers" and printed entries in the *Express's* Christmas editions. It sounded as though Geraldton had been well served by its local paper. In fact most 19th century newspapers published poetry and short stories. And

although we have alternatives now nothing has quite filled that void where local people read their local paper and enjoyed the writings of local writers, correspondents, and poets.

I have never been to Geraldton on the WA coast north of Perth so it seemed to be the moment to find out something about the town and the flower. Though possibly the town is better known for what lies offshore. The area of reefs and shoals and low islands known as Houtman's Abrolhos is notorious because of its most famous shipwreck. A number of writers have been drawn to the story including Henrietta Drake-Brockman who wrote *Voyage to Disaster* and Simon Leys who called his version *The Wreck of the Batavia*.

Leys outlines the story. There were several wrecks and 'close encounters' of Dutch ships with the West Australian coast but "that of the *Batavia*, which occurred in 1629 on the reefs Houtman Abrolhos, a group of tiny coral islands some fifty nautical miles off the Australian mainland, was the most famous and also the most fully documented. The three hundred survivors who found shelter on the islands fell under the control of one of them, a psychopath who instituted a reign of terror. This criminal, assisted by a few acolytes whom he had managed to seduce and indoctrinate, led a methodical massacre of the castaways, sparing neither women or children. Three months later, with two hundred already slaughtered, the bizarre butchery was brought to an end by the arrival of a rescue ship from Java. The leader and his main accomplices were put to death on the spot after being duly examined, tortured and sentenced according to the legal requirements of Dutch criminal justice." As well as these records and the memoirs of survivors a book soon followed in 1647. "It can be said without exaggeration that, in its time, the tragedy of the *Batavia* had a greater impact on the public imagination than did the wreck of the *Titanic* in the 20th century. The comparison comes naturally to mind since in both cases disaster struck, on her maiden voyage, a ship that embodied the pride and the power of her age."

The tragedy gradually faded "until 1963, when guided by the remarkable deductions of a local historian, a diver found the wreck." (The 'local historian' was Henrietta Drake-Brockman.)

The puzzle in all this is the character of Jeronimus Cornelisz. To call him a psychopath doesn't really explain his murderous rampage on some small islands where he was probably doomed to die himself unless the commander and captain could make the long voyage to Batavia (Jakarta) in an open boat and bring a rescue ship. He does not seem to have been driven by concern that there would be insufficient food and water for all the survivors. There is no sign of him turning to cannibalism to survive. Leys describes him as "a man about thirty years old who had only recently signed on with the VOC (Verenigde Oostindische Compagnie or Dutch East India Company). He was well-educated; he had been an apothecary but various setbacks had brought him to the verge of bankruptcy. However, in boarding ship for the East, he was not fleeing his creditors but the arm of the law. He was closely linked to a scandalous character, the painter Torrentius (1589-1644), who had just been arrested, tortured and condemned for immorality, Satanism and heresy. The authorities were searching for any of his associates." Was it his sudden freedom from the constraints of society and that his victims were probably Christians praying fervently for deliverance ... And there is a complicating factor: the ship was carrying trunkloads of gold and silver to pay for spices

and other goods produced in the East Indies. Did he hope to find a way to turn this cargo into his own private wealth?

And what of Houtman and his Abrolhos? In fact there were two brothers Houtman. Cornelis and his younger brother Frederik led the first Dutch expedition to South-East Asia in the hope of muscling in on the spice trade previously dominated by the Portuguese. The *Britannica* says “Sent to Lisbon in 1592 as commercial representatives of nine Dutch merchants, Cornelis and Frederik were imprisoned by the Portuguese for attempting to steal secret charts of East Indian sailing routes. After their release in 1595 they returned to Amsterdam, where Cornelis was appointed commander of four merchant ships of the Vierre Company, a syndicate founded by the nine merchants to establish trade with the East Indies. Using sailing directions written for the voyage by Jan Huyghen van Linschoten, the Dutch explorer and author of books on Portuguese navigation in the Orient, the fleet set sail on April 2, 1595. Reaching the East Indies in 1596, Cornelis established trade relations with the rulers of Java, Sumatra, and Bali” but he fell foul of the Sultan of Aceh and was killed there in 1599. So it was his brother Frederik who continued the trading voyages to the East, writing the first Dutch-Malay dictionary in 1603 and discovering the Abrolhos off the Western Australian coast in 1619. Abrolhos (abre os olhos), in Portuguese meaning ‘open the eyes’ or ‘keep the eyes open’, seems very appropriate for what is a group of 122 low-lying islands described as the “southernmost true coral reefs in the Indian Ocean”.

Philippe Godard in *The first and last voyage of the Batavia* provides some intriguing pictures of the islands and their underwater coral wonderlands and writes, “The presence here of sea-lions, generally found in much lower latitudes, adds to the uniqueness of the archipelago and completes the picture of a world that is a meeting-point of others, the like of which does not exist anywhere else throughout the seas and oceans of our planet. It is a world of strange beauty also, seen from the sky, with its countless shallows of opalescent colours, its overlapping foam-fringed reefs, its sinuous channels that sometimes come to an abrupt end, and its “chimneys” of deep blue, dotted here and there on the reef-flats that the sea covers at high tide, and that were formed by rain-water, locally acidified by contact with certain plants, percolating through pockets of soft limestone at the time of the land-bridge.”

But I found myself wondering if the Dutch ever had any regrets that their only view of the Western Australian coast was of somewhere to avoid. Today the Abrolhos is a regular fishing and diving spot with adventure and eco tours. Mike Rendell in *Crusoe, Castaways and Shipwrecks in the Perilous Age of Sail* says of the lure of diving: “The atrocities were soon forgotten but interest was revived in the 1970s when divers started to bring up some of the artifacts scattered on the ocean floor. Large items, such as the cannon, anchors and ornamental stonework, were brought to the surface, along with smaller artifacts such as coins, drinking vessels, mortars and other household effects. On the islands, mass graves have been located, and the site has been declared part of Western Australia’s Museum Wreck Trail. It is described as being part of the country’s ‘museum without walls’ concept.” There have been books, articles, radio dramas, even an opera, and a replica of the *Batavia* was built in the Netherlands and sailed to Australia in time to be the flagship for the Dutch team at the 2000 Sydney Olympics.

The Geraldton Waxflower (*Chamelaucium uncinatum*) belongs to the myrtle family. Geoff Bryant in *The Random House Encyclopedia of Australian Native Plants* says of it: “The common names refer to the town of Geraldton north of Perth on the stretch of Western Australian coast where this species is most abundant. It is a commonly grown species and the chief parent of most recently bred cultivars. A brittle, spreading shrub of up to 4 m tall and wide, it has fine, needle-like foliage and large, airy sprays of waxy, white, mauve or pink flowers borne profusely in late winter and through spring.”

H is for HIGHLAND:

There is of course no shortage of places with High, Highland, or Highlands in their names. I came upon a place called American Highland in Antarctica which I assumed had been discovered or explored by an unimaginative American and one who was not quick enough to claim it for the USA (or was above such petty things as claiming national territory) as it is in the large Australian wedge of Antarctica.

It is a high ice-covered plateau, 7,000 to 10,000 feet or 2,000 to 3,000 metres high. My first thought was to wonder whether Australia might have been tempted to rename it. But then I began musing on Antarctica more generally.

Yes, you can do a tour there, by cruise ship to see penguins, seals, icebergs, the Aurora Australis, or by plane to look down on smoking volcanoes and ice-covered wildernesses, or if you are very good at something, possibly as a member of a research team, you can live at an Antarctic base.

A very long time ago Antarctica had plants and land-based creatures. It is hard to picture this and hard to picture that world. But it meant that the world's oceans were not only far less salty but also a great deal higher. Shells have been found on mountain tops round the world. South America must have been a long narrow strip of interrupted land running down to the isolated islands of Antarctica, only the highest peaks peeping above the water. There were no people around to try to stay the march of climate change as ice began to take up that water and lower the world's oceans. And if there had been—would they have welcomed this gradual change? Probably. Because more and more land was revealed. And land provided greater possibilities than water. Scientists always seem to be busy drilling ice cores in Antarctica, not because they want to reach the land underneath but to test the amounts of carbon preserved in the ice over the aeons. And when massive ice sheets melted at the end of the last Ice Age not only did the seas rise rapidly but the land, released from that massive weight, sort of sprang up. Perhaps ‘sprang’ is not quite the right word. But my image of the American Highland and elsewhere in Antarctica released from that massive weight of ice is of a place which would become impressively higher. Perhaps the people of the Pacific about to see their lands go under the sea could be given a piece of Antarctica as part compensation? Preferably a piece with great tourist potential.

Antarctica is that large white blob around the South Pole but I had never looked at it in detail. So it was an education to actually study a map and ponder on the names which have been plonked on it by explorers, in memory of explorers, for the patrons and sponsors of explorers, and more rarely because of particular physical attributes and peculiarities.

Women rarely feature except as wives or queens in the nations of those explorers. Marie Byrd Land, Victoria Land, Queen Maud Land, Queen Fabiola Mountains.

The discoverer of American Highland was, yes, an American, Lincoln Ellsworth, and he has been rewarded with his features, Ellsworth Land and the Ellsworth Mountains.

Michael Palin in *Pole to Pole* wrote: “Below us the flat white waste is broken by nunataks – peaks that are tall enough to break through the ice-sheet – and eventually by the longer ranges of crumbly black rock that make up the Ellsworth Mountains.

“Much of Antarctica is still unmapped and a race to name new mountains, plateau, bays and glaciers is under way. To prevent complete confusion there is an international committee that vets names and claims. From the latest map it would seem they’ve run sadly short of inspiration – one set of mountains is called the ‘Executive Committee Range’. If they can get away with that, surely I can find a ‘Palin Peak’.”

He wrote that more than 30 years ago. But if you would like to be memorialized by some feature of Antarctica I think your best chance is via an Ice Shelf or Ice Tongue. Larsen Ice Shelf, Shackleton Ice Shelf, Voyeykov Ice Shelf, Amery Ice Shelf, Ninnis Glacier Tongue, Chelyuskintsy Ice Tongue ... And behind every name there is a story. For unlike a council whacking names on the streets of a new suburban development (‘we could go for trees, I s’pose’) most places in Antarctica have a story of courage and endurance behind them.

Brian Toohey in *Secret* wrote, “Despite fears that some other country will seize its Antarctic ‘territory’, Australia doesn’t own any part of that continent—never has and never will. Its claims have always lacked international recognition except from a handful of other countries with claims. The reality is that Australia ratified the 1961 Antarctic Treaty that put all territorial claims on indefinite hold, demilitarised the continent, and promotes international scientific cooperation.” And in 1991 exploring for minerals was banned until 2048. But I think it is understandable that Australians feel a moral right to some parts of Antarctica, given the extraordinary courage, stoicism, and dedication that went into the early exploration and mapping of Antarctica. This is only matched by the courage and dedication of men from the UK and Norway. In the 1930s several Americans including Lincoln Ellsworth joined this small band of doughty explorers, surveyors, and scientists. And I think there is another aspect. People tend to care and put the money into caring for the places they feel they own. Some dedicated and caring people put time and money and hard work into caring for the places they rent but many see no point in caring for a place they can be evicted from at any time.

Lincoln Ellsworth’s story *is* worth remembering. Born in Chicago, he first became connected with Roald Amundsen’s attempts to fly over the North Pole. This was achieved in 1926 when they flew from Svalbard to Alaska. He then turned his attention to the South Pole, making four expeditions there with his ex-fishing boat from Norway to which he gave the very un-Norwegian name of *Wyatt Earp* (and he took with him as ‘mascot’ a gun belt which had belonged to Wyatt Earp) and a plane on skis which he called *Polar Star*. In the plane he made the world’s first trans-Antarctic flight, he discovered mountains which he called Sentinel Range (later renamed in his honour), and from his explorations came the American decision to claim a large chunk of Antarctica for the USA, 350,000 square miles of it. But it wasn’t always plain ‘sailing’. When they lost radio contact and seemed to be lost his pilot brought the plane down on the plateau to save fuel. It was not only that Ellsworth was a very poor navigator or that the South

Magnetic Pole had confused things, but the pilot Herbert Hollick-Kenyon discovered that Ellsworth's sextant was misaligned. When he fixed it he found they were still in fact on course. But Wilkins in the *Wyatt Earp* had already radioed for help believing disaster had overtaken the plane and Australia eventually managed to arrange for a ship to be sent, carrying two light planes. Meanwhile the two men had managed to dig the *Polar Star* out of a snowdrift after a blizzard and set out again for their destination.

This might suggest a very modest man but he called his 1938 autobiography *Beyond Horizons: The Autobiography of the Great Polar Explorer*. I wondered if those were his choice of words or whether his publisher wanted them so as to sell the book more readily. I enquired at the Glenorchy Library to see if it was possible to read *Beyond Horizons* and found, to my surprise, that the only copy in a Tasmanian library is heritage listed and kept behind glass, unable to even be viewed by the ordinary library patron. They did however find me a good, and probably a better, alternative, a copy of Jeff Maynard's *Antarctica's Lost Aviator*. In fact, Ellsworth used a ghostwriter. Maynard said of it, "In *Beyond Horizons*, Ellsworth paid little acknowledgement to the many people who had helped him cross Antarctica. He repeatedly claimed he made all the decisions regarding the purchasing and fitting out of the *Wyatt Earp*; he had personally selected the plane and had a hand in its design; he studied the conditions in the Antarctic and solved the problems of its navigation. Nowhere in the book was there a photograph of Wilkins, who received only brief mentions. The crew members of the *Wyatt Earp* were either ignored or described as "my cabin boy" or "my meteorologist." The reader was told that Ellsworth was in command of the ship the entire time it was at sea." Perhaps unsurprisingly "*Beyond Horizons* enjoyed only one print run and was soon forgotten."

Ellsworth was a very unlikely hero. Maynard sets the scene: "Finally, the plane accelerates across the snowfield, lifts off, circles once over the cheering men still on the ground, and flies out of the picture. The local time is 0800 Greenwich Mean Time (GMT). The date is November 23, 1935. The location is Dundee Island, near the tip of the Antarctic Peninsula. The wealthy and eccentric American explorer, Lincoln Ellsworth, after years of setbacks, misfortunes, and ridicule, is finally on his way to attempt the first crossing of the last unexplored continent on Earth."

Strictly speaking, Ellsworth depended on his Canadian pilot, Herbert Hollick-Kenyon, because he couldn't fly a plane, and he depended on an Australian, Sir Hubert Wilkins, to organise the expedition, because he had never managed to organise anything. In fact he was a remarkably incompetent vacillating man but he was also a very wealthy one. His childhood had been made miserable by a very strict overbearing father. But that father left him a fortune when he died. In effect he was able to buy himself into several important expeditions of polar exploration. He revered the tough brave men who had succeeded, from Wyatt Earp to Roald Amundsen and Hubert Wilkins, writing, "I am frankly a hero-worshipper and sentimentalist." But almost by default he became a hero because when put to the toughest tests of survival, digging his plane out of blizzard-driven snow and eventually reaching the radio shack Richard Byrd had created at an untenanted base called Little America, he came through with surprising calm. One of the men on the rescue mission, Francis Ommanney, said of Ellsworth that he was "rather a naïf and childlike old boy who hadn't much idea why he was flying across the Antarctic or what he hoped to achieve by the feat." Perhaps the answer was quite simple: he too wanted to be a hero.

He drew inspiration from Mary Brent Whiteside's poem:
Who has known heights and depths shall not again
Know peace—not as the calm heart knows
Low, ivied walls; a garden close;
And though he tread the humble ways of men
He shall not speak the common tongue again.

Who has known heights shall bear forevermore
An incommunicable thing
That hurts his heart, as if a wing
Beat at the portal, challenging;
And yet—lured by the gleam his vision wore—
Who once has trodden stars seeks peace no more.

The *Polar Star* found a home afterwards in The Smithsonian and then was moved to the National Air and Space Museum in Washington. But the *Wyatt Earp* had a more complicated life after its Antarctic duties. It was eventually sold to Australia and renamed HMAS *Wongala*. It carried ammunition from Sydney to Darwin then became a 'guard ship' in South Australia, and eventually was made available for Sea Scout training. Then it was refurbished with the possibility of further use in the Antarctic. But it was too old for the conditions and was re-sold to run supplies across Bass Strait. It was sold again and called the *Natone* "to honor a small Tasmanian town" but sent to Queensland to work as a coastal trader. It ran aground off the Gold Coast in 1959 and "Lincoln Ellsworth's gallant little ship was smashed to pieces".

"Lincoln Ellsworth was not an expert navigator. ... Nevertheless he did, along with Hollick-Kenyon, manage to bring the *Polar Star* 2,200 miles (3,500 km) across an unexplored continent to within sixteen miles (25 km) of Little America, which was about the size of a football field and hidden beneath the ice."

Maynard ends by saying, "The flight across Antarctica, by guess or by God, remains an incredible achievement."

HOLLYWOOD:

"The four or five blocks that comprise the epicenter of Hollywood are a morass of advertisements, hot pavement, homeless encampments, anonymous office buildings with graffiti slung across their faces, and overpriced parking lots. Weekday afternoons in Hollywood belong to patchy mascots and drunk Charlie Chaplin impersonators trawling for autographs. Everywhere you look, there are confused tourists who come to Los Angeles expecting to see the film industry of yesteryear—the sweeping pepper trees, quaint studios, and beaming doyennes kneeling to press their hands into fresh cement outside Grauman's Chinese Theatre. Modern Hollywood is hell, and driving through it is a chore I avoid at all costs."

From *Double Exposure* by Ava Barry.

There are other Hollywoods and they have been there much longer. For instance, Cassell's *Gazeteer of Great Britain and Ireland* offers three that predated California's

namesake. One in England about 6 miles south of Birmingham, one on the road between Dublin and Drogheda which had a holy well, and one on the road from Dublin to Baltinglass and Tullow in Co. Wicklow. I assume they all laid claim to the key ingredient: a copse of holly bushes. It is rather hard to imagine holly bushes, rather than palm trees, in California but perhaps someone with memories of one of those other Hollywoods ...

Lili Anolik wrote *Hollywood's Eve: Eve Babitz and the Secret History of L.A.* about Eve Babitz who wrote *Eve's Hollywood*. The town Eve's mother and grandmother came to was a very different town. "Lily May arrived in Hollywood in 1934. She must've blinked her eyes, dried out from the Dust Bowl and the fluorescent Texas sun and the ugly, oil-reeking air. Maybe she also rubbed them because it would be hard to credit what they were seeing: palm trees, the leaves heavy, fleshy, swaying gracefully under a sky of blue both deep and soft; slanting, honeyed light spilling densely across the fronts of the buildings, horizontal rather than vertical and sleepy-looking, the cottages, wooden and A-frame or Spanish-style, white stucco with red-tile roofs; trolleys moving people unhurriedly to and fro and back again on wide streets that still had, as she'd soon discover, long rural stretches, orange groves on either side; and, most thrillingly of all, in the near distance, above Bronson Canyon, on Mount Lee, the HOLLYWOODLAND sign, erected in 1923, an advertisement for a real estate development, and the site, the year before, of a spectacular suicide, a young woman named Peg Entwistle jumping off the *H* after failing to make it in motion pictures (Lily May had no interest in those, but she very much did in enchantment, the other local product). And as she stood there, breathing in the delicate scent of the jasmine blossoms, feeling the lazy, languid weight of the breeze—ocean, even though the Pacific was miles away—its touch on her face as gentle as a caress, she probably wondered if she wasn't dreaming or dead. Reality here simply wasn't real."

But alas, people kill the things they love. Or in this case, didn't love enough. "A rage for newer, bigger, better swept through L.A. in the fifties. Buildings and houses from the turn of the century, elegant and majestic, were being torn down left and right, junked like old movie sets, to make way for monstrosities, bland and anonymous. Mae's method was, in her words, "to stay one step ahead of the smashing ball." Says Mirandi (Eve's sister), "Mother used to bump into the man who ran the Cleveland Wrecking Company at sites. They became friends. He started calling her when he got a job. He'd tell her, 'We're going to be at such and such a place in three months.' She'd grab her card table and her folding chair, her pencils and pads, and go. Usually she'd take me and Evie with her. I'd bring my homework, and Evie would bring a book, and we'd just sort of hang out while she drew." Mae's sketches of the Hollywood Hotel, the original Los Angeles High School, the Angels Flight Railway at Hill Street, are among the only records of these structures that exist. And to see her work in its entirety is to see a city that's vanished, a city that wasn't a city at all, but a drowsy Spanish outpost, the ghost town called Los Angeles that haunts the sleek, tense, ultramodern urban experience known as L.A."

I is for INUVIK:

After a friend died her daughter gave me her set of *Britannicas*. Though some of the information is now out-of-date I still love browsing in endless intriguing little snippets. I tried various 'I' places through my mind without having a 'That's It!' moment. So I went to the relevant encyclopaedia to browse. And I came up with this: "Inuvik, settlement, Northwest Territories, Canada, on the East Channel of the Mackenzie Delta, near the northern point of the Yukon. Planned as a model Eskimo community by the Canadian government, it was built (1954-62) on firm, well-drained land to avoid construction problems that had plagued Aklavik. Government headquarters of the Western Arctic, Inuvik has modern schools, a hospital, and a hotel. It is a centre for trappers, sealers, and walrus hunters and specializes in Eskimo handicrafts."

The thing which intrigued me was a picture of a church there designed as a large igloo. I wondered how they had set it up inside. And, more generally, 'planned' 'model' communities do not have a terribly good reputation around the world so I wondered how Inuvik had fared.

Lonely Planet's guide to *Canada* says, "Inuvik, a few dozen kilometers from the mouth of the Mackenzie River, was founded in 1955 as an administrative post to replace the inconveniently located Aklavik. With its rainbow-colored rows of houses and warren of above-ground heated pipes, this close-knit community still feels like a work in progress." They offer craft shops with "plenty of soapstone and whalebone carvings as well as jewelry made of NWT (North West Territory) diamonds" but I assume shops all over Canada stock Inuit crafts and Inuvik would be a very long drive to buy a carved walrus. So why go?

"During the summer's constant daylight, lots of visitors arrive in search of Arctic adventure via the rugged, awesome 737km Dempster Hwy from the Yukon, and many continue all the way to Tuktoyaktuk, on the shore of the Arctic Ocean." They call the Dempster Highway "a most worthy contender for Canada's most scenic and challenging drive. It passes through dense boreal forest and bare tundra, and rises gently between snow-tipped mountains. It's an unpaved, partially potholed road with treacherous muddy sections, potential delays at ferry crossings and no phone signal." But as you climb out of the mud or bump over the holes you have the consolation, indeed the excitement, of a "heart-wrenchingly beautiful" route with likely "wildlife sightings" and access to several "remote national parks".

And the church which initially intrigued me? "The town landmark is the wooden Our Lady of Victory Church, also called the Igloo Church, designed to reflect the local Inuvialuit culture. It has a resplendent gleaming dome and its appealing interior is decorated with scenes from the Rapture, painted by Inuvialuit artist Mona Thresher".

J is for JAFFA:

Jaffas in my childhood were those round orange-coated chocolate lollies we bought on the rare occasions we went to a movie and which some kid always seemed to drop so that they rolled noisily everywhere on the wooden floors. I assumed they were called Jaffas because the port of Jaffa was associated with the export of oranges.

There was an ancient seaside settlement in Israel, going back several thousand years, called Joppa so I wondered if it had morphed into Jaffa or if the two places were entirely separate. A little bit of research told me that yes, they were one and the same—or at least they occupied the same area of ground. The ancient port of Joppa was a Philistine

town, then a Jewish town, but was also attacked and occupied by the Persians and the Romans.

It appears in several Biblical stories; most famously, perhaps, in the Book of Jonah. “One day, the Lord spoke to Jonah son of Amittai. He said, “Go to Nineveh, that great city, and speak out against it; I am aware how wicked its people are.” Jonah, however, set out in the opposite direction in order to get away from the Lord. He went to Joppa, where he found a ship about to go to Spain. He paid his fare and went aboard with the crew to sail to Spain, where he would be away from the Lord.” There is a great storm and the sailors pray to their various deities for help but when they find Jonah is running away they blame him for the storm and throw him into the sea. He is swallowed by a large fish and naturally turns back to the god he has disobeyed to pray for deliverance. After three days the fish coughs him back up and this time he does what he is asked and goes to Nineveh to proclaim “In forty days Nineveh will be destroyed!”

But the people, believing him, decide to fast and put on sackcloth as a sign of their repentance; even the king gives out an edict, and people and animals wear sackcloth. God forgives them their past wickedness but Jonah is angry that he has been through so much and all just so God can forgive the people of Nineveh who, after all, are Assyrians and therefore the enemies of Israel. But God has no time for this self-pity, pointing out that in the great city of Nineveh “it has more than 120,000 innocent children in it, as well as many animals!” The story is an allegory about obedience and repentance and perhaps too a reminder that it takes courage to obey and repent. It is a pity that a great deal of thought has instead gone into trying to determine what kind of fish could swallow Jonah without turning him into digestible mush.

Jerome Murphy-O’Connor in *The Holy Land: An Oxford Archaeological Guide* says of it: “The confused urban sprawl of Tel Aviv belies the fact that the city was founded in the C20. In 1909 a group of 60 Jewish families moved out of Jaffa to settle in the sand dunes to the north. At first a suburb of Jaffa, it became independent in 1921 and thereafter grew uncontrollably as new immigrants poured in. In May 1948, in the eve of the declaration of the State of Israel, Jewish forces took control of Jaffa.

“The first settlements in the area between Jaffa and the Yarkon river date from the end of the Stone Age (c. 5000 BC), and evidence for continued occupation during the subsequent Copper and Bronze Ages has also been found. The name Jaffa appears for the first time in the list of cities captured by Thutmose III in his campaign of 1468 BC. ... Letters conserved in the archives at Amarna show Jaffa to have been under Egyptian control in the C14 BC, and they retained it until the Philistines established themselves in the area c. 1200 BC.”

It was taken by Israel in the time of King Solomon, reverted to the Philistines, then back to King Uzziah of Judah but was then taken by the Assyrians. With the collapse of Assyria “Jaffa passed from hand to hand, being occupied in turn by Egypt, Babylon, Persia, and Sidon.” It became a Greek colony under Alexander, then went back to Egyptian control. Then “in 47 BC Julius Caesar returned the city to Jewish control. A besotted Mark Antony gave it to Cleopatra; on her death in 30 BC Augustus added it to Herod’s realm.” The Crusaders took possession in the C13. “The Mamluk sultan Baybars took the city on 8 March 1268, and stripped it of timber and marble for his new mosque in Cairo. In 1344-46 his successors systematically razed the buildings and filled in the

harbour in order to deny the European powers a base.” It remained in Ottoman Turk hands till WWI after which it was briefly administered by Britain until it became part of the modern nation of Israel.

I am not sure I will ever be able to think of Jaffas as simply the adjuncts to a movie matinee again.

K is for KILU CAVE:

Caves are places with amazing limestone formations or strange forms of life such as little creatures without eyes. But caves can have a different fascination. They can be a window into our human past. Anthony Regan and Helga Griffin edited a collection of papers for their *Bougainville before the conflict*. In a paper by Matthew Spriggs titled ‘Bougainville’s Early History: An Archaeological Perspective’ he writes, “A whole new vista on Bougainville’s past was opened up in 1988 by the publication of Stephen Wickler’s dates for his excavations at Kilu Cave near Malasang Village on Buka.” Buka is the small island just off the north coast of the larger island of Bougainville. “A series of radiocarbon dates, back to nearly 29,000 years ago, extended the known history of the main Solomons chain by almost 10 times. Previously, the earliest dated sites for the Solomon archipelago were about 3,000 years old, relating to colonisation by agricultural, Austronesian-speaking populations who made and used a very distinctively decorated pottery called Lapita. Assemblages of Lapita pottery include red-slipped pots of various shapes and sizes, sometimes decorated using dentate (tooth-like) stamps to produce elaborate patterns such as representations of a human face. This pottery is found at many sites between the Bismarcks and Samoa, dating to this time period, and to the south and east of the Bismarcks. It was generally thought to represent the first colonisation of the Pacific islands by humans. This is still the case for Vanuatu, New Caledonia, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. But the dates for Kilu demonstrated a much longer human history for the Solomons chain.

“A longer than 3,000 year history had, in fact, been predicted for the Solomons chain, particularly for Bougainville, prior to 1988 on the basis of the presence of non-Austronesian or Papuan languages and because of the distinctive skin colours of the Bougainvilleans and other western Solomons populations. The non-Austronesian languages were distributed on Bougainville, as they are on the island of New Guinea, in the interior and south of the island, with Austronesian languages occurring mainly along the coastal fringes and thus appearing to represent the languages of later arrivals. The genetic diversity of Bougainvilleans, symbolised by their extremely dark skin colour, was thought by biological anthropologists to have required an extremely long time-period of occupation of the region, certainly a lot longer than 3,000 years.”

The Austronesian language group, sometimes called Malayo-Polynesian, is a large group of languages which were spoken in Malaysia, Indonesian, Madagascar, and up through parts of Vietnam, Cambodia, the Philippines and Taiwan, as well as out into the Pacific, apart from Australia and parts of Melanesia. The group is divided into Western Austronesian predominantly found in S. E. Asia, and Eastern Austronesian predominantly found in the Pacific.

“The Kilu Cave excavation confirmed these predictions and gave us a glimpse of what the lifestyle of early Solomon Islands populations was like.” But then the

Bougainville ‘crisis’ intervened, stopping all mining activity but also stopping the research into the Cave’s history.

Buka, Bougainville and the islands of the Solomons were one land mass during the last Ice Age but as the ice began to melt and the seas to rise they emerged as separate land masses. “Although Kilu Cave is the earliest site currently known in the entire Solomons chain, this does not necessarily make it the earliest site occupied by humans in the region. From the Bismarck Archipelago to the north, the obvious immediate origin for its first colonists, there are sites dating back 35,000 to 40,000 years. Sites on mainland New Guinea — itself joined to Australia for much of its history — go back even earlier, and the human settlement of the Australia-New Guinea continent is now generally believed to go back 50,000 to 60,000 years.”

There were comparatively few major gaps between Africa and the Pacific, people could have followed coastlines with relative ease, but there are two significant gaps: between the islands of eastern Indonesia and New Guinea, and between the islands of New Britain and Buka. “This may have delayed discovery of the Solomons, or it may be simply that we have not yet found the earliest sites there.”

“Kilu is a cave at the base of a 30-metre high limestone cliff, some 65 metres from the sea and currently about 8 metres above the high tide mark. It consists of a large, dry front shelter where excavation took place and a damper small cave chamber behind it. The main shelter is 33 metres by 17 metres and well lit. ... Cave use during this time seems to represent only very sporadic low-intensity use.” The stone tools they examined were flakes with polished cutting edges and, intriguingly, they were found to have plant material adhering which proved to come from two kinds of taro. “The distribution throughout the deposit of tools with residue on them might suggest a regular supply was available that would seem to require some degree of cultivation.”

Shell middens, fish bones, remains of land-based animals including rats, lizards and snakes suggest a very varied diet. “Between about 20,000 and 10,000 years ago the Kilu site was abandoned, and we as yet have no other sites that bridge the gap in the Solomons.” Other caves have been found but so far they show no occupation later than just over 6,000 years ago. “This abandonment may have resulted from changes in sea level that dropped to a maximum 130 metres below its present level during the coldest part of the Ice Age. The site may have been isolated at the top of a substantial cliff with no access to the coast at this time. Kilu was reoccupied at about 10,400-10,000 years ago, and a series of dates continues to about 5,450-5,300 years ago. The upper 30 centimetres of the deposit is partly disturbed, showing some ephemeral use of the site in the last 2,500 years. The Holocene levels (meaning those of the last 10,000 years) include large hearths, but the significance of this is unclear as no charcoal at all had survived in the Pleistocene or Ice Age levels. The stone tools continue to be simple flakes, and residue analysis showed that their function in processing root crops also stayed the same. A decline in quantity and increase in breakage of bone in the top 60 centimetres of the deposit suggests a decrease in intensity in site use before its abandonment sometime around 5,000 years ago.”

How and when people came to a site is fascinating but so too are their reasons for abandoning it. Did they simply find something better or was it for more dramatic reasons?

L is for LORDS:

“The Marylebone Cricket Club, formed by Thomas Lord in 1787, took over from Hambledon as the ruling body and a new generation of underarm pacemen emerged in the early years of the 19th century. They were Tom Howard, father of 19 children, Honest John Wells and George Brown of Brighton.

“John Willes of Kent was the first to spot the possibility of roundarm bowling becoming the accepted vogue when his sister Christine bowled that way when the bulk of her skirt prevented underarm deliveries. Willes introduced his revolutionary action when playing for 23 of Kent against 13 of England in 1807, but it became increasingly unpopular over the next 15 years.

“The point of no return arrived for Willes at Lord’s in 1822. After being no balled bowling roundarm, he hurled the ball to the ground in disgust, walked to his horse and rode away, never again to appear in a match of any consequence; but his place in cricket history was already assured.

“William Lillywhite carried roundarm bowling to respectability and, along with Jem Broadbridge and George Thomas Knight, nephew of the author, Jane Austen, was the leading light of the new order, belatedly – for Willes at least – legalised by the MCC in 1835.”

From *Korty: The Legend Explained* by Charles Sale.

Those Boys Own type stories if they included a cricket game always seemed to have someone crying ‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’ So I thought this was one of those things that just came with a sport like ‘Tally ho’ or ‘Howzat’ or ‘They’re off’. But in fact it came from a poem by Sir Henry Newbolt. Though his poems often had a patriotic theme he was not a John Bull type saying ‘My country right or wrong’ but rather a writer who understood that Britain’s imperial ambitions also came with injustices and tragedies.

There’s a breathless hush in the Close to-night —
Ten to make and the match to win —
A bumping pitch and a blinding light,
An hour to play and the last man in.
And it’s not for the sake of a ribboned coat,
Or the selfish hope of a season’s fame,
But his Captain’s hand on his shoulder smote —
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’

The sand of the desert is sodden red —
Red with the wreck of a square that broke; —
The Gatling’s jammed and the Colonel dead,
And the regiment blind in the dust and smoke.
The river of death has brimmed his banks,
And England’s far, and Honour a name,
But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:
‘Play up! play up! and play the game!’

This is the word that year by year,

While in her place the School is set,
Every one of her sons must hear,
And none that hears it dare forget.
This they all with joyful mind
Bear through life like a torch in flame,
And falling fling to the host behind —
'Play up! play up! and play the game!'

'Vitai Lampada' by Sir Henry Newbolt.

A variety of writers have been cricketers or cricket fans, such as Arthur Conan Doyle, Alec Waugh, John Galsworthy, Sir John Squire and many more. But cricket writer Neville Cardus in his *Autobiography* mentions going to Lords with a more unexpected one. J. M. Barrie. "During 1926 I went to Lord's one morning with Barrie. We sat at right angles to the wicket, a most unprofessional place for me because I like to see the spin. But Barrie preferred the stand over the Tavern at Lord's near the dining-room; I think he imagined he was taking me to a cricket match as though I were one of his adopted grown-up children; he asked me after we had sat in the sun an hour or so whether I would like an ice-cream. Also he asked me what I thought of J. W. Hearne as a bowler: "I mean do you call him—as an expert—fast or slow?" J. W. Hearne was a slow leg-break bowler, and I replied: "Slow of course; in fact, very slow." Barrie meditated for a while, took another look at Hearne's bowling and said: "For my part I should say he's pretty fast." Here followed a pause for more meditation, then he added: "You must come down to Stanway and watch me. I can bowl so slow that if I don't like a ball I can run after it and bring it back." He used this remark at a speech to the Australian team later on; he never wasted a word. Seldom could I get him to talk about anything except cricket."

He also wrote: "I have known Australians to visit Lord's for the first time and loathe the feeling they received there of custom and prerogative. But after a while I have known the same Australians thoroughly assimilated, in love with the old order it stood for; they became more royal than the King. They enjoyed seeing the patricians in the Long Room at lunch, eating meat pies and drinking cans of beer—like patricians. Lord's was not, of course, all school-tie and patrician; it was a microcosm of London itself. There was the East End—near the Tavern—as well as the West End of the Long Room. When the promenade on the grass took place during lunch, Seven Dials was free to move with Belgrave Square; a Hendren is as symbolical of Lord's as ever the Hon. C. N. Bruce. Still, there is a limit to things; you can have J. W. Hearne at Lord's a sort of butler; you can have Patsy a head-groom or coachman; you can have big genial Jim Smith, out of the garden, so to say, or something to do with the buttery. But at Lord's you could not in decency have an Emmott Robinson permanently on the premises or any other embodiment of industry or trade. Cricket, I say, honours the *habitat*; the social historian will find in a study of it and its environment much that the blue-books omit.

"A hundred times I have walked down the St. John's Wood Road on a quiet morning—that's the proper way to enjoy Lord's: choose a match of no importance, for preference one for which the fixture card promises a "band if possible." I have gone a hundred times into the Long Room out of the hot sun and never have I not felt that this is a good place to be in, and if the English simply *had* to make cricket a national institution

and a passion and a pride, this was the way to do it, in a handsome hall and pavilion, a resting-place for the game's history, with its constitution to be found as much in Debrett as in "Wisden." I have looked through the great windows on the field of play and seen the cricketers in the heat, moving like creatures in another element, the scene as though suspended in time; the crowd a painted canvas; the blue sky and the green of the trees at the nursery end; the lordly ones slumbering on the white seats of the pavilion, or quietly talking. On the Friday morning when Hitler invaded Poland, I chanced to be in this same Long Room at Lord's watching through windows for the last time for years. Though no spectators were present, a match was being continued; there was no legal way of stopping it. Balloon barrages hung over Lord's. As I watched the ghostly movements of the players outside, a beautifully preserved member of Lord's, spats and rolled umbrella, stood near me inspecting the game. We did not speak of course; we had not been introduced. Suddenly two workmen entered the Long Room in green aprons and carrying a bag. They took down the bust of W. G. Grace, put it into the bag, and departed with it. The noble lord at my side watched their every movement; then he turned to me. "Did you see, sir?" he asked. I told him I had seen. "That means war," he said."

I borrowed Lonely Planet's *Experience London* to find out how you actually get to Lords but to my surprise it made no mention of the hallowed venue. Do more people go to London to see its graffiti or eat Japanese food than go for the cricket? Given that Lords was the venue for Don Bradman's amazing 254 runs against England in 1930 I found that hard to believe. Thomas Lord did create his ground in Marylebone in 1787 but it moved to the St John's Wood Estate in 1811 and then to its current home off St John's Wood Road in 1814 and there it reposes, waiting for the next Don Bradman to come and make cricketing history.

M is for MONTMARTRE:

"Montmartre embodied the bohemian spirit. In its past it had been the home of anarchist Communards and then of artists and writers for whom absinthe provided inspiration. Now it held a mix of small cafés and theatres that hosted poetry readings or a playwright testing a first act on patrons, and dance studios occupying ateliers that once boasted students like van Gogh.

"Young Parisians treasured converted studios here, trading the trudge up the steep streets and flights of stairs for the view of the sweeping panorama below, just as Utrillo, Renoir, and Picasso once made their homes in cheap ateliers. This was where the Impressionists, Cubists, and Surrealists had painted. The tradition of the village, eccentric and stubborn, still remained."

Cara Black in *Murder in Montmartre*.

John Baxter sets the scene for the armchair traveler in his *Montmartre*: "In Paris, one district more than any other demonstrates this capacity to induce in people a readiness, even a hunger, for change. Though superficially tranquil, Montmartre, the hilltop village on the city's northern edge, has repeatedly erupted in revolution—in art, in politics, in culture—and left the world fundamentally changed.

"Given its sleepy beginnings, who could have foreseen that, within a few years of becoming part of the city in 1860, events in Montmartre would grip the world?"

“As a Prussian army ringed Paris, starving it of munitions, food, even water, the wind that had only ever driven flour mills was harnessed to carry news-laden balloons above enemy lines.

“Barely was the siege lifted than Montmartre declared itself an anarchist state, the Commune, independent of both Paris and the nation. Yet, within a generation, it turned its back on politics to become a laboratory of experiment in painting—only to discard art also, and re-emerge as a community synonymous with sensuality and sex. Of all these upheavals, however, only ruins, statues, and memorials remain. It’s as if each sweep of history expunges what went before, as an eraser wipes a blackboard clean.

“Today Montmartre is quiet once again. But only someone with no sense of history would gamble on it remaining so.”

Long before it became a place for tourists Montmartre was a place of gypsum mines, going back to Roman times, which the many windmills ground to the powder we use to make ‘Plaster of Paris’ or as the French called it, Montmartarite. The mills still appear on advertisements and posters but they were first turned to grinding grain then into places of food and entertainment. But the hillsides riddled with old gypsum mines created problems not only for the building of grand structures like the Basilica of Sacré Coeur but also for more modest dwellings. And names now forever associated with Montmartre, Le Chat Noir, the Moulin Rouge, the Bateau Lavoir, Le Grand Guignol, as well as plaques and sometimes tombs of the ‘names’, artists, dancers, writers, musicians, models, cabaret stars, still exert an attraction. Many of those from the past, from Pablo Picasso to Ernest Hemingway, only became famous after they had moved on from Montmartre. So perhaps as you wander around you may rub shoulders with someone who someday ...

M is for MACGILLYCUDDY REEKS:

Long ago when I was at primary school we had to draw maps of various places in the British Commonwealth including Canada and New Zealand every weekend as homework. But whoever set the curriculum also included places like South Africa and Ireland. Perhaps they hadn’t noticed that the British Commonwealth had shrunk.

We did an outline then put in some mountains and rivers. The thing that remains in my mind from what were probably not very good maps of Ireland was a mountain range called the Macgillicuddy Reeks. It was not explained why the mountains had been given such an intriguing name. All that mattered was putting them in approximately the right place.

There was a family called MacGillicuddy. Agatha Christie has a fictitious Mrs Macgillicuddy in *4.50 from Paddington*. But why Reeks? Did the mountains reek or was this something about the mist curling upwards from them? No. Reeks is a version of ricks, an Anglo-Irish version of ‘stacks’. In Irish the mountains are called Cruacha Dubha Mhic Giolla Mo Chuda meaning The Black Stacks of McGillicuddy.

Robert Lloyd Praeger said of them in *The Way That I Went*: “Macgillicuddy’s Reeks (*i.e.* Ricks), the highest mountains in Ireland (Carrantual, *Corrán tuathail*, an inverted reaping-hook (from its outline) is 3414 feet), are not so conspicuous from Killarney as their proximity and height would lead one to expect, for Purple Mountain and Tomies Mountain, separated from “The Reeks” by the deep Gap of Dunloe, rise between, screening them somewhat effectually. But from other sides, and especially from

the north, they tower up boldly, a close-set group of sharp peaks, overtopping all the hills around. They are thus cut off from Killarney by both water and mountain. The Reeks are best approached from the north-west—from Caragh Lake and Glencar; on that side a driving road passes within three miles of the summit of Carrantual at a height of 545 feet, and the track that runs up the Caragh River over to Cummeenduff takes you both closer and higher. The orthodox way of ascending Carrantual from Killarney is to drive to Gaddagh bridge, six miles west of Lough Lene, and ascend the Gaddagh River and on up the wild Hag's Glen. The slopes are steep and often grassy, with so much precipitous ground that you must choose your route carefully; and there are dark tarns lying in cliff-walled coombs of green and purple slates, and knife-edge *arêtes* above—together an inspiring place for the mountaineer. The walk along the main ridge, from above the Gap of Dunloe forms, in the estimation of the late H. C. Hart, who was a very competent judge, "the grandest bit of mountaineering to be met with in Ireland". The Gap of Dunloe, which cuts the Reeks off from their natural continuation on the north, is a deep Glacial overflow channel, formed by a torrent when the ice lay piled so high on the lower grounds around that this was the easiest point of escape for the marginal streams. But one can scarcely view it in peace on account of the cloud of human gad-flies which infests it, attracted thither by the stream of tourists passing through it on Killarney's favourite lake-and-mountain excursion."

The Reeks are on private land (the Macgillicuddy family have been there since the 1500s but the mountains are owned by a number of different people) so you do need to keep to the designated walking tracks, not wander off on your own. And I imagine the tourist traffic, a hundred years since Praeger wrote of the roads through, is now bumper-to-bumper in summer.

Paul Muldoon in his collection *General Admission* calls a poem 'Macgillicuddy's Reeks':

She stood beside my narrow bed
To check my EKG
She shook her pretty little head
At what's become of me
I thought I glimpsed a path that led
Through rhododendron days
And fuschia nights to the boat shed
In which we two once lay

But she gazed only at my chart
The valleys and the peaks
Brought back the time she broke my heart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks
But she gazed only at my chart
The valleys and the peaks
Brought back the time she brought my heart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks

I saw her on Killarney's shore
One morning in July

When I still thought I was a thorn
Trying to find a side
I met her in the little launch
That runs to Innisfallen
Hunched together haunch to haunch
Trying to keep my balance

But she upset my applearth
She kissed me on the cheek
And I was struck by Cupid's dart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
I was struck by Cupid's dart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks

She was a systems analyst
For a dot com company
She said you think because we've kissed
I'll be yours eternally
I'll sign another pre-nup
And we'll merge our PLCs
That's why most girls go belly up
In this economy

And when it comes to a jump-start
Your forecast's pretty bleak
The Nasdaq goes by fits and starts
Like Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
The Nasdaq goes by fits and starts
Like Macgillicuddy's Reeks

She gazed only at my chart
The valleys and the peaks
Brought back the time she broke my heart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
Macgillicuddy's Reeks
That was the time she broke my heart
In Macgillicuddy's Reeks.

N is for NINEVEH:

I went to my (fairly) trusty encyclopaedia to see if they gave something of the history of Nineveh. It is not that you are likely to be planning to spend your next holiday

in Iraq but that doesn't really take away the mysterious 'pull' of ancient places. "Nineveh, the most populous and the oldest city in Assyria, lay on the east bank of the Tigris opposite modern Mosul (in Iraq). From time immemorial, roads from the foothills of Kurdistan debouched there, and a tributary of the Tigris, the Khawsar River, added to the value of the fertile agricultural and pastoral lands in the district. The first to survey and map Nineveh was the archaeologist Claudius J. Rich in 1820, a work later completed by Felix Jones and published by him in 1854. Excavations have been undertaken intermittently since that period by many persons. A.H. (later Sir Henry) Layard during 1845-51 discovered the palace of Sennacherib and took back to England an unrivalled collection of stone bas-reliefs together with thousands of tablets inscribed in cuneiform from the great library of Ashurbanipal. Hormudz Rassam continued the work in 1852. During 1929-32 R. Campbell Thompson excavated the temple of Nabu (Nebo) on behalf of the British Museum and discovered the site of the palace of Ashurnasirpal II. In 1931-32, together with M.E.L. (later Sir Max) Mallowan, Thompson for the first time dug a shaft from the top of the Quyunjik (Acropolis), 90 feet (30 metres) above the level of the plain down through strata of accumulated debris of earlier cultures to virgin soil. It was then proved that over four-fifths of this great accumulation is prehistoric."

The first settlement there was probably created in the 7th millennium BC. Small settlements grew up on trade routes and these became towns and sometimes cities. Nineveh began as a small Hurrian settlement before becoming an Assyrian town. Trade was the initial driver of importance and prosperity but was gradually replaced by conquest. And it was conquest which was partly to blame for Assyria's collapse in 612 BC. The restlessness of its vassal states, invasion by a combined force of Babylonians and Medes, internal strife, epidemics, and what might have relevance still, the likelihood that famine and poor harvests was partly driven by deforestation to provide timber for building and fuel and in the push to bring more marginal lands into cultivation.

The *Bible* in the Book of Nahum exults over the destruction of Nineveh, understandable perhaps but unattractive in that the destruction and massacres are attributed to God rather than the human passions which bring about the rise and fall of kingdoms ...

“The gates by the river burst open;
the palace is filled with terror.
The queen is taken captive;
her servants moan like doves
and beat their breasts in sorrow.
Like water from a broken dam
the people rush from Nineveh!
“Stop! Stop!” the cry rings out—
but no one turns back.

Plunder the silver!
Plunder the gold!
The city is full of treasure!

Nineveh is destroyed, deserted, desolate!
Hearts melt with fear;

knees tremble, strength is gone;
faces grow pale.”

“All those who hear the news of your destruction clap their hands for joy.” But the Babylonians, empowered by their destruction of the Assyrian empire, eventually fell upon Jerusalem, destroying the city and carrying its population off to Babylon as slaves. And then the Persians captured Babylon and enabled those Israelite slaves to return home to Jerusalem and helped them rebuild ...

Eudora Welty wrote in an essay she called ‘Place in Fiction’: “One element ... is surely the underlying bond that connects all the arts with place. All of them celebrate its mystery. Where does this mystery lie? Is it in the fact that place has a more lasting identity than we have, and we unswervingly tend to attach ourselves to identity? Might the magic lie partly, too, in the *name* of the place—since that is what *we* gave it? Surely, once we have it named, we have put a kind of poetic claim on its existence; the claim works even out of sight—may work forever sight unseen. The Seven Wonders of the World still give us this poetic kind of gratification. And notice we do not say simply “The Hanging Gardens”—that would leave them dangling out of reach and dubious in nature; we say “The Hanging Gardens of Babylon,” and there they are, before our eyes, shimmering and garlanded and exactly elevated to the Babylonian measurement.”

But Bettany Hughes in *The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World* queries whether the gardens were actually in Babylon. “Unequivocal archaeological evidence for hanging gardens at Babylon might be conspicuous by its absence, but the existence of ancient hanging gardens a hundred miles to the north, in the city of Nineveh, is indisputable. Because new evidence, and the persuasive detective work of scholars, suggests that our second Wonder could quite possibly not only be a daydream made flesh – as the majority of later historical accounts would have it – by Nebuchadnezzar the Great in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, but also in gardens further to the north in the wider province of Babylonia in Nineveh, the Bible’s ‘city of sin’, in the seventh century BCE by Sennacherib, the self-styled ‘Favourite of the Gods’.

“The story of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon is then a tale of two cities; a tale of two emotional reactions to history; and a tale of two kings – the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar the Great whose power base was Babylon, and the Assyrian Sennacherib who ruled from the mighty northern city of Nineveh, just shy of the modern city of Mosul.”

“Assyria ... was a kingdom whose centre of operations comprised what is now central and northern Iraq, a territory of mountains and rainfalls and tributaries, whose power base lay east of the fast-flowing Tigris. Nineveh was an older settlement than Babylon, with heft, right from the time the pyramids on the Giza Plateau were being raised. With continuous influence dating back to at least the seventh millennium BCE, Assyria controlled Babylon from 732 to 626 BCE – and at its height territories in what is now Turkey, Palestine, Israel (called by the Assyrians Bit-Omri), Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria. Today Nineveh abuts war-ripped Mosul, where the River Tigris flows now more sluggishly. Students sip tea at riverside cafés, with the devastated historical city, virtually obliterated after three years under the ISIL caliphate, just visible on the river’s east bank.”

Sennacherib moved his capital south from Ashur to Nineveh and set about a massive building program. But he also went to great pains to bring water for irrigation from the mountains of Kurdistan through stone-lined channels. “Perched on the northern citadel, the rebuilding of Nineveh’s royal palace and its gardens took twelve years to complete. Nineveh was Sennacherib’s new capital – but crucially, was called Old Babylon in some Assyrian sources. The entire region was often described as Babylonia. So when ancient sources describe Babylon, could it be, as argued cogently by the scholar Stephanie Dalley, that they are in fact memorialising Nineveh?”

I turned to Eckart Frahm’s *Assyria: The Rise and Fall of the World’s First Empire* to see if he mentions any hanging gardens in Nineveh—or indeed any gardens. Alas no. But he does mention Nineveh’s famous library.

It was Sennacherib’s grandson Ashurbanipal who set about creating what was then the world’s largest library, with twenty-six thousand tablets, “discovered in a layer a foot thick” and which are still being studied by scholars at the British Museum. Frahm writes, “If there is one achievement from the reign of Ashurbanipal whose significance cannot be put into question, it is the library the king assembled at Nineveh. Strictly speaking, Ashurbanipal created several libraries, set up in his own new North Palace, in Sennacherib’s Southwest Palace, and in the temples of Nabû and Ishtar, which were located between the two royal residences. When Austen Henry Layard and his workmen, in 1850, discovered the first of these collections in the Southwest Palace, they were astonished by the large number of clay tablets they had stumbled upon.” And fired clay tablets lasted in a way that mudbrick buildings didn’t and perhaps more importantly in ways that papyrus and vellum didn’t.

“Almost all the tablets from Nineveh, those from Layard’s excavations as well as others that were found later, were brought to the British Museum in London. It’s “Kuyunjik Collection” comprises today some thirty thousand tablets and fragments. Their decipherment, and the rejoining of the broken pieces of this gigantic jigsaw puzzle, have been main preoccupants of Assyriologists since the mid-nineteenth century. Even though this process is still not complete, a lot is now known about the contents of Ashurbanipal’s libraries.”

But no one could decipher the writing, cuneiform, or knew what language was used on the tablets. “The main breakthrough was owed to a modest but brilliant Irishman by the name of Edward Hincks, a clergyman from Killyleagh in County Down who collaborated closely with Layard. By 1852, Hincks had realized that the cuneiform signs “all represent syllables,” with “every vowel definitely expressed.” Hincks’s correct identification of the values of hundreds of signs allowed Layard, in his 1853 book, *Nineveh and Babylon*, to provide remarkably accurate pioneer translations of some of the monumental inscriptions he had uncovered at Nineveh. Sensationally enough, among the events described in these texts was an attack by the army of the Assyrian king Sennacherib on Jerusalem in 701 BCE that was also described in the Bible.”

And the question which might trouble modern readers: who is the real owner of these thousands of tablets? The remnant Assyrian populations in the Middle East, Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran, have suffered grievously in the centuries since Nineveh fell to the Babylonians and the Medes, massacred, discriminated against, dispossessed and driven into exile. They now mostly live as migrant and refugee communities in the West. So

perhaps the British Museum where they can go to see something of their heritage is the best place for the tablets?

And did Ashurbanipal's passion for rebuilding and creating his massive libraries come at the cost of the beautiful palace gardens?

Though Nineveh was sacked by the Babylonians and Medes new things were gradually built over it including a medieval mosque which was linked to Nabi Yunus, known to us as the prophet Jonah. Hughes writes, "But for ISIL these were degenerate religious men, the prophet Jonah the wrong kind of prophet – so the extremists rigged the mosque with explosives and then detonated it, telling locals to stand at a distance of a third of a mile to watch, filming the explosion and expelling all the Christian families who lived locally." And Frahm is more graphic. "On February 25, 2015, the militant Islamic State group, also known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), posted a video on its social media channels. Its first scene shows the Nergal Gate on the north side of the ancient city of Nineveh. Inside the gate can be seen a beautifully carved monumental bull colossus made of hard stone. The footage proceeds to document, in painful detail, the work of a man in black clothing, standing on a platform and armed with an electric drill, as he systematically destroys the head of the sculpture, cutting deeply into its fine facial features and its carefully crafted beard. Another man, standing next to the colossus and wearing traditional Islamic garb, explains, in an Arabic dialect that marks him as coming somewhere from the Arabian Gulf, "The Prophet Muhammad commanded us to shatter and destroy statues. This is what his companions did when they conquered lands. Since God commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey. We do not care what other people think or if this costs us billions of dollars." The scene is followed by a second one, filmed inside the Mosul Museum, a few kilometers across the Tigris River. Men in strange attire are shown toppling Assyrian and Parthian statues and smashing them with sledgehammers, while verses from the Quran are recited and a voice offscreen sings in the style of a traditional *nashid*: "Hell is filled with idols and wooden images. Demolish the statues of America and its clan."

"Thus began the second destruction of Assyria's great capitals, more than two and a half millennia after the first."

But when Islamic State was routed it was found that under that Sunni mosque were the remains of an Assyrian palace. The extremists had created tunnels to store weapons but also to store looted artifacts. Alongside the destruction of carvings, statues, artworks and more, Islamic State was also selling off these stolen 'blasphemous' artifacts and making billions of dollars to fund their campaigns.

So is there anything which might be said definitively about hanging gardens apart from the fact that both Babylon and Nineveh in ancient times had beautiful gardens?

O is for 'OVER THE HORIZON':

Horizons on land can be intriguing, mysterious (what lies beyond those mountains?), occasionally threatening if the people unseen in distant valleys are warlike, but mostly just accepted. It was rather different when people ceased hugging coasts in little vessels and genuinely set out to sea. As they sailed and as the land disappeared, leaving them alone on the water 'a painted ship on a painted sea', the fear that land and home had not just disappeared from sight but might have ceased to exist must have

exerted its own fears. And for those who set out in small boats, outrigger canoes, rafts, there was the added fear: carried by currents there was not necessarily any way home. They had no choice but to sail on. Those who went out into the Pacific and settled hundreds of tiny islands were the lucky ones. Some undoubtedly sailed on into endless ocean with no land to appear before them. Magellan had no idea how vast the Pacific was. Other people whose names are lost must also have found their fate in that vastness. As Thor Heyerdahl found on his raft traveling westward across the Pacific he was at the mercy of the currents. He couldn't change course.

There were helpful hints, the sky above, birds, coconuts bobbing on the waves, different varieties of fish, volcanic ash or pumice on the wind. But there were undoubtedly niggling fears no matter how confident early navigators tried to be ...

Peter Trickett in *Beyond Capricorn: How Portuguese Adventurers secretly discovered and mapped Australia and New Zealand 250 years before Captain Cook* wrote: "Progress at sea was rapid. Cape Bojador, on the western edge of the Sahara, where the 'Land of the Blacks' began, was rounded by one of Henry's captains in 1434, exploding once and for all the superstition of medieval seamen that any ship which dared to pass this cape would disappear forever in the dreaded 'Torrid Zone', where the sea was rumoured to boil. By the time of Henry's death in 1460 the coastline of West Africa had been sailed and charted as far as Cape Palmas, where the coast turns east to form the Gulf of Guinea. The Atlantic islands of Madeira, the Canaries and the Azores had been colonised. Most importantly of all, Portuguese mariners had by now learned to sail confidently out of sight of land, trusting to their compass bearings and accurately calculating their latitude at sea with the aid of two revolutionary navigational instruments, the quadrant and the astrolabe."

"The first major advance was made by Bartolomeu Dias, a navigator second in reputation only to Vasco de Gama. ... After sailing down the African coast and reprovisioning the caravels in a harbour of what is now Namibia, Dias left the supply ship in the charge of a small crew and sailed far out to sea, heading south-west to avoid headwinds on a course which kept him well out of sight of land. Finally, at about forty degrees south his ships picked up the prevailing westerlies and turned east to regain the African coast.

"This was a major navigational feat, proving that ships could now sail on an accurate course for long distances in the open ocean, relying solely on their newly developed navigational instruments."

"The story of da Gama's epic voyage has been retold many times, so there is no need to dwell on it. Recently, though, evidence has been found suggesting that there were other secret Portuguese expeditions to the Cape—and perhaps even beyond—in the supposedly blank decade between Dias' voyage and that of da Gama. Some historians now believe that secret voyages could explain the assurance with which da Gama ordered his flotilla to set a south-westerly course across the Atlantic far out of sight of land for three months, turning east only when his ships were nearing the latitude of the Cape of Good Hope. When they finally made landfall just 160 kilometres north of the Cape, da Gama's ships had covered 4500 nautical miles nonstop, a voyage at that time unequalled by the ships of any other European nation."

“Since its first circumnavigation, *Endeavour* has become almost as famous as Cook himself, with researchers having many unanswered questions about the humble Whitby collier that made one of history’s most celebrated voyages. One of the mysteries associated with Cook and his ship is how a vessel built for England’s coastal coal-carrying trade was able to cross and recross the world. Undoubtedly, the seamanship of Cook and his crew is a large part of the answer to that question. But whatever qualities their ship possessed must also have been important. What were they?

“And where was *Endeavour*? The Royal Navy had quietly disposed of Cook’s ship and she sailed into the twilight world of vessels past their use-by date. But her name became burnished with greater and greater fame over time. A River Thames wreck was falsely touted to sightseers as the remnants of *Endeavour*. Relics associated with the ship are exhibited in museums around the world and several replicas have been built. Maritime archaeologists, historians and treasure hunters have been searching for her remains for many years, not because *Endeavour* is thought to have any treasures in her hold but because of her fame and that of her captain.

“After the worn-out *Endeavour* returned to England, she was used to transport naval goods to and from the Falkland Islands, then sold into private shipping interests. Under the name *Lord Sandwich* she took part in the American Revolution as a troop transport and prison ship. In 1778 she was scuttled with another dozen or so ships at the entry to Newport Harbour, Rhode Island. *Endeavour* was now part of an underwater blockade against the attacking French, allied at that time with the American forces. It was not until 1993 that a local maritime archaeology group, the Rhode Island Marine Archeology Project (RIMAP), rediscovered the wrecks. It was not known until 1999 that *Endeavour* was among them.

“Previously, another wreck at Newport had been identified as Cook’s ship. Her name was *La Liberté*. Sections of this ship were displayed around the world as relics of *Endeavour* and one sliver even went into space with the *Apollo 15* mission in 1971; one of NASA’s space shuttles also bore the name. It is now thought that this ship was, in fact, the *Resolution*, the ship Cook sailed on his second and third voyages of discovery. If proven, it would be an enormous historical coincidence for two such famous ships sailed by the great James Cook to be lying a few kilometres away from each other.”

From *Great Australian Mysteries* by Graham Seal.

It might seem easy to identify a ship but once the name has worn away, and when piled into masses of underwater junk and covered with small creatures it becomes much more difficult. But does it matter?

‘Over the Horizon’ comes back to that intriguing question of who finally put paid to the fear that the Earth was flat and therefore people could fall off the edge into space. But unlike other discoveries everyone who traveled any distance noticed that the places they left behind them gradually disappeared and new places became visible in front of them ... I remember reading a book called, I think, *The Earth is Flat*. It wasn’t that the author was saying that the earth is akin to a pancake but rather that we need to perceive our surroundings as flat for the sake of our own comfort and confidence. If we were constantly aware of living on a curve, like a seal trying to balance on a large rubber ball, we would be beset by a sense of constant unease ...

P is for PAKISTAN:

Benjamin Gilmour went round the world working as a paramedic and wrote a book of his experiences, *Paramédico: Around the World by Ambulance*. He has this interesting story from Pakistan.

“Streets around Mithadar bustle with donkey carts and tooting cars and people lugging unusual loads on their heads. It’s the last day of work before Eid al-Adha and smoking coolies yell out as they drag overladen carts past grubby children playing cricket in alleyways with splintery planks. Tall Raj-era buildings look close to collapse in this densely populated neighbourhood where Abdul Sattar Edhi first opened shop in 1957. That was the year he bought a beat-up Hillman van for 7000 rupees – about US\$100 – onto which he had painted the words ‘Poor Man’s Ambulance’. In no time he was operating the sole ambulance for a city of a million, sweating around the clock. In his 1996 biography, *Mirror to the Blind*, Edhi talks of the days he would drive the ambulance from one accident to another without a break until his ‘head was spinning’. Of any living person, Edhi is thought to have gone the longest time without a holiday – seventy-eight years or thereabouts – calculated from the age of five when his mother inspired him to begin voluntary social work.”

“In just over fifty years, Abdul Sattar Edhi has created a health and welfare empire like no other. His ambulance service boasts 1600 vehicles across the country and is listed in the *Guinness Book of Records* as the largest on earth. At most major intersections across Pakistan, Edhi’s white ambulances can be seen parked ready to respond. They can also be summoned by dialling 115. The man is a household name, a champion of the poor, a role model for the young, a hero of the masses. While most famous for his ambulance service, Edhi’s work also extends to social welfare, homes for the geriatric and the destitute, clinics for women, maternity hospitals and adoption services managed by his wife Bilquis.”

“In his early days in Mithadar, Edhi retrieved drowned bodies from the sea, from rivers and from wells, bodies that broke apart with one touch. He picked them up from manholes and gutters, from under bridges and railway tracks. And no matter how infested with maggots or how decomposed they were, he brought them home and prepared them for burial.”

Gilmour quotes Edhi: ‘We cannot truly reduce suffering,’ he says, ‘until we are able to rise above our own senses.’

“Thanks to this strong stomach and iron spirit, Edhi is said to have prepared almost twenty thousand Pakistani bodies for burial with his bare hands.

“Following a trail of dung and, soon after, a convoy of animals, I come upon the man himself sitting among a flock of grubby sheep some would consider unfitting company for the chief executive of an organisation worth a billion rupees a year. But Edhi owns little more than two sets of simple *shalwar kameez* – the traditional Pakistani long shirt and pants – eats one modest meal a day and for most of his life has slept on the cold floor of his office. It’s precisely this self-imposed poverty that allows him to identify with those he helps.”

Gilmour says, “Edhi’s wife Bilquis is just as busy as her husband, supervising maternity clinics, nursing schools and adoptions services offered by the foundation.” (I couldn’t help wondering if she also slept on the floor of her office. But as they had a family I assume there was a family home somewhere.)

“Edhi is never shy to speak his mind. In a country where journalists disappear or end up in jail for criticising the government, Edhi’s popularity makes him untouchable. His reputation also allows him enviable access to areas where no one else can go. While countless Pakistani NGOs drool over \$750 million of US aid money allocated for the tribal areas, most of it remains in the bank, gathering dust due to lack of security in FATA (Federally Administered Tribal Areas) and a shortage of reliable partners. While tragically ironic, Pakistan’s most trusted individual and experienced humanitarian would never accept a single cent of US aid, despite being the best man to spend it. Abdul Sattar Edhi believes this kind of money is tied up in politics, the very politics responsible for creating such dismal conditions for Pakistanis in the first place.”

“Edhi is often regarded as ‘the Mother Teresa of Pakistan’ and that comparison seems appropriate. At the age of nineteen I volunteered at Kalighat, Mother Teresa’s home for the dying and the destitute. My duties were to bathe old men encrusted with the filth of Calcutta, force-feed the malnourished and pick maggots out of open sores. It was challenging work. I feel the criticisms proffered by Mother Teresa’s detractors are based on Western comparisons with some ideal that for most Indians living below the poverty line is simply unattainable. As long as a patient’s condition is not made worse, ‘something’ is always better than ‘nothing’, and until the poor have free access to health care and are well informed about it, humanitarians like Mother Teresa and Edhi will step in with elementary services that will be gratefully accepted.

“In his biography, Edhi has a clear message for those who point out his failure to progress: ‘If these critics cannot share even a portion of their wealth with the poor, they should stop attacking me for sharing my poverty with them.’ ”

In 2010 an illiterate village woman was sentenced to death in Pakistan for blasphemy. Anne Isabelle Tollet gave a voice to Asia Bibi despite the great difficulties. Asia had gone out to pick falsa berries to make a little money for her family. It was a very hot day and she got herself a drink of water from a well there. But she was a Christian and the well water and the communal cup were only for the use of Muslims. For her ‘crime’ and her protest at the way she was treated she was sentenced to death. Her husband and family had to leave their village because of threats. When the Minister for Minorities, Shahbaz Bhatti, spoke out on her behalf he was murdered.

Tollet writes, “The law against blasphemy is unjust. It is used to settle disputes between neighbours or to get rid of a rival simply by making an oral accusation against them.”

It was President Zia-ul-Haq “who brought in the Hudood Ordinance. It was a new law that made a criminal of any woman who had sexual relations outside marriage. At that time adultery was punishable by life imprisonment or death by stoning.” And even though it was later relaxed slightly women who had been raped had to “provide four eye witnesses to her rape, as required by the current law.” And the unmentioned result of rape is often infanticide.

Nor is it only Christians who suffer though they are far more vulnerable to mob violence. “Zarmina was a Muslim, accused of blasphemy like me. Her story was totally absurd. She had just got married when she and her husband had a motorbike crash in Shergarh, several hours’ drive from here. Luckily they weren’t badly hurt, but when her husband lost control of the bike with Zarmina riding pillion behind him; it careered into a

monument dedicated to the Prophet Muhammad. Zarmina and her husband were both accused of blasphemy and thrown into prison.” Zarmina died in prison.

Nor was it only women. “The people there told how an old Muslim man had been sentenced to fifteen years in jail for throwing away a copy of the Koran. But the man was blind. I thought it wasn’t right, because he wouldn’t have known it was the holy book. He hadn’t done it on purpose. I didn’t think that was blasphemy.”

After nine years in a small damp windowless cell without any sanitation Asia Bibi was released because of outside pressure on the Pakistani government and saw no choice but to go into exile with her family.

Her experiences would seem to make a very good reason NOT to visit Pakistan.

But the hills and valleys in the remote tribal north of the country have their own enticement. I was thinking on this when I came across explorer Wilfred Thesiger’s *Among the Mountains*, his travels in northern Pakistan, mainly in and around Hunza province, and Afghanistan in the 1950s. He traveled mainly by pony or walking but more occasionally ... “The Yashkuk stream, which we forded soon after leaving Spanj, ran thigh-deep and felt numbingly cold. Muhammad Aziz, the headman of Reshit, met us two miles from Babaghundi and gave us salt tea, curds, cream and some good bread. He and some other men accompanied us to Babaghundi. He gave me a yak to ride which I steered by a rope threaded through its nose, brought back over its head between its horns. I found the yak a comfortable mount, sure-footed but too slow. ... Just before sunset, three Kirghiz turned up on yaks, the advance party of a caravan going to Spanj to buy flour. They wore dark clothes, thickly padded; two had black fur caps, and the other an eared cap of leopard skin. ... At 7.a.m. we set off again with our yaks and porters, along the river past groves of willow and thorn, a small-leafed variety with a red berry. ... The track continued along the mountainside before descending to the river which here dwindled to a stream. We forded the stream, then crossed the moraine of a glacier and rounded the shoulder of another mountain to Biatar, at the foot of the Chilinji Pass, where we camped in two rough shelters built under overhanging rocks. The scenery between Babaghundi and Biatar had been very striking, dominated by high snow peaks of the Yashkush and Koz ranges. A lot of juniper and wild roses grew along the mountainsides, besides some yellow daisies; earlier in the season, there must have been a lot of flowers here. ... On the cliffs around us we heard ibex (which the porters called markhor) whistling continually, a bird-like note rather like a curlew. Also a lot of chikhor were calling on the mountain tops. ... We saw tracks of ibex everywhere on our way down the valley. We followed a stream whose banks were clothed with thickets of golden birch and willow. ... The following morning we started early and struggled down to the main valley again through deep snow which made it difficult to pick a way through large boulders. The weather, however, was now clear and bright. The juniper and birch were laden with snow. For a mile or two we followed the tracks of a snow leopard which had chosen the easiest route. ... Next morning we continued on to Imit, quite a small village attractively positioned in the Ishkoman valley. Except for some houses and cultivated fields, Ishkoman itself was in ruins; the Mir, Sultan Ghazi, now lived permanently at Imit where there was a small mosque and a guest-house. On the way along the valley I had seen a peregrine falcon and here, for the first time, I saw many smaller birds, mostly warblers. The Mir kept a sparrow-hawk which he used for hunting partridge ... At the top

of the pass I noticed some large tracks but had been too preoccupied to pay them any attention. When I asked Mirza what they were he said they were the fresh tracks of a very large brown bear.”

Everywhere he went he was met with hospitality but everywhere he went men were out hunting with matchlocks, hawks, kestrels, falcons, and occasionally more modern weapons. I began to wonder if any of the wildlife had survived into the 21st century. And I wonder if he would meet with the same friendliness now when the mountains have seemingly become home to a more Taliban-like view of Islam.

But the mountains in their magnificence will remain beyond the ups-and-downs of human history.

Q is for QATTARA DEPRESSION:

I am not sure how practical hieroglyphics were (I don't suppose people sat down and said 'I'll just send a quick note to so-and-so') but they have their own beauty and mystery. Neal Spencer in the *Book of Egyptian Hieroglyphs* writes, “Crudely carved beneath a scene in the temple of Isis on Philae Island is the last known hieroglyphic inscription, dated to 394 AD. This date marks the end of nearly 3500 years of using the script to write the ancient Egyptian language. In the centuries following that last inscription, the ability to read hieroglyphs disappeared; during Medieval times, the signs were thought to represent mystical symbols. The modern breakthrough in understanding the language came in 1822, when the French scholar Jean-François Champollion made the assumption that the signs actually represented sounds. Using the trilingual inscription on the Rosetta Stone in hieroglyphs, demotic and Greek, he first deciphered the name of Ptolemy V. Since then, the study of hieroglyphs has flourished, with thousands of texts translated. Egyptologists now avail themselves of multi-volume dictionaries and dozens of grammars of the language. Essentially, it is a script that can be studied like any other; a crucial difference is that we no longer know how it was pronounced.” This is partly because there are no written vowels, as in Hebrew and Arabic, but this is offset by the fact that Coptic Egyptians speak a language descended from ancient Egyptian. Modern Coptic of course has evolved but still uses some words which go back to the time of the pharaohs.

The writing uses three types of signs. Ideograms are a sign which denotes a word, e.g. a picture of a house to represent a simple dwelling. Then there are phonograms which use a picture to convey a sound, e.g. a picture of an owl represents the sound 'm'. As well as twenty-four single consonant signs one hundred and fifty multi-consonant signs have been determined. Then there are the determinatives. These are signs at the end of a word to determine the meaning when similar sounding words have different meanings. These are helpful when it is an abstract concept being expressed rather than a straightforward noun for a thing.

“The number of signs is often staggering to the modern student of the language. Approximately 750 were used in the classic form of the script, Middle Egyptian. However, the majority are determinatives, frequently self-explanatory, such as the dozens of variants featuring a male figure. A knowledge of a few dozen phonetic signs and the basic group of determinatives would probably suffice for a basic ability to read the script. In much the same way, a limited vocabulary of signs can help modern viewers understand a reasonable amount of the texts upon statues and stelae.”

Hieroglyphs, from the Greek for ‘sacred carvings’, were used on temples and tombs and as well as the signs there was also symbolism in the colours used, e.g. “the colour green was evidently associated with rebirth and regeneration, explaining why the face of Osiris often bears this hue in paintings, relief and statuary. Yet he could also be shown with black skin, symbolizing his rulership over the Underworld.”

But the Egyptians *did* develop a simpler form of writing for everyday use. “Soon after the appearance of hieroglyphs, a cursive script was developed to write the language, now known as hieratic. Such a development was inevitable, as hieroglyphs were rather cumbersome for writing mundane records of government administration or accounts. Hieratic was used for land contracts, wine-labels, inventories, some funerary texts, literary texts, trial records, love-letters, graffiti and census and absence lists.”

And then from “about 700 BC, another cursive script appeared, now known as demotic; this superseded hieratic. An example of its use is in the middle text upon the Rosetta Stone. Demotic probably outlived hieroglyphs, as the latest demotic text dates to 452 AD, at Philae. Later still, Coptic, the script of Christian Egypt, was developed, borrowing signs from Greek.”

The Qattara Depression seems too far from the valley of the Nile with its plethora of ancient tombs and temples, pyramids and the Sphinx, to lay claim to any ancient artifacts. But it wasn’t always a place in the desert. So I went looking to see if it was ever a place of community. Strictly speaking, it is a large amorphous area containing salt pans and the occasional oasis rather than a place with neat boundaries.

And ‘far’ is a relative term in the ancient world. We tend to think that people of ancient Egypt, though they were familiar with the Nile Valley, the immediate areas of the Mediterranean and the Near East, were ignorant of further afield. But Wilfred Thesiger in *Among the Mountains*, his travels in remote parts of Asia, wrote, “The sky gradually cleared during the morning as we marched down the valley to Sar-i-Sang, where lapis lazuli was still mined. All the lapis lazuli so extensively used in ancient Egypt, including the tomb artifacts of Tutankhamun, had come from this one valley in the remote mountains of Central Asia.

“The official in charge of the mine refused to allow my Panjshiri porters into their camp, so we sent them ahead to the next village ... To reach the mine, we had to cross again to the east bank of the river. Here we saw whole cliffs of flawless white marble, with huge blocks of marble scattered in the valley below them. All of the silicate which constitutes lapis lazuli was extracted from these white marble cliffs.”

Now Sar-i-Sang is in modern day Afghanistan in the Hindu Kush mountains. So those semi-precious stones to get to the Egypt of the Pharaohs had made a long trek across modern Iran and Iraq or had been taken southwards to be shipped to the Red Sea more than three thousand years ago. It suggests that people had far-flung connections we tend to overlook. And their value to the Egyptians must have been such that it would make such journeys profitable.

I wondered if the Depression was the result of a long ago asteroid landing but the explanation is that it was a place of salt marshes and salt lakes which gradually dried out and wind erosion did the rest, leaving it about 60 metres below sea level. Qattara is an Arabic word meaning ‘dripping’ as in water dripping rather than lard. It was European

explorers who thought this fact might be used to advantage. Jules Verne used this idea in his 1905 novel *Invasion of the Sea*. If a tunnel were to be drilled to the Mediterranean to bring water then the steep fall into the Depression could be used to create hydro power or less dramatically if the depression could be turned into an inland sea it would have a moderating influence on the area. Strangely enough this idea of hydro power was taken up and promoted by the CIA during the Eisenhower administration, not because the CIA cared deeply about cheap non-fossil-fuel power for the Egyptians but because they thought a big project like this could draw President Nasser away from his cosy relationship with the Soviets. But nothing happened and despite similar ideas being proposed since then Qattara remains a depression in the desert. There are problems with the idea of diverting the Mediterranean through a tunnel, not least the build up of salt which could affect the Sand Stone Nubian Aquifer which is a source of underground fresh water. The alternative of diverting the Nile has had only a small number of proponents. The water question has now been complicated by the search for oil in the area. People understandably hope that if Saudi Arabia can have oil under its deserts then why not Egypt?

So is there anything interesting there apart from burning sand and the occasional salt pan or marsh?

It is west of Cairo. If you go north you come to El Alamein on the coast. If you continue on westwards you come to the Libyan Plateau. If you go south from the Depression you come into the Western Desert. It is strange to find, in a country bursting with people, a large space empty of people. That in itself is intriguing. And the other thing which intrigued me was that although there is only one small permanent human settlement, the Qara Oasis, it does have some very interesting wildlife including cheetahs, gazelles, hares, various birds and foxes.

R is for RABAUL

“The beautiful township of Rabaul is no longer the Jewel of the Pacific. It has been devastated by several more volcanic eruptions and much of it still lies under layers of pumice. For a period of approximately fifty years it was a thriving, exciting cosmopolitan township—until the day the people who helped create it disappeared.”

Gillian Nikakis in *He's Not Coming Home*.

She says of the town when her parents arrived: “Tick (her mother Thyrsa’s nickname) was enchanted by Rabaul’s wide streets. The beautiful colourful casuarinas, mango and rain trees provided soothing shade from the tropical sun. The gardens were beautifully kept and the green lawns provided a backdrop for glorious colourful frangipani, crocus and croton. These plants divided the properties as there were no fences. ... German built bungalows with red and green roofs were set in these gardens and stood up to 20 feet (6 metres) from the ground. Balcony lounges lacquered green, and pot plants brimming with luxurious maidenhair fern decorated the wide verandas which surrounded each house. Not only were the gardens full of colour, but so were the streets.

“Gentlemen in their whites, some with elegantly dressed European women on their arm, strolled in the streets. Chinese women in brightly coloured silk with parasols shielding them from the tropical sun added to the picture.” It was an idyllic life for many white people, apart from the mosquitoes and the humidity, but it was also a highly stratified society. “The word boong was first used by New Guinea natives to describe the

white man. This was because of the sound of the rifle shots made by the guns of the first white men they encountered. How the word came to describe the natives, out of the mouths of white men, is one of life's little mysteries." And some of those rifles were very definitely pointed at the New Guinea natives.

But there were more legalistic controls. "Much of the legislation passed in the 1920s and earlier was punitive and paternalistic. After 1911 the law forbade 'all noise shouting beating of drums and dancing...in...(gazetted) towns and villages (after) 9 o'clock each night unless given permission by a Magistrate.'" And "From 1920 all Papuans, both male and female, were forbidden to wear clothes on the upper part of the body, on pain of being fined between 10 shillings and one pound, or imprisonment for between one and two months and having their clothes destroyed." Then there was the White Womens Protection Ordinance. "A New Guinean who attempted to have carnal knowledge of a consenting white woman could be gaoled." If a white woman was raped by a New Guinean he was likely to receive the death penalty. "Offences against white women could incur whippings and long gaol sentences; and many felt that it was important for the New Guineans to learn that the white woman was 'sacred'."

No New Guinean was permitted to join the public service nor to carry a weapon in town except to sell or remove it. "New Guineans were forbidden the use of any garden seat, arbour, summerhouse, or other convenience provided for the public in the Rabaul Botanic Reserve, and of any seat or other convenience that was provided for public use in the public streets, roads, parks and gardens of Rabaul, Kavieng, Morobe, Madang, Namatanai, Aitape, Lorengau, Kokopo, and Kieta townships."

"Rabaul in early 1937 was in its heyday as an inviolate enclave of the British Empire ... No Asians or New Guineans attended the public school. Rabaul was a racially stratified society in which the colonial 'mastas' were the 700 Caucasians, mainly Australian and German. Next in line, came the 1,000 Asians, mainly Chinese and a few Malays and last about 8,000 New Guineans, including many indentured laborers from as far away as the Sepik area and Manus Island".

But however idyllic white life might be it had no answer when "On Friday 28 May 1937 there were several earthquakes lasting about 30 seconds each." The waters in the harbour retreated. Several houses collapsed. The next day "The water in the middle of the harbour began to bubble. It was like a giant cauldron full of boiling water. The sea began to break into waves and water began to spout towards the sky. Rocks were thrown high into the air with hot water, dust and pumice." The world grew dark, "the dense clouds of pumice thrown out of the volcano obliterated the sun and the only light was from the ferocious lightning. This created a weird and terrifying atmosphere."

People hurriedly began to leave Rabaul. "Many people said the most terrifying experience was the electrical storm that accompanied the eruption. Continuous blinding lightning, rolling thunder and darkness filled the sky. The volcano continued to spit giant rocks."

When the eruption finally ended Rabaul was buried under ash and pumice. There was talk of moving the capital to Kokopo but in the end Rabaul was dug out and rebuilt. Part of the reasoning was that Rabaul had a much better harbour.

It was not the harbour but the fact that Rabaul was to the north-east of the New Guinea mainland which made it an attractive first port-of-call for the Japanese as they pushed south. It seems extraordinary that so little had been done to plan any defence of

the island, to provide equipment, or plan for evacuations of women and children. “Requests by the Administration in Rabaul to evacuate civilians on a Norwegian ship in the harbour were refused. The Australian Government insisted on the ship being loaded with copra rather than evacuees.”

“There was no attempt made to evacuate the Chinese community who were left to their fate. This was particularly callous as the Chinese had been at war with Japan for twenty years and were also our allies. Understandably there was much ill feeling as they were certainly at great risk in the hands of the Japanese.”

And the Administration was determined not to train or give weapons to any New Guineans. (The Dutch in the Netherlands New Guinea took a different approach, arming and training several Papuan battalions. Curiously, General MacArthur had first considered making his ‘leapfrog’ to the Philippines via Rabaul but it would’ve required longer range aircraft than were then available. Instead he made the ‘leapfrog’ from liberated airfields in the Dutch territory, leaving from Hollandia, Biak and Noemfoor via Morotai to the Philippines and probably saving thousands of lives through bypassing the Japanese forces in the Pacific and in the Dutch East Indies/Indonesia, Timor, Singapore and Malaya.) “The Tolais had served under several masters and were treated condescendingly by the Europeans in Rabaul. They were considered impossible to discipline and useless from a military point of view. It was deemed important for them to ‘know their place and keep it’. No wonder many of them saw the Japanese as liberators.” But far from understanding this sentiment the Japanese were if anything more racist.

After the war the Australian Government refused to hold any sort of enquiry into all the mistakes that had been made. The entire white male population had been rounded up by the Japanese and put on board the *Montevideo Maru* to be sent to Japan. But the Americans, not knowing about the thousand prisoners on board, torpedoed the ship off the coast of the Philippines. It is the biggest loss of Australian lives at sea in our history.

After the war the town was gradually restored but the volcano continued to lie in wait. A Lonely Planet Guide to *Papua New Guinea & Solomon Islands* says, “Be prepared to fall on your knees in awe: almost the entire old town of Rabaul is buried in deep, black volcanic ash and looks like a movie set for an apocalyptic film or a Papuan version of Pompeii. Who’s the bad boy responsible for this soul-stirring moonscape? Mt Tavurvur, which looms ominously to the east. On 19 September 1994 it erupted, spewing huge amounts of ash over Rabaul, and the Simpson Harbour and Karavia Bay area. It reduced the landscape to an alien prehistoric desert. It’s still active; you can see it belch huge plumes of smoke into the sky.”

But don’t let that put you off. It’s still a working port though the centre of the town has not been rebuilt. “First things first: Simpson Harbour – once crusted with pumice – is still magnificent, and the anchored ships lie quietly in the still water. The Beehives, the tiny craggy islands in its middle, look striking from any angle.

“There are tunnels and caverns in the hillsides around Rabaul. Admiral Yamamoto’s Bunker (locked) is interesting though austere, and the placards near it are informative. There’s a map on the ceiling for plotting world domination.” Then there’s the New Guinea Club which eventually became a small museum and the Vulcanology Observatory “about 900m off Tunnel Hill Rd, from where you can enjoy million-dollar views over the bay and the volcanoes.” And if you take Namanula Road “over the great caldera’s rim” you will come to the Japanese Peace Memorial; “the main Japanese

memorial in the Pacific, is dignified and testament to the forgiveness of the local people.” Then you can go diving, snorkeling, canoeing, walking in the jungle, WWII heritage tours, swimming in hot springs or something less everyday “walking trips to see the megapode colonies on Matupit Island.” I assumed a megapode was a creepy-crawly of some description, like a nematode perhaps, but no, my dictionary defines a megapode as “a large Australasian or SE Asian bird that lives on the ground and builds a mound of plant debris to incubate its eggs.”

Gillian Nikakis also tells the story of an interesting man. “John Murphy, Joe Nason and the other military prisoners held in Rabaul endured appalling unsanitary conditions, hard work in the hot sun, malaria, dysentery, beriberi, and the unpredictable atrocities inflicted by the Japanese. Prisoners lost up to two-thirds of their body weight and all suffered from malnutrition. They were kept constantly on the point of starvation. Their daily quota of food was three small balls of rice. Records of Japanese atrocities were given in evidence at Japanese war crime trials and before the International Military Tribunal, Far East.”

Evidence of murder, massacre, death marches, mutilation, vivisection and even cannibalism by the Japanese was provided but she says it was the “unpredictability of the Japanese (which) made life very difficult for the prisoners. One day Captain Yamada and two guards came to the prison cell. One was carrying a shovel. They told John Murphy, ‘You must put on proper clothes. At two-thirty you will be executed by the sword’.

“Murphy promptly told the Japanese, ‘Ah, get stuffed’. The interpreter refused to translate this for Captain Yamada. Murphy shook hands with the other prisoners and walked out with the three Japanese. When they reached the appointed spot one of the guards tried to hand Murphy the shovel and said, ‘You must dig grave’.

“Murphy pushed the shovel back at the guard. ‘Dig it yourself, you bloody Jap’.”

The story then gets stranger. Joe Nason in his memoir written with Robert Holt *Horio You Next Die!* recorded it: “At the prompting of Yamada, the junior officer said, ‘You die because you spy’.

Murphy lashed out. ‘I am not a spy! I was in military uniform when I was captured...part of an advance detachment of the Australian Army.’ He angrily added, ‘who will be here soon!’

The Jap officers were silenced, but Yamada grinned with satisfaction at the prisoner’s loss of composure. Murphy spoke to Tsukahara, the interpreter, in a low voice.

‘Please ask your officers if they are aware I am the author of a book on pidgin-English? It’s entitled ‘The Book of Pidgin English’. It had been published in 1942 and proven useful to both Australian and American troops in the New Guinea campaign. The book was the proudest achievement of his life; and at this moment the condemned man wished to share the thought of it.

Captain Yamada didn’t wait for an interpretation. ‘Ah yes’, he bragged. ‘We capture one.’

‘It took me five long years to write’, Murphy stated, thinking it strange the Japs took pride in the ‘capture’ of one of his books. In an attempt to prolong his life, the Aussie said, ‘I wish I could see one before I die’.

The junior officer promptly said, ‘Okay, I bring you one tomorrow’.

Captain Yamada roughly elbowed his colleague in the ribs and screamed at the junior officer. Later, when Murphy was returned to the other prisoners, he translated Yamada's words as 'You idiot goat! You've given the game away!' It had been nothing but a charade."

So what of John Murphy's book? He had been a patrol officer in the Australian territory of New Guinea (TNG) but in the words of Maj.-Gen. Basil Morris, "When Civil Administration ceased in New Guinea early in 1942, that fine body of men who belonged to the field staffs of the Territories was absorbed into the Australian Army and formed the backbone of the Australian New Guinea Administrative Unit. Captain Murphy was one of these and has latterly performed sterling and gallant service in the immediate vicinity of the enemy."

Murphy wrote, "Melanesian Pidgin-English is a true Melanesian language of great adaptability and facility." Perhaps the problem lies in the word 'pidgin' which implies that it is less than a 'real' language. But Murphy says firmly, "Unhappily the transient tourist, learned, no doubt, in his several departments, and even some of our ablest residents, castigate Melanesian Pidgin-English as a hopeless, complicated and unsatisfactory medium of expression. Unfortunately they are judging the language on a very superficial knowledge of it. It is unfortunate that the antipathy and prejudice against Melanesian Pidgin-English is not directed against the painful jargon of broken English and sonorous twaddle which too many pass off as Pidgin-English."

He notes that it uses phonetic spelling and is not burdened with the many cases, tenses, and inflexions which can terrify the learner of other languages. "Pidgin English, Tokboi or Tok Pisin is a native language, Melanesian in idiom and grammar." It was used as a trade language between different language groups long before Europeans arrived. As well as in the TNG it was used as a lingua franca in the Admiralty group, New Ireland, New Britain, Solomons, and to some extent in Papua and Dutch New Guinea. "While the natives speak their own language within their groups, they invariably use Pidgin English in intercourse with other language groups."

He also provides brief insights into Melanesian cultural beliefs including gift exchanges, communal sharing, and even 'The Soul': "It is generally believed that, in sleep, the spirit leaves the body and wanders abroad. It may have encounters with other spirits or gain knowledge on these wanderings. A dream (driman) is the consciousness of these wanderings of the spirit. A native will not awaken a sleeper abruptly, lest the spirit not have sufficient time to return to the body."

Assuming you can find the English word behind the Pidgin one can lead you astray. For instance, a girl would regard her sister as *barata* and her brother as *susa* or *sista* because *barata* refers to a relative of the same sex and *sista* to someone of the opposite sex. But other words *are* related. *Dokta* = medical officer. *Plaiyas* = pliers. *Kukamba* = cucumber. But *tabak* is not tobacco. Instead it means leprosy. Some names obviously predate Europeans such as *manungunai* = sea eagle, and some are in-between: *paul bolong bus* = scrub turkey. There are words to describe things which we would not necessarily name such as *sangana* = inside of the thigh. And some words are colourful evocations of the purpose of something such as: *liklik paus bolong moni* = purse.

I came away from Murphy's book with the feeling that although he wanted to create something useful it was also a labour of love. And I suspect he translated some Shakespeare, not because it would be useful but because he liked Shakespeare.

Julius Caesar, from Act III, Scene 2. "*Pren, man bolong Rom, Wantok, harim nau. Mi kam tasol long plantim Kaesar. Mi noken belten longen. Sopos sampela wok bolong wanpela man I stret; sampela i no stret; na man i dai; ol i wailis long wok i no stret tasol. Gutpela wok bolongen i slip; i lus nating long giraun wantaim long Kalopa. Fesin bolong yumi man. Maski Kaesar tu, gutpela wok i slip.*"

At the end of the war Murphy and the others found that the Kempei Tai were hoarding food, planning to kill all their prisoners then have their own celebratory banquet. But Murphy's troubles were not over. "At the end of the war John Murphy was accused of collaborating with the enemy. The fact that he survived led many to believe that it indicated his guilt. He was tried and exonerated. The six American airmen who were released with him in 1945 were stunned to hear of the accusations. They stated clearly that they would not have survived without his help. He was a leader and described by one American as having a dynamism about him that commanded respect. He was a wonderful story-teller. He stole food and medicines from the Japanese stores. He taught himself to speak and read Japanese so that he could win concessions from the camp commander and to glean valuable information about Japanese activities, some of which he was able to get back to headquarters through the local people. The extent of his bravery and the enormity of the injustice imposed on him became clear during the second day of his trial. In her moving obituary of John Murphy, Dr Susan Kelly commented that

he kept prisoners' depression at bay through a blend of badgering, humour, saying the rosary, making playing cards, cigarette rolling machine and packets, inventing games, using the Japanese concept of honour or 'bushido' to the prisoners' advantage, story telling, stealing food and enforcing rules.

He remains the only Australian soldier to have been honourably acquitted after a general court martial. He sold his house to cover his legal fees but never received any compensation; nor did he receive the honours to which he was entitled. The true extent of his courage becomes clear when reading Joe Nason's account of their POW experience."

Nikakis then provides a personal memory of Murphy coming to their house in 1946 when she was a child. "He told us that he was Father Christmas's leading reindeer and, because we were special, he would let us feel the bumps on his forehead where the antlers would come out later that night. I felt his forehead and I just knew I was feeling the antlers. He told us not to tell anyone, as this was our secret, and I kept this secret for many years.

John and I were enthralled by his story of Little Red Riding Hood:

She was a goody goody. In fact, she was so good that she was given all sorts of medals, which she wore on her chest. One day she packed a basket of food and set off through the woods, to visit her sick grandmother. She came across the wolf, which chased her. She outwitted him and hid behind a bush and the wolf just couldn't find her. He was about to give up. At that moment, Little Red Riding Hood was shaking so much that her medals began clinking together. The wolf heard the noise, found Red Riding Hood and gobbled her up. Sometimes it's better not to win all the medals."

Murphy didn't get any medals but his *Book of Pidgin English* was reprinted many times.

And for RAVENNA:

I was browsing in a book of European architecture, Nikolaus Pevsner's *An Outline of European Architecture*, and came upon the picture of a beautiful building in Ravenna, in fact, two beautiful buildings. S. Apollinare Nuovo and S. Vitale. But the thing which surprised me was their age. Yes, Rome has older more famous buildings, though they do not rival Ravenna's in beauty. But S. Vitale was completed in 547 AD and S. Apollinare Nuovo in the early 6th century.

If Ravenna could offer these beautiful ancient buildings what else could it offer? I was immediately seized with the desire to know more.

Ravenna is on the Adriatic Sea in the north-east of Italy and it was Ravenna's 'reign' as the capital of the western part of the Byzantine empire which gave it its beautiful early buildings and mosaics. These glorious mosaics are described as: "Mosaics made in Ravenna for the Ostrogoth king Theodoric (AD 493-526) are the first full manifestations of Byzantine art in the West." Although some beautiful objects in Ravenna, such as the ivory throne, may have been brought from elsewhere mosaics are created by artisans 'on the spot'. The *Britannica* says, "The mosaics of Ravenna and its surrounding area, like its sarcophagi, occupy a place apart. They mark the transition from a truly Roman to a Byzantine style, enriched by local colour. Mosaics of the 5th and 6th centuries are numerous in this city. Those in the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia (the old chapel of the destroyed church of Sta. Croce, second quarter of the 5th century), while retaining the plasticity of antique art, are distinguished by the fervour of expressions that are accentuated by the predominantly blue and white tonalities. In the tympanum of the entry door a Christ, the Good Shepherd, combines Hellenic gracefulness with the dignified attitude and sumptuous robes of the master of the world. In the so-called Baptistery of the Orthodox in the cathedral, a baptism of Christ at the height of the dome (renovated) is surrounded by a magnificent procession of Apostles (mid-5th century), whose sturdy grandeur is transfigured by the white and gold of their robes, uniting marvelously with the acanthus plants and tapestry of the blue ground. The depiction of church architecture in a lower zone is in a warmer and more varied palette."

Eyewitness Travel in *Back Roads, Northern & Central Italy* says: "From AD 402 until 476, Ravenna was the capital of the Western Roman Empire and remained the capital of Byzantine Italy until the 8th century. The city's importance in the early Christian era endowed it with astonishing monuments and lavishly decorated churches – eight buildings have been listed by UNESCO. But Ravenna is a living city and not just an architectural museum – its piazzas and historic monuments are linked by pleasant streets bustling with local life."

You can visit the Basilica di San Vitale, "built 527-48 ... the only major church from the period of Emperor Justinian I to survive virtually intact. Its colourful mosaics are the height of Byzantine splendour – look for the emperor portrayed with court officials, and on the opposite wall, the Empress Theodora" and the Basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo "has a cylindrical bell tower and some of the largest Byzantine mosaics (6th century)", both of which are open every day.

Ravenna is also where Dante wrote much of *The Divine Comedy*. And it is where he was buried in 1321.

But perhaps you have become jaded by magnificent churches? “From Ravenna, pack a picnic and set off early to Valli di Comacchio, to spend a couple of hours watching the water birds on the lagoon. Carry on to Comacchio to visit the eel pickling factory, then head off to Porto Garibaldi for lunch on the beach. Drive north to the woods of Bosco della Mesola to glimpse the shy deer, or just stay on the beach.” I can’t say I’ve ever hankered to visit an eel-pickling factory but lagoons and water birds are always a delight.

S is for SALZBURG:

Salzburg is a province and city in the Austrian Alps. The *Britannica* says of it: “A unique combination of scenic Alpine landscape and architectural richness has led to Salzburg’s reputation as one of the world’s most beautiful cities.”

Other Austrian cities such as Innsbruck can also claim ‘architectural richness’ and ‘Alpine landscape’ but Salzburg has a unique drawcard. “Salzburg is most famous as the birthplace of Mozart, whose house, No. 9 Getreidegasse, is preserved as a museum, and the site of the annual Salzburg Festival.”

It has another musical connection. Lonely Planet’s *Best Trips to Germany, Austria & Switzerland* says, “Salzburg’s trophy sights huddle in the pedestrianised, Unesco World Heritage-listed Altstadt (old town). The tangled lanes are made for a serendipitous wander, leading to hidden courtyards and medieval squares framed by burgher houses and baroque fountains. You’ll also see plenty of icons from the evergreen musical *The Sound of Music*.”

But I will stay with Mozart. “Salzburg is storybook Austria, and easily explored on a walking tour. Beside the fast-flowing Salzach River are the Altstadt’s mosaic of domes and spires, and the formidable 900-year-old clifftop fortress, the Festung Hohensalzburg, reached by the glass Festungsbahn funicular, with the mountains beyond. This dazzling backdrop inspired the lordly prince-archbishops and home-grown genius Mozart.

“You can visit the great composer’s 1756 birthplace, the Mozarts Geburtshaus as well as his one-time residence, the Mozart-Wohnhaus” at 8 Makartplatz. Both are museums open to the public.

The other day I went to see a film called *Mozart’s Sister* which shows you the Geburtshaus. The sister, Maria Anna ‘Nannerl’, was as much a musical prodigy as her brother Wolfgang but when she reached her teens it was no longer seen as appropriate to let her perform in public. Her life, like the lives of so many women, became confined and restricted. But she continued to practise her music and she probably continued to compose. Considerable forensic work has gone, and is going, into determining whether some of Wolfgang’s works were actually collaborations or whether he put his name to some of her work.

She eventually married (acquiring five step-children) and moved to St Gilgen. “St Gilgen’s historic centre, 400m west of the Wolfgangsee’s shore, huddles around Mozartplatz and the photogenic Rathaus (old town).” (Is that where Wolfgang got his name?)

“Mozart’s mother was born in St Gilgen and the family is the focus at St Gilgen’s Mozarthaus, especially Mozart’s sister ‘Nannerl’, also an accomplished composer and musician.”

The “Cosy little museum Muzikinstrumente-Museum der Völker is home to 1500 musical instruments from all over the world, collected by a family of music teachers; there are opportunities to hear and play the instruments.”

If you plan a visit to Salzburg you may be going to see high mountains or old buildings but it is quite likely you are going to the Mozart Festival. This is a feast of classical music in late January each year and is said to be the world’s most popular festival of classical music.

S is for SARGASSO:

“Tales of empty ships found in the Sargasso Sea or neighboring parts of the Atlantic almost invariably mention the *Mary Celeste*, perhaps the sea’s most famous derelict. The incident did not occur in the Sargasso Sea, although the *Mary Celeste* passed north of it on her way to the spot north of the Azores where she was found by a British brig, the *Dei Gratia*, in November 1872. The latter vessel, noting the erratic course of the *Mary Celeste*, hailed her and, obtaining no reply, boarded her and subsequently took the *Mary Celeste* as a prize.”

Charles Berlitz in *The Bermuda Triangle* goes on: “Harold Wilkins in *Strange Mysteries of Time and Space* makes a good case for the possibility of the ship’s having been boarded and taken at sea by persons already known to the ship’s complement, with the implication that the crew was disposed of and the empty ship then ‘rediscovered’ at sea and taken as a prize.

“In developing this theory, Wilkins points out the many inconsistencies in the stories of the captain and the crew of the *Dei Gratia*, and the fact that the *Dei Gratia* was moored alongside the *Mary Celeste* for over a week in New York harbor, and sailed shortly after the ill-fated vessel’s departure.”

I like the sense of mystery the *Mary Celeste* conjures up but the fact remains that all the details of the finding and boarding come from the men of the *Dei Gratia*. It may have been a case of piracy. It may even have been a con arranged between the masters of two ships to defraud the owners and insurers. Berlitz goes on: “After prize proceedings, the refurbished *Mary Celeste* went to sea again but soon acquired the reputation of being a ‘jinx ship,’ causing misfortune, destruction, and death among those who sailed on her, until her final master, Captain Gilman Parker, after supplying overgenerous liquor rations to all hands and above all to himself, deliberately, it is said, sailed the *Mary Celeste* onto a rocky reef near Haiti and so ended her unlucky career.”

Jean Rhys called a novel *Wild Sargasso Sea* but in this the Sea is partly used as a metaphor rather than a real place. This is understandable. There is something mysterious about the Sargasso Sea and the creatures which come there to breed. A place where you cannot walk but neither can you swim or dive or sail. David Damrosch in *Around the World in 80 Books* says of Rhys’s novel, “The Sargasso Sea of Rhys’s title is created by a confluence of ocean currents, where large patches of sargassum seaweed grow and where it was said that ships could be trapped, unable to escape. In the early 1930s, my great-aunt Helen served as a scientific illustrator on a research expedition off the coast of

Bermuda conducted by the prominent naturalist William Beebe. Their trip included studying aquatic life in the Sargasso Sea, and the book he wrote on the trip, *Nonsuch: Land of Water*, includes an illustration by her of a fish concealing itself in a length of sargassum. Beebe comments that ‘there is no doubt but that the first weed was torn by storms from the rocks and reefs of the West Indies, and swept by wind and currents out into the great dead center of two and a half million square miles over which it is scattered today.’

“Rhys’s novel connects the most imperial of islands with its Caribbean other, in a disenchanted version of More’s Utopia, the good place and the no-place, inextricably intertwined.” And in between are the mysterious reaches of a sea which everybody avoids.

A different, human-made, mysterious place is what is known as the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. Daniel Smith in *100 Places You Will Never Visit* wrote, “The responsibility of no single nation, the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is a truly dirty secret that few outside the community of environmental activists are ready to acknowledge and act upon. The patch has formed from countless tonnes of rubbish deposited into the sea, 80 per cent of it from mainland areas.”

Smith explains that the Garbage Patch in the North Pacific, north-west of Hawaii, is due “to a gyre, an ocean current that is very calm at its centre but swirls round in a circle, drawing in ever-increasing volumes of floating debris. Ecologists have been forecasting the existence of such a feature since at least the 1980s, but it was only in 1997 that Charles Moore and his crew confirmed the existence of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch while competing in a yachting race. Moore subsequently set up a campaigning body to bring attention to the problem.”

Strictly speaking you can visit, should you wish to do so, and the concentrated nature of the collection of rubbish should, in theory, make it easier to clean up. “Scientists estimate that the Garbage Patch contains three-quarters of a million fragments per square kilometre [0.4 sq miles]. Plastic accounts for 90 per cent of all the rubbish in the world’s oceans, and as much as 70 per cent of it sinks, causing untold damage to life on the sea bed. Yet the Great Pacific Garbage Patch remains the floating landfill site that no government seems keen to discuss. It is a safe guess that if it were the Great Pacific Oil Reserve, there would be rather more of a clamour to establish sovereignty.”

And Roger Scruton in *Green Philosophy* wrote, “There are parts of Europe, Asia and the Middle East where fields, trees and hedgerows are entangled with sheeting and bags, and an area of the Pacific Ocean twice the size of Texas is supposedly now veneered with plastic rubbish, causing untold destruction to fish, sea birds and other marine life.” He goes on to say “Yet the problem of plastic is one that we could solve, both nationally and globally.” He sees the answer in making all packaging biodegradable. This, of course, doesn’t clean up the mess that already exists. I have seen various things proposed including giant scoops. But it comes back to that vexed question: if no one owns the Great Pacific Garbage Patch and it is in international waters then who will pay to clean it up? The answer is probably that everyone should pay. Even people in landlocked countries are guilty of letting plastic rubbish float away down their rivers and drains until they reach the sea. And from there currents, winds, and tides carry them far from home.

And what of the mystery of the creatures which breed in the Sargasso Sea? I first came upon one species when I read Gavin Maxwell's *Ring of Bright Water* many years ago. "Early in May comes the recurrent miracle of the elvers' migration from the sea. There is something deeply awe-inspiring about the sight of any living creatures in incomputable numbers; it stirs, perhaps, some atavistic chord whose note belongs more properly to the distant days when we were a true part of the animal ecology; when the sight of another species in unthinkable hosts brought fears or hopes no longer applicable. When the young eels reach the Camusfeàrna burn – no more than a uniform three inches long nor thicker than a meat-skewer, steel-blue when seen from above, but against the light transparent except for a red blob at the gills – they have been journeying in larval form for two whole years from their breeding grounds south-west of Bermuda, through two thousand miles of ocean and enemies. During that long, blind voyage of instinct their numbers must have been reduced not to a millionth but a billionth of those who set forth, yet it is difficult to imagine that there can have been vaster hordes than reach the Camusfeàrna burn; still more difficult to realise that these are but a tiny fraction of the hosts that are simultaneously ascending a myriad other burns."

And there are still obstacles to face when they reach the Scottish coast. Hungry herons are waiting, elvers get lost, some cannot make it up the waterfalls and wet rocks, but ... "It is not possible for more than a moment or two to identify oneself with any single one of this mass, but there is a sense of relief, of emotional satisfaction, in looking upward to the lip of the falls where they spill over from the hidden pool above, and seeing the broad band of glistening elvers that have accomplished the apparently impossible and are within an inch of safety."

For many years it was a mystery where the elvers came from. But then with modern tracking devices it was found that the elvers which grew to adult size in the streams and pools of western Europe then headed for the Sargasso Sea to mate and breed and the tiny hatchlings would then cross thousands of kilometres of ocean to reach the coasts of Europe. But this did not solve every mystery. How did the tiny creatures find their way across those vast expanses of ocean and how did creatures hatched in salt water then adapt to the fresh water of inland burns and pools and then re-adapt to salt water on their return to the Sargasso Sea? And I wondered where Australia's fresh water eels go to breed. In fact, no one knows but it is believed they breed somewhere in the Pacific, possibly near Fiji and are then carried by currents to Australia and down the coast.

It did not really surprise me to learn that European eels are a threatened species. To all the natural predators of the tiny elvers can be added exploitation, pollution, loss of habitat, the 'usual suspects'. And I couldn't help wondering if the mysterious seaweed forests of the Sargasso Sea itself are also under threat.

S is for SUMMERSIDE:

"While it lacks the elegance and cosmopolitan vibe of Charlottetown, Summerside is a simpler, seaside-oriented place with everything you need in one small, tidy package. Recessed deep within Bedeque Bay and PEI's second-largest 'city,' this tiny seaside village possesses a modern waterfront and quiet streets lined with leafy trees and grand old homes. The two largest economic booms in the province's history, shipbuilding and fox breeding, shaped the city's development in the 19th and early 20th

centuries. Like Charlottetown, its outskirts are plagued by unsightly development – you’ll find most of Summerside’s interesting bits along, or near to, Water St, which runs parallel to the waterfront.

The Lonely Planet Guide to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick & Prince Edward Island.

My image of Summerside was created by L. M. Montgomery in *Anne of Windy Willows*. Anne goes there to be principal of Summerside High School in the 1880s which can’t have been very big as it only had three staff. But it was definitely a place of leafy streets and grand old homes.

A number of streets are mentioned, Trent, Temple, Queen, as well as Dawlish and Glencove Roads, but I haven’t tried to find their real life counterparts. Nor have I tried to discover whether what she calls the island of Flying Cloud in “the harbour with its smoky islands and glowing sunsets” really exists.

Anne mentions several of those grand old homes. The Evergreens is “a big, imposing, gloomy mansion of stone-trimmed red brick, with a mansard roof warty with dormer windows, an iron railing round the flat top and so many spruces and firs crowding about it that you can hardly see the house”. Maplehurst is “a proud, exclusive house which draws its trees round it and won’t associate with common houses. It has a big white wooden woman off the bow of old Captain Abraham Pringle’s famous ship, the *Go and Ask Her*, in the orchard, and billows of southernwood about the front steps which were brought out from the old country over a hundred years ago ... They have stately mirrors over the old black fluted mantels, a glass case with wax flowers in it, pictures full of the beauty of the ships of long ago ... Marble-topped tables, one bearing a beautiful model of a ship with crimson hull and snow-white sails” and “A round mirror with a clock in the centre”. While Elmcroft was “an old-fashioned house with towers at every corner and a bulbous cupola on the roof”.

Then there was Tomgallon House. “It was on a dark, windy March evening, when even the clouds scudding over the sky seemed in a hurry, that Anne skimmed up the triple flight of broad, shallow steps flanked by stone urns and stonier lions that led to the massive front door of Tomgallon House.” It is equally grand inside. “Miss Minerva ushered her along a hall, hung with portraits and photographs of faded loveliness, with the famous stained-glass window at its end, into a large, high-ceilinged, very stately guest room.” “The dining room was in keeping with the rest of the house. There was another ornate chandelier, an equally ornate gilt-framed mirror over the mantelpiece, and a table beautifully set with silver and crystal and old Crown Derby”. “Miss Minerva marched Anne ruthlessly over the whole huge house, full of great square rooms: ballroom, conservatory, billiard-room, three drawing rooms, breakfast room, no end of bedrooms, and an enormous attic. They were all splendid and dismal.”

It was not that everyone lived in such style. Montgomery hints at the poverty of some lives. “Lewis Allen is paying for his board by doing *housework* at his boarding house, and isn’t a bit ashamed of it. And Sophy Sinclair rides bareback on her father’s old grey mare six miles in and six miles out every day.”

The Guide mentions a ‘handsome Queen Anne Revival house on the corner of Summer and Winter Sts’. But Anne’s Tomgallon House sounds more like a grand Victorian place. And you can stay at Willowgreen Farm which sounds reminiscent of her forays into the nearby countryside.

You can also visit the West Point Lighthouse (is this the one Anne describes as “The faraway lighthouse, painted in odd red-and-white rings” though it now boasts black and white rings and a small museum?), the Acadian Museum, and the Maisons de Bouteilles. But the value of *Anne of Windy Willows* is not that you can correlate her places to the modern town but rather that it leaves the reader with the belief that Summerside would be a very nice place to visit.

T is for TIERRA DEL FUEGO:

Tierra del Fuego still entices, not as a place to visit perhaps, it *is* windy and cold, but as a place of the imagination. I can remember being intrigued by the name when I came upon it when I was young. I was under the impression that Cape Horn was part of it and Cape Horn turned up in sea shanties and rollicking ballads such as in Norman Lindsay’s *The Magic Pudding*:

“Ho, the cook of the *Saucy Sausage*,
Was a feller called Curry and Rice,
A son of a gun as fat as a tun
With a face as round as a hot cross bun,
Or a barrel, to be precise.

“One winter’s morn we rounds the Horn,
A-rollin’ homeward bound.
We strikes on the ice, goes down in a trice,
And all on board but Curry and Rice
And me an’ Sam is drowned.

“For Sam an’ me an’ the cook, yer see,
We climbs on a lump of ice,
And there in the sleet we suffered a treat
For several months from frozen feet,
With nothin’ at all but ice to eat,
And ice does not suffice.

“And Sam and me we couldn’t agree
With the cook at any price.
We was both as thin as a piece of tin
While that there cook was bustin’ his skin
On nothin’ to eat but ice.

“Says Sam to me, ‘It’s a mystery
More deep than words can utter;
Whatever we do, here’s me an’ you,
Us both as thin as Irish stoo,
While he’s as fat as butter.’

“But late one night we wakes in fright
To see by a pale blue flare,

That cook has got in a phantom pot
A big plum-duff an' a rump-steak hot,
And the guzzlin' wizard is eatin' the lot,
On top of the iceberg bare."

"There's a verse left out here," said Bill, stopping the song, "owin' to the difficulty of explainin' exactly what happened when me and Sam discovered the deceitful nature of that cook. The next verse is as follows:—

"Now Sam an' me can never agree
What happened to Curry and Rice.
The whole affair is shrouded in doubt,
For the night was dark and the flare went out,
And all we heard was a startled shout,
Though I think meself, in the subsequent rout,
That us bein' thin, an' him bein' stout,
In the middle of pushin' an' shovin' about,
He—MUST HAVE FELL OFF THE ICE."

"That won't do, you know," began the Puddin', but Sam said hurriedly, "It was very dark, and there's no sayin' at this date what happened."

"Yes there is," said the Puddin', "for I had me eye on the whole affair, and it's my belief that if he hadn't been so round you'd have never rolled him off the iceberg, for you was both singing out, 'Yo heave Ho' for half-an-hour, an' him trying to hold on to Bill's beard."

"In the haste of the moment," said Bill, "he may have got a bit of a shove, for the ice bein' slippery, and us bein' justly enraged, and him bein' as round as a barrel, he may, as I said, have been too fat to save himself from rollin' off the iceberg. The point, however, is immaterial to our story, which concerns this Puddin'; and this Puddin'," said Bill, patting him on the basin, "was the very puddin' that Curry and Rice invented on the iceberg."

"He must have been a very clever cook," said Bunyip.

"He was, poor feller, he was," said Bill, greatly affected. "For plum duff or Irish stoo there wasn't his equal in the land. But enough of these sad subjects. Pausin' only to explain that me an' Sam got off the iceberg on a homeward bound chicken coop, landed on Tierra del Fuego, walked to Valparaiso, and so got home".

It was a surprise to learn much later that Cape Horn is part of a separate small island. Though this is slightly misleading. Tierra del Fuego is like a mother island surrounded by lots of baby islands including Hornos Island which sprouts Cape Horn and a monument to the legions of sailors who died while trying to sail around it.

Tierra del Fuego is divided between Argentina and Chile and this has led to squabbles over the channels around it, not least because these channels are rich in lobsters. The Argentinian part boasts the world's most southerly city in Ushuaia and the Chilean segment boasts the world's most southerly town in Puerto Williams. But both sides offer penguins, sea lions, a variety of bird life, guanacos, and that unexpected import, Canadian beavers. Argentina imported some beavers in 1946 with plans to start a fur industry. Instead the beavers have become a serious problem. Not only are there no

natural predators but sub-Antarctic vegetation does not cope with beaver habits. I felt sorry for the beavers which, after all, did not ask to be relocated, because they are now being killed off to protect the environment.

The island, like Tasmania, suffered the near destruction of its indigenous tribes and they now exist only in very small numbers. Nor does Tierra del Fuego provide the ideal means for people and groups to come together and reconnect. Apart from fishing and some timber cutting and ranching it provides few jobs. And a border cutting through their traditional lands does not help. Though they were related to people living on the mainland the hunter-gatherer people of Tierra del Fuego are usually divided into four tribes, the Selk'nam or Ona (and I remember a news item many years ago saying the last Ona man had died), the Haush or Manek'enk, the Yahgan or Yámana, and the Kawésqar or Alacaluf. They all used bark canoes and lived similar lives (and suffered similarly from introduced diseases and intermittent massacres) though there were considerable differences in language and beliefs.

But for people hardier than me it does offer some unforgettable hiking experiences. *The Rough Guide to South America on a Budget* says, "Puerto Williams is home to around three thousand people, including the last descendants of the Yámana. The windblown town has a desolate quality to it, though the community itself is warm and close-knit. Many travellers come to Puerto Williams to complete the challenging Los Dientes de Navarino Circuit – a strenuous four- to seven-day clockwise trek in the Isla Navarino wilderness for experienced hikers only."

When I went looking for something on the Circuit I found a number of company advertisements, along with striking photographs of wild mountains and water, and when you consider that 'dientes' is Spanish for 'teeth' it gives you an idea of the shape of some of those mountains. As a number of travel companies offer organised treks I found I could do quite a lot of pleasant armchair traveling just by scrolling through their material.

U is for URANUS:

When I was young my parents paid off a set of *Newman's Encyclopedias* in the belief it would help us in school. I can't remember getting much from them but I *did* like the section of myths and legends and the section on astronomy.

Back then I believed the planet was called U-rain-us so it was a disappointment later to hear people calling it Urine-us. It seemed to undermine its beauty and mystery. But name or not it is a planet to ponder on.

"William Herschel and his sister Caroline, the eighteenth century's prodigies of amateur astronomy, are fine witnesses to the depths available in nature. At the age of twenty-eight, while working as an organist and music teacher and living in Bath, England, William developed an obsession with looking at the sky. He gazed for hours at the stars and the moon at night in the Beaufort Square garden. He began to read voraciously about astronomical calculation and speculation, and to build telescopes. After five years of following these pursuits, he brought his sister over from Germany to assist him with housekeeping and with his growing astronomical enterprises. Caroline's growth had been stunted and her face scarred from childhood illnesses. She had suffered abuse

and neglect at the hands of her mother and eldest brother, and had pursued what learning she could against their wishes. She took to astronomy like a fish to water.

“Together, William and Caroline built a larger, more powerful and more precise telescope than any previously known in England, including at the royal observatories. Building it took untold days and hours of painstaking, nonstop polishing of metal mirrors. One polishing session took sixteen uninterrupted hours, and Caroline had to put food in William’s mouth while he was working. It was with this telescope that William discovered the planet Uranus in 1781; they built later the smaller, roving telescope with which Caroline found her vocation as a highly accomplished comet hunter.

“Both William and Caroline eventually memorized the night sky, able to navigate the stars and planets without charts and to identify hitherto unknown and unseen objects. William imagined, as few had before, the depths of the universe, seeing past what the ancients saw as a sphere of fixed stars to what he envisaged as a vast realm of illuminated emptiness. The Milky Way, even as late as the eighteenth century, was thought of as a flattish surface, as it appears to the eye. It was William who imagined that we see it from the side, that its circular shape is obscured by our perspective, and that it stretches outward into a universe whose depth had not been guessed.”

Zena Hitz in *Lost in Thought*.

Barrie W. Jones in *Pluto* expands on this: “Until 1781 just five planets were known: Mercury, Venus, the Earth, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn, all readily visible to the unaided eye.” But on the 26th April of that year Herschel presented a paper to the Royal Society in London to say he thought he’d found a new comet, but a month later he had established that it was, in fact, an unknown planet. It was a German astronomer Johann Elert Bode who christened it Uranus. Herschel then went on to discover two moons orbiting Uranus which his son John christened Titania and Oberon. William and Caroline lived at 19 King Street in the English town of Bath and they mounted their home-made telescope in their modest backyard.

But the immediate result was that people began asking if there might be more planets beyond Uranus. And the more the new planet was studied the more there seemed to be discrepancies in their observations which might suggest it was being pulled by the gravity of another unknown planet. A number of people went searching, with Englishman Adams and Frenchman Le Verrier now regarded as co-predictors and two Germans Galle and d’Arrest given the title of co-discoverers of Neptune in 1846. But there were still questions being asked about more planets and in 1930 a young American, Clyde Tombaugh, discovered Pluto.

Urania in Greek mythology was the Muse of Astronomy. I am not sure just how and when she was called upon for inspiration. I didn’t think of the ancient Greeks as being the kind of dedicated mappers of the heavens that we think of the ancient Mayans as. But they obviously saw a need for some connection. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* says, “In some accounts she was the mother of Linus the musician (in other versions, his mother is the Muse Calliope); the father was either Hermes or Amphimarus, son of Poseidon. Urania was also occasionally used as a byname for Aphrodite. Her attributes were the globe and compass.” That seems to suggest that it was seafarers who would be most likely to call on her for help once they were out of sight of land.

But the Greeks also had the male Uranus as part of a far darker story. Gaea (or Gaia) produced Uranus and from a union between Gaea (Earth) and Uranus (Heaven) came not only the Titans but the Cyclopes and the Hecatoncheires. But Uranus hated his offspring and hid them inside Earth's body. She pleaded for help but only Cronus, a Titan, responded. He cut off his father's testicles. The drops of blood which fell on Gaea turned into the Erinyes, the Giants and the nymphs called Meliai. And the severed testicles floated on the sea producing a white foam from which sprang the goddess Aphrodite.

Cronus by his action had severed the connection between Earth and Heaven.

There is no doubt that the ancient Greeks had vivid imaginations but this story is thought to be an imported one as societies to their East, such as the Hittites, had similar myths and Cronus's use of a scimitar rather than a sword also suggests an Eastern origin.

It is perhaps not surprising that some of Uranus's more modern 'children' are a mixture. The famous Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe called his peaceful observatory Uraniborg. And Uranus gave his name to Uranium ...

There are an estimated two hundred thousand million stars in our galaxy. In antiquity a planet was defined as a celestial body that wandered against the fixed pattern of the stellar background. Indeed, the word 'planet' is derived from the Greek word *planetes*, which means 'wanderer'. Seven planets were visible to the unaided eye. In the English-speaking world these are the Sun (from the old English Sunne), the Moon (from the old English Mona), Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn (the names of Roman gods). The Earth was not included because of the prevailing view in antiquity that the Earth was fixed at the centre of the Universe, and not in motion among the stars.

"In the early decades of the sixteenth century the Polish astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus (the Latinized version of Coppersnic, 1473-1543) revived an ancient Greek idea that the Sun, not the Earth, is fixed at the centre of the Universe. Such a heliocentric Universe had been proposed as early as about 200 BC by Aristarchus of Samos (an island off the coast of what is now Turkey). However, it did not survive long under the weight of Aristotle's influence. The widespread adoption of a heliocentric Universe came after the observations of the Danish nobleman Tycho Ottesen Brahe (1546-1601), which led to Kepler's laws of planetary motion. These are much more easily framed in a heliocentric system than in any other. The heliocentric Universe at once led to the exclusion of the Sun from the class 'planet', which then comprised Mercury, Venus, the Earth, the Moon, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn." But then with the discovery of moons orbiting Jupiter and Saturn the definition was changed: a planet orbited the Sun while the Moon since it orbited Earth could no longer be regarded as a planet. This was the accepted view when William Herschel startled the scientific world with his discovery of Uranus.

Uranus as a planet is a place of mystery and beauty. We do know that it has a core of "icy and rocky-iron materials", that it has an atmosphere of hydrogen, methane, and helium, that it takes around 84 years to orbit the Sun, that it spins on its side rather than its axis, that like Saturn it has rings though less spectacular ones, and intriguingly that both Uranus and Neptune are estimated to have formed much closer to the Sun "where there was enough material in the solar nebula to enable them to grow before nebular gases were swept away." It was the gravitational pull of the giant planets which drew them away from the Sun. Uranus has five moons, two of them, Titania and Oberon, were found by William Herschel in 1787; Ariel and Umbriel were discovered by William

Lassell in 1851; and Miranda not until 1948 when an American astronomer Gerard Kuiper found it. I would rather like to be the discoverer of an unknown celestial body—and so I fell to musing on what name I might give my mysterious new-found body ...

It seems there is an expectation that newly-found celestial bodies should receive names from mythology. Even modern discoveries seem to bow to this traditional wisdom. For instance, in 1949 Walter Baade at the Mt Palomar Observatory in California discovered what was called a ‘minor planet’. I hadn’t heard of it. And as it has a diameter of only 0.8 of a kilometre I am not surprised that it didn’t make a big splash. But it is not a comet and it is not a moon but rather follows its own eccentric orbit round the Sun, rotating every two and a half hours.

And what did it get called? Icarus.

So given this tradition ...

U is for UXBRIDGE:

Uxbridge is a town. Oxbridge is a slip of the tongue when you can’t be sure whether you mean Oxford or Cambridge but know that a venerable university is somewhere in the mix. It is now a part of London. But the thing which intrigued me when I went looking was that there are a number of Uxbridges. There is one in Canada in “the traditional territory of the Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe people” and which looks rather attractive. Then there is one in Massachusetts in the US and to my surprise there is a little one in Tasmania up the Derwent Valley past New Norfolk but before you get to Bushy Park.

So what might the original Uxbridge offer the visitor? Unexpectedly, it can offer you the chance to visit a bunker! “The only original Battle of Britain RAF Fighter Group Operations Room open to the public.” Remember those old films with attractive young women pushing markers round a large table and someone talking of ‘some bandits coming in’ from such-and-such direction? So you can immerse yourself in such a wave of pleasant nostalgia you won’t notice the claustrophobia of going down into the bunker.

U is for UKRAINE:

In *Forgotten Bastards of the Eastern Front* Serhii Plokhy says: “In the early 1930s Stalin starved close to four million Ukrainians, along with millions of other Soviet citizens, in his attempt to collectivize agriculture. As noted earlier, Poltava, Myrhorod, and Pyriatyn were among the areas of Ukraine that suffered most from the famine. Stalin took advantage of the crisis to attack the Ukrainian party cadres and launch an assault on the nation’s cultural revival. Ukrainians living outside Ukraine and constituting the largest national minority in Russia proper were reregistered as Russians almost overnight. Contemporaries speak of those events as a Ukrainian genocide.

“As the Third Reich invaded Ukraine in 1941, many locals wanted to see the German divisions as portents of the arrival of European civilization and long awaited liberation from Stalin’s brutal rule. Many used the occasion to reclaim their non-Soviet identity and restore a Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent of Moscow. Although the Germans allowed that, they went on to establish a reign of terror in Ukraine. The main victims were Jews: close to a million Jewish men, women, and children, or every sixth Jew who died in the Holocaust, came from the Ukraine. Young Ukrainians were hunted down to be sent to labor camps in Germany, producing a huge forced emigration—2.2

million Ukrainians ended up there by 1944. Ukrainian nationalists, briefly tolerated in 1941, also fell victim to the German regime as their leaders were killed and their followers driven underground.” (Of the estimated 2.8 million people sent from the USSR to Germany as slave labour around 2.1 million of them were from the Ukraine.)

“By the time the Red Army came back to Ukraine in 1943, there were few believers in German liberation, but the population did not forget or forgive the Soviet atrocities of the revolutionary and interwar eras. Well aware of this, the Soviet authorities were concerned that Ukrainians had been exposed to anticommunist propaganda during the German occupation and were now anything but loyal to the Soviet regime. With the arrival of the Americans, foreigners of a different brand, the secret police was all eyes and ears.”

The book is sub-titled ‘An Untold Story of World War II’ and certainly I had not known that Stalin had, reluctantly, allowed the Americans to set up air bases for fleets of heavy bombers in western Ukraine in 1944 so that Germany could be more effectively bombed from the east. The Americans had some success but Stalin’s paranoia about the Americans really being spies, Russian inefficiencies, breakdowns in communications, and disagreement over targets made the whole program far less effective than it might have been.

And Ukrainian hopes that the American presence might herald change for the better were unfulfilled. “The attitude of the local Ukrainian population to the arrival of the Americans was quite different from that of the Red Army officers and soldiers. The latter, especially young officers and technicians, indoctrinated in Soviet class-based thinking and sharing official prejudices against the capitalist West, grudgingly accepted American economic and military prowess, compensating where possible by asserting their sense of their own ideological and cultural superiority. The locals, especially those who had lived in the Russian Empire as children and experienced the German occupation as adults, were not impressed by Soviet propaganda that sought to demean the Americans, viewing their arrival as a change for the better—as heralding reform of the Soviet political system by limiting the power of the party; or the expulsion of the communists altogether; or undoing the takeover of Ukraine.”

And the Soviets objected to Ukrainian girls going out with young American servicemen who were generous with gifts and behaved with a cheerful friendliness. The promise, both military and political, which the American presence heralded was largely nullified by Stalin.

Oksana Maksymchuk and Max Rosochinsky introducing a book of Lyuba Yakimchuk’s poems, *Apricots of Donbas*, write: “Lyuba Yakimchuk is a phenomenon. Barely in her mid-thirties, she has already managed to collect some of Ukraine’s top prizes as a poet and screenplay writer. She’s an accomplished spoken word performer, a fashion icon profiled by *Vogue USA*, and a mother of a ten-year old. She recently wrote a play, and she’s working on a biography of a famed twentieth century futurist poet Mykhail Semenko.

“Yakimchuk’s accomplishments are not limited to those in the cultural sphere. Born and raised in the family of a coal miner and a conveyor operator in the small industrial town of Pervomaisk some sixty miles from the Russian border, Lyuba is also an advocate for the underserved communities in the Ukrainian east. In 2014, when

Russian-backed militants occupied Pervomaisk, forcing her family to escape as refugees, Yakimchuk emerged as a spokesperson for the plight of the civilian population in the region. Her advocacy efforts on behalf of the dislocated persons and the inhabitants of the occupied territories continue to this day.

“The present collection draws on the poetry Yakimchuk wrote over the past ten years. During this period, Ukraine was swept over by massive peaceful demonstrations against a corrupt regime, subsequently falling victim to Russian aggression in the form of annexation of Crimea and military incursion into the Donbas region, which left millions of people displaced. Yakimchuk’s poems reflect a perspective of a civilian witnessing the descent of her familiar surroundings into a state of chaos, struggling to maintain her balance as she attempts to make sense of the changes she observes. Yet the poems do not easily fall into the category of victim narratives. Time and again, Yakimchuk’s poetic language demonstrates art’s redemptive potential to restore the victim to a place of significance, as one who puts the broken pieces together, even if she cannot put them “back in place” or undo the damage done.”

I had not thought of Ukraine in connection with apricots but then I thought ‘why not?’ I think of Ukraine in connection with sunflowers, and indeed with apples and almonds and barley, so why not apricots which, orange and juicy, seem to hold out the promise of something life-giving.

inhale-
explode
inhale-
explode

I get startled by the sounds of vowels
and by the consonants
startled by soft sounds
and by my own breathing

a tremor seizes me
like leaves on an aspen tree
like a bumble bee
dropped into a winter

where pain awaits
a white demise
of no explosion
no inhalation

‘shell fire’
when the city was destroyed
they started fighting over the cemetery
it was right before Easter—
wooden crosses over the freshly dug graves
put out their paper blossoms—
red, blue, yellow

neon green, orange, raspberry pink

joyful relatives poured vodka for themselves
and for the dead—straight into their graves
and the dead asked for more, and more, and more
and their relatives kept pouring

the carnival went on
but at some point
a young man set off a trip-wire
at the grave of his mother-in-law
an old man gazed into the sky
and lost it forever
a fat man smashed his shot glass
at the fence around his wife's grave
glass fell at his feet
like hail

Easter came
now a live crow sits on the grave
of Anna Andriivna Ravenova
instead of a headstone
BTR-80 wheels
rest at the cemetery nest of the Kolesnyk family
where lie buried
Maria Viktorivna, Pylyp Vasylyovych, and Mykola Pylypovych

what are they to me, those wheels and that crow?
I can no longer remember

‘crow, wheels’

we've got mutual friends on Facebook, you and I
friends who had died
nobody buried their profiles
friends post flowers on their walls

it's like having a grandmother
buried in the city cemetery
the roots of an apple tree at her grave entwined
with the roots of the evergreens at the graves close by

before Easter, I go to her to tidy up
in case this is the year
she decides to rise

I weed around her grave
so that I wouldn't be ashamed when she rises

threatened millions of people in the Ukraine a massive humanitarian effort by the international community staved off disaster but in the 1930s Stalin did his best to successfully hide the famine and the starvation. The film suggested that one person who *did* listen to Gareth Jones was George Orwell. But did they actually meet?

Rebecca Solnit in *Orwell's Roses* wrote, "In 1928, the Soviet Union was at the start of its first five-year plan to pursue an accelerated program of industrialization that drew many people to the cities and increased bread shortages. Bad weather and Stalin's rural policies made the shortages far worse. Better-off and less-cooperative peasants were denounced as "kulaks," and at the outset of 1929, Stalin launched a swift and brutal "dekulakization" rampage to destroy members of this fluid category. Immense numbers of peasants, particularly in Ukraine, were executed, imprisoned, or shipped off to Siberia and other remote places.

"The government seized the remaining peasants' grain, by force, by torture, at gunpoint. Even after the population was starving, Stalin was convinced they were holding out, and the brutality continued. Those who tried to leave the regions stripped of sustenance were prevented; those who tried to steal food were shot. The surviving peasantry was forced onto collective farms where conditions were often chaotic, brutal, and otherwise inconducive to productivity. Ideologues who knew nothing of agriculture were sent to run the farms. The conditions for a catastrophe piled up in the early 1930s.

"In the resultant "terror famine" sometimes called the Holodomor, about five million human beings starved to death, mostly in Ukraine. Famished peasants came to the towns to beg for scraps, came to the train stations in hopes of escaping, or died en route. Their skeletal bodies were strewn along the roads. Deranged by hunger, some turned to cannibalism, even devouring their own children. The Soviet regime found the starved millions incompatible with its image of communism's success and so concealed their fate, with the help of most of the western journalists in Russia, who faced censorship and expulsion for telling the truth, but who were in most cases all too willing to comply.

"Public figures—notably the playwright George Bernard Shaw, who had been flattered extensively by the regime—denied the existence of the famine, as did *The New York Times's* Walter Duranty, who used his prestige to discredit other journalists who tried to report the facts. They hadn't been tortured; the process of making them go along with a lie had been more delicate. At the time, only a few journalists, including Orwell's friend Malcolm Muggeridge, told the truth about the famine and its causes. Gareth Jones, who in 1933 did so more boldly than anyone else, was in 1935 the victim of a still-unsolved murder."

So it was Malcolm Muggeridge who exposed Orwell to the story while Gareth Jones was the ghostly inspiration over Orwell's novella. It was many many years since I had read *Animal Farm* and I mainly remembered that the pigs come out on top, their dictatorial pig Napoleon designating himself Leader, and proclaiming, 'ALL ANIMALS ARE EQUAL BUT SOME ANIMALS ARE MORE EQUAL THAN OTHERS'.

But Orwell also writes in *Animal Farm*, "For days at a time the animals had nothing to eat but chaff and mangels. Starvation seemed to stare them in the face.

"It was vitally necessary to conceal this fact from the outside world. Emboldened by the collapse of the windmill, the human beings were inventing fresh lies about *Animal Farm*. Once again it was being put about that all the animals were dying of famine and disease, and that they were continually fighting among themselves and had resorted to

cannibalism and infanticide. Napoleon was well aware of the bad results that might follow if the real facts of the food situation were known, and he decided to make use of Mr Whymper to spread a contrary impression. Hitherto the animals had had little or no contact with Whymper on his weekly visits: now, however, a few selected animals, mostly sheep, were instructed to remark casually in his hearing that rations had been increased. In addition, Napoleon ordered the almost empty bins in the store-shed to be filled nearly to the brim with sand, which was then covered up with what remained of the grain and meal. On some suitable pretext Whymper was led through the store-shed and allowed to catch a glimpse of the bins. He was deceived, and continued to report to the outside world that there was no food shortage on Animal Farm.”

Orwell had begun thinking about the book as far back as 1937 and wrote it in 1943 but couldn't get it published until 1945 and it was published without the preface he had intended for it. In this he had written, “The endless executions in the purges of 1936-8 were applauded by life-long opponents of capital punishment, and it was considered equally proper to publicize famines when they happened in India and to conceal them when they happened in the Ukraine. And if this was true before the war, the intellectual atmosphere is certainly no better now.” Orwell also wrote a preface for the edition translated into Ukrainian by Ihor Szewczenko who promoted the need for a Ukrainian edition to explain the ‘Russian nationalistic exploitation of the Ukrainian people’ and which was distributed to Ukrainians living in camps for Displaced Persons after WW2.

I remember seeing Sophia Loren in a film walking through a paddock of sunflowers supposedly in the Ukraine. It is an image which has stayed with me. But many images have jostled their way over it. Political unrest, invasion, war ... and Chernobyl.

In *Chernobyl Prayer* Svetlana Alexeivich, winner of the 2015 Nobel Prize for Literature, writes of the most obvious monument to the tragedy, the sarcophagus to entomb the damaged reactor. “Reactor No. 4, now known as the ‘Shelter Object’, still holds in its lead-reinforced concrete belly around 200 tonnes of nuclear material. This fuel is partially mixed with graphite and concrete. Nobody knows what is currently occurring inside.

“The sarcophagus was hastily constructed to a unique design, one that must fill the design engineers from St Petersburg with pride. It was intended to last for thirty years, but the structure was built with a remote assembly technique, its sections joined together by robots and helicopters: hence the gaps. Today, the data suggest the breaches and cracks exceed 200 square metres in total, and aerosol radioactivity is continually leaking through them. When the wind blows from the north, traces of uranium, plutonium and caesium appear in the south. On a sunny day with the lights off, shafts of light can be seen inside the reactor hall falling from above. What are they? Rain also penetrates the building, and should moisture reach the fuel-containing material, there is the potential for a chain reaction.

“The sarcophagus is a corpse which still has breath. It is breathing death. How much longer does it have? Nobody really knows: it remains impossible to access many of the structural components to assess their soundness.”

And so ... “Ukraine will shortly start work on a grandiose construction project. A new shelter known as the ‘Arch’ will be placed over the sarcophagus built in 1986 to

cover the destroyed Reactor No. 4 of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Twenty-eight donor countries are earmarking an initial tranche of funding for the project of over 768 million dollars.” Svetlana’s book came out in 2016 so I couldn’t help wondering how much of this new building to be made with 18,000 tonnes of steel had actually been constructed before Ukraine had to turn its attention to fighting off the invading Russians.

“The Arch will be an unprecedented edifice in the history of mankind. The scale of the structure is awe-inspiring: the double shell will tower up to 150 metres. In terms of aesthetics, it will almost be comparable with the Eiffel Tower.”

No, you can’t look inside the Sarcophagus to see ‘what is currently occurring’. But yes, people *have* come back to live in the neighbouring villages. In 1986 the whole town of Prypiat, with its 50,000 people, was hurriedly evacuated. But small numbers have drifted back—because they couldn’t find somewhere else to live; because they thought of it as home, and the villages there for hundreds of years were genuinely ‘home’ in a way the recently built town to house power plant workers was not; because they didn’t know how seriously to take the threat of continuing radiation; because the forests, larch and pine, have grown up around them with creatures, unaware of the danger, wolves, bears, deer, wild boar, birds of many kinds, both as food and perhaps as comfort to the new fringe-dwellers.

Alexievich in her collection of personal reminiscences from survivors refers frequently to the animals of the Zone. ‘It was such a beautiful area. The trees were not recent plantings but the original, ancient forest. Meandering streams, their water tea-coloured but so, so limpid. Green grass. People calling to each other in the forest. But I knew it had all been poisoned, the mushrooms, the berries, the squirrels scampering among the nut bushes.’ And from another, ‘I went there thinking it would all be covered in grey ash, in black soot, like in Bryullov’s painting *The Last Day of Pompeii*. But I got there and everything was beautiful. Breathtakingly beautiful! Meadows in flower, the gentle spring green of the forests. I love that time of the year. Everything is coming to life. Flourishing, singing...What struck me most was the combination of beauty and fear. Fear could no longer be separated from beauty or beauty from fear.’ But ‘We were working in Pripyat. The whole town was surrounded by two rows of barbed wire, like a national border. It had these nice clean high-rise blocks, while the streets were covered with a thick layer of sand, chopped down trees. We were following orders: ‘laundering’ the town and replacing the top twenty centimeters of soil with a layer of sand.’

She also reminds readers that the farmland just over the border in Belarus was contaminated, leading to a massive rise in cancers (‘Before Chernobyl, the incidence of cancer in Belarus was 82 in 100,000. Today, the rate has risen to 6,000 in 100,000: an almost seventy-four-fold increase’) and birth defects. ‘The newspapers wrote that we were lucky the wind hadn’t blown the wrong way. Meaning towards the city, towards Kiev. No one knew at the time, no one guessed that it had blown over Belarus. Over me and my little son, Yura. That day I’d gone for a walk with him in the forest. We were picking wood sorrel. My God, why did nobody warn me?’ And the economic costs? Serhii Plokhyy writes ‘Belarusian economists estimated the overall price tag for their republic alone at US\$235 billion’ ...

—‘Our duty was to keep them out. An old woman came, carrying a basket of eggs; we had to confiscate and bury them. She’d milked a cow and was carrying a pail of milk. A soldier was with her; the milk had to be buried. If they secretly dug up their

spuds, you confiscated them. And the beetroots, the onions, pumpkins: they all had to be buried. Those were the instructions. The harvest was glorious, enviable. And such beauty all around. It was a golden autumn. We all had the faces of madmen, both them and us.'

—'Sometimes a boar will come into the orchard from the forest, sometimes an elk. People come rarely, though. Just the police.'

—'All the hens' combs were black, not red: that was the radiation ... The milk wouldn't sour, it curdled into lumps. It was the radiation. Had that radiation stuff in my vegetable plot. The whole plot went white, completely white, like it was dusted with something. With some little specks. I thought maybe something had been carried from the forests. The wind had sprinkled it.'

—'All the sparrows in our village disappeared. They were lying all over the place, in gardens, on the tarmac. They got raked up and taken away in containers, along with the leaves. That year, you weren't allowed to burn leaves. They were radioactive. They had to be buried.'

'Two years later, the sparrows reappeared. We were so pleased. We were shouting to each other, 'I saw a sparrow yesterday. They're back.' '

—'The first wolf-dogs have appeared, born to she-wolves from dogs that took to the forest. They are larger than wolves, cannot be hunted with flags, are unafraid of light and humans, do not respond to wolf decoys. And the wild cats are already roaming in packs, with no fear of people. Their memory of how they were obedient to man has faded. There is a blurring of the boundaries between the real and unreal.'

—'A cow was walking with her calf. We didn't shoot them. Nor did we shoot the horses. They were frightened of the wolves, but not of human beings. But horses are better at defending themselves. It was the cows that the wolves got first.'

—'Pigs that had gone wild were running about the empty villages. And dogs and cats were waiting by their gates for their owners, keeping watch over their empty houses.'

—'The first time we went, dogs were running about near their houses. Guarding them, waiting for people to come back. They were excited to see us, came running to a human voice. They welcomed us. We shot them in the houses, the barns, the vegetable plots. ... We didn't kill the tortoises ... In the yards, there were cages wide open, rabbits running about. The coypus were locked up, we let them out; if there was any water nearby, a lake or river, they swam away. Everything had been left in a hurry. Thought they'd soon be back. After all, how had it gone? An evacuation order 'for three days'.'

—'From the helicopter...

I was flying close to the ground, observing. There were roe deer, wild boars. All scrawny and sleepy, moving in slow motion. They were feeding on the grass that grew there, drinking the water. They didn't realize they needed to leave too. Along with the humans.'

—'I arrived there when the birds were sitting in their nests, and left when the apples were lying on the snow. There was a lot we didn't manage to bury. We buried earth in the earth. Along with the beetles, spiders and maggots, that whole separate nation. We buried a world. That was the deepest impression I came away with. Those creatures.'

—'So long as the town or village has sparrows and pigeons, it's safe for people to live there. If the bees are busy, it's still clean. I was in a taxi, and the driver was puzzling over why the birds were acting as though they were blind, dropping down on his

windscreen, crashing into it. Like they'd gone daft and dozy. They seemed suicidal. After his shift, to blank it all out, he used to sit drinking with his friends.'

—'Something an old beekeeper said remains in my memory. I have heard the same thing from others. 'In the morning, I went out into the garden and something was missing, the usual sound was gone. Couldn't hear a single bee – not one! Eh? What was that about? And they wouldn't fly out the second day. Nor the third. Later, they told us there was an accident at the power plant, which wasn't far off. But for a good while we didn't know. The bees knew, but we didn't.'

A different writer, Michael Palin, visited just before the break-up of the USSR and wrote in *Pole to Pole*: "We head north and west from Kiev, making for the town of Narodichi. It's forty-two miles due west of Chernobyl, two of whose reactors, Vadim reminds us, are still operational. The Ukrainian Parliament has voted unanimously to close them down. The Soviet government has refused. The Ukrainians claim that 8000 died as a result of the accident. The official Soviet figure is thirty-two.

"We are passing through woodlands of pine and oak scrub interspersed with harvested fields and cherry and almond orchards. ... After a while the woodland gives way to a wide and fertile agricultural plain. The first indication that this abundance is tainted comes as quite a shock. It's a sign, set in brambles and long grass, which reads, 'Warning: It is forbidden for cattle to graze, and to gather mushrooms, strawberries and medicinal herbs'.

"We stop here and put on our yellow TLD badges, which register radiation levels, and which will be sent back to Harwell for analysis after our three-hour visit. Armed with these and a radiation detector, we enter Narodichi where people have lived with radiation for over five years. It's a neat, proud little town with a chestnut-lined main street and a silver-painted Lenin in front of the party headquarters. In a year's time there will be no one here.

"In the municipal gardens the grass is uncut but a fountain still plays. There are several memorials. One is a scorched tree with a cross on it – local people think that the forest protected them from the worst of the blast. Beside the tree are three large boulders, one of which commemorates four villages and 548 people evacuated in 1986, another fifteen villages and 3264 people evacuated in 1990. Twenty-two more villages and a further 11,000 people will be going in 1991. An inscription reads: 'In memory of the villages and human destinies of the Narodichi region burnt down by radiation'.

"One of the most polluted areas is the children's playground, with thirteen to seventeen times normal gamma radiation levels. The red metal chairs hang down from the roundabout and blue steel boats swing gently in the breeze, but no one is allowed to play here any more.

"Michael, the local schoolmaster, is short and podgy and his face is an unhealthy grey. There were 10,000 children in the region, he tells me; now there are 3000. Two of his pupils pass by on bicycles and he grabs them and introduces us. The boys, just back from a Pioneer camp in Poland, look bored, and reply in monosyllables, which Michael translates thus: 'The children send fraternal greetings to children throughout the United Kingdom'. He smiles proudly and a little desperately. I ask if the children's work has been affected by their proximity to Chernobyl. He sighs and nods.

'There is not a single healthy child here.' "

And strangely, yes, tours were offered to seekers-out of extreme tourism with a Kyiv travel agency offering: “We have arranged an itinerary, starting in the ghost city of Pripyat. You will visit abandoned multi-storey apartment blocks with blackened laundry on their balconies and children’s prams. The former police station, hospital and the Municipal Communist Party Committee building. The slogans of the Communist era are still there: not even radiation can obliterate them.

“From Pripyat, our route takes us to ghost villages where wolves and wild boar scavenge through the cottages in broad daylight.” And from there you can go on to view the giant Sarcophagus from a distance ... And did anyone sign up for such a tour? It seems so.

It is the current war against Ukraine which is on (nearly) everybody’s mind with shocking pictures of dead bodies, destroyed buildings, burnt cars, infrastructure turned to rubble. I went looking for a book which would explain some of the conundrums, not least why Vladimir Putin would spend billions on fighting a war when simple friendship and a Good Neighbour Policy could have provided mutually beneficial economic relations. Mark Edele in *Russia’s War Against Ukraine* writes, “The entire period from 1927 through 1949 then, was a relentless onslaught of revolution from above, famine, terror, repression, arrest, deportation, war and genocide. The impact of these two decades of relentless violence and traumatising cannot be overstated.” In 1917 Ukraine had asserted its nationhood only to be dragged into the USSR. The *Britannica* said of this, “Many severe trials remained before Soviet power was consolidated in Kiev, and such noted Soviet generals as Kliment Voroshilov, Semen Budenny, Yury Kotsyubinsky, Nikolay Shchors, Vasily Bozhenko, and others won early fame in numerous battles against German and Polish interventionists, White Guards, Cossacks, and Ukrainian nationalists.” (I assume Putin admires those Soviet generals.) In 1991 with the breakup of the USSR a new opportunity for Ukraine to assert itself opened up. A key factor in that break-up was ... nuclear power. Serhii Plokhyy in *Atoms and Ashes* wrote: “In Lithuania, the republic that first declared its independence from the Soviet Union, the protests began in the fall of 1988 at the Ignalina nuclear power plant, which housed RBMK reactors more powerful than those at Chernobyl. In March 1990, the newly elected Lithuanian parliament declared the country’s independence from the Soviet Union. Ukraine followed the same path. The first Chernobyl protests led to clashes with police in April 1988. By November, a rally too big to ban or stop was organized in downtown Kyiv in full view of the authorities. People demanded the “truth about Chernobyl.” The government was reluctant to share anything. The Movement for the Independence of Ukraine, born of those protests, led the country to independence in the tumultuous developments that followed the failed coup against Gorbachev in August 1991.

“The econationalism fueled by the antinuclear movement in both Lithuania and Ukraine became an important factor in the unraveling of the Soviet Union. Lithuania started the pro-independence drive in the USSR, and once Ukraine voted for its independence on December 1, 1991, the Soviet Union was doomed. It was dissolved one week later, on December 8, by the leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, the three republics that had suffered most from the Chernobyl fallout.”

The two nations, Russia and Ukraine, might have peacefully existed side-by-side but ... “This individual aspect, the role of Putin’s personality and his decision-making

power, in part explains the timing of the invasion. Having relatively little to show for nearly a quarter of a century in power, Putin entered his seventieth year in 2021. What would he celebrate at his next birthday? Russia's increased isolation? The botched COVID-19 response? The ailing economy? The sanctions on Russia? His personal wealth and power? He had failed to make Russia into a 'normal' country, as he had pledged at the beginning of his presidency—a country prosperous and free, a beacon to the world. While he had presided over economic growth, it had come at the cost of the enrichment of the few and the immiseration of the many. The opposition had built an unflattering picture of him as a thief of Russia's riches. This much Putin knew, and he did not like it."

But 'strong men' are rarely told the truth. I knew he liked to present himself as 'macho man' (though age creeps up on macho men) but I didn't know he was obsessed by history, Russia's past. "On a fundamental level, then, Putin's aggression was the result of an unhealthy obsession with history and with his own role in it." Or as Serhii Plochy in *The Russo-Ukrainian War* put it, "Russian spies, especially the special directorate of the Federal Security Service (FSB), which was charged with clandestine operations in Ukraine, were feeding Putin descriptions of the attitude of the Ukrainian population toward its own government and Russia that conformed to his historical fantasies." One source of his fantasies was the "philosopher Ivan Ilyin, an admirer of fascism, whose article, "What the Dismemberment of Russia Promises the World," would become a frequently quoted source in the speeches and pronouncements of Putin and other Russian officials. Ilyin argued that one day Russia would gather its lands back under its tutelage."

John Sweeney in *Killer in the Kremlin* wrote "Putin cherry-picked a series of ideas that coalesced together and became his guiding star: ultra-nationalism; hatred of the other; contempt for a free press and free speech; intolerance of mockery and humour; profoundly conservative social values; an unfree market in hock to political power; a reverence for 'the organs', the KGB and its alphabetic spaghetti predecessors (Cheka, GPU, OGPU, NKGB, NKVD, MGB) and offshoots (SVR, FSB). Without articulating it, with no announcement, Putin was a Russian fascist."

Edele wrote, "This past began to expand. His 2020 essay still covered familiar ground: it was a defence of Soviet imperialism during World War II. The 2021 essay on Ukrainian history, by contrast, was an unapologetic imperialist history of Russia since medieval times. They both fit into a wider pattern. In 2016, Putin unveiled a memorial to Volodymyr ('Vladimir') the Great, ruler of Kyiv from 980 to 1015, a 'Russian' ruler, according to Putin (and most historically conscious Russians). In June 2022, the more modern Vladimir compared himself, without too much false modesty, to Peter the Great."

The problem with this is that Volodymyr/Vladimir was not Russian. Luke Harding in *Invasion* wrote, "The founders of Kyvian Rus in the ninth and tenth centuries were Vikings who arrived by river, not Slavs. The word *Rus*—pronounced *Rooss*—means "men who row". Its etymology is Scandinavian. Modern state boundaries and modern national identities were formed much later."

Historians generally accept Rurik, a Viking adventurer, as the founder of this dynasty. Vikings, known as Varangians, traveled down through eastern Europe, through what is now Ukraine towards the glittering lodestar of Byzantium. There is debate over exactly how historical Rurik was. I found him given parents Godoslav and Umila but that is not proven; equally his alleged wife Efanda, a Norwegian princess also called a daughter of Gostomysl of the Obodrites, is not proven. Rurik's son Igor or Ingvar

Roriksen married St Olga, Olga of Kyiv, who is remembered for her ferocity towards her husband's murderers and her apparent piety after she became a Christian, and had Svyatoslav whose wife is uncertain. He had a number of relationships and the mother of his son Vladimir is usually taken as Malusha described as his housekeeper and more romantically "described in the Norse sagas as a prophetess who lived to the age of 100 and was brought from her cave to the palace to predict the future." Their son Vladimir/Volodymyr had several wives: Rogneda or Ragnhild of Polotsk, Malfrida, a Bohemian, Princess Olava Allogia, daughter of Eric "the Victorious" of Sweden and Ollogia of Bohemia, but he then became a Christian and as part of his deal with Emperor Basil II of Byzantium he married the Emperor's sister, Anna of Byzantium, (of mixed Greek and Armenian heritage), gave up his wives and concubines, and after she died married a woman who is described, though with some debate, as a granddaughter of Otto the Great, Holy Roman Emperor, and they are said to have had a daughter who married Casimir I of Poland. His, and Anna's, best known son Yaroslav 'the Wise' of Kyiv married a Swedish princess, Ingegerd, daughter of King Olaf of Sweden, and they married their daughters into European royalty, Elisiv becoming Queen of Norway, Anastasia becoming Queen of Hungary, and Anne becoming Queen of France. The focus of the new dynasty in Kyiv was towards both Europe and Constantinople, not towards the small towns and villages and still nomadic tribes of what would become Russia.

Kyiv already existed as a small town and Christianity was already present but "that Vladimir chose the Byzantine rite over the liturgies of German Christendom, Judaism, and Islam because of its transcendent beauty is apparently mythically symbolic of his determination to remain independent of external political control, particularly of the Germanic Goths. The Byzantines, however, maintained ecclesiastical control over the new Russian church, appointing a Greek Metropolitan, or archbishop, for Kiev, who functioned both as a legate of the patriarch of Constantinople and of the emperor." John Julius Norwich in *A Short History of Byzantium* enlarges on Vladimir's reason for his choice: "Already he had made searching enquiries of Muslims, Jews and Roman Catholics – none of whom, however, had impressed him. Finally he sent emissaries to Constantinople where a special service had been held in their honour in St Sophia, of such beauty that, as they subsequently reported, they had not known whether they were on earth or in heaven." Vladimir began building churches and monasteries all over his land, a process continued by his son.

I am not sure what of all that appeals to Vladimir Putin.

It was mainly Yaroslav who gave the small centre of Kyiv its beautiful buildings including St Sophia, modeled on St Sophia in Constantinople, and the Pechersk monastery. Yaroslav's children, Vladimir's children, even Svyatoslav's children all wove complex relationships with the ruling families of Europe, France, Hungary, even far-away England and, naturally, continued links with the families of Byzantine rulers.

Karl Schlögel in *Ukraine* says of Kyiv, "Yet there is another spot from which to look down on Kiev for a very different view: the high ridge above the Dnieper. The panorama of the wide river, and the lowlands on the far side, is breathtaking. 'Sublime' is a word one should use sparingly, but here it fits; here the city says: I was, I am, I shall be. The visitor vividly senses the vastness of the plains extending east of the Dnieper and basks in the beauty of the parks that take up the hills, with the gold of the church domes and bell towers rising from the verdant greenery, a scene that, as the exiled Russian

philosopher Georgy Fedotov noted, left even the ‘poet from the North’ – he meant Alexander Pushkin – lost for words.”

And Luke Harding wrote in *Invasion*, “It was a colourful, modern European city of three million people. With its cafés and restaurants, Bolt cars, and food-delivery guys on pedal bikes labouring up ancient cobbled boulevards, it felt like a cosmopolitan Berlin or Prague. ... There was an art-house cinema and an underground bar not far from the French Renaissance opera house. ... I was staying in a hotel on Yaroslaviv Val. The street was close to the heart of the capital. I walked past pavement florists selling tulips from buckets, and a violinist, busking in her usual evening spot and playing Edith Piaf’s “La Vie en Rose”. ... It was inconceivable that Russian missiles might soon be landing amid such varied humanity and beauty.”

Kyiv is an attractive city with open spaces, gardens, and greenery, art nouveau mansions, varied and interesting architecture, but it has had to be rebuilt many times, after the Mongol invasions of 1240, more recently after the destruction of WW2, and now as missiles rain down on it a huge bill to rebuild the damaged parts and the many damaged cities of Ukraine looms.

Not just the ancient buildings of Kyiv but, in Plokyh’s words, “In mid-July UNESCO identified 163 cultural sites destroyed or damaged by the Russian war on Ukraine. It was a sad irony that Russian bombardment was killing Russian speakers and destroying landmarks and locations claimed by Russian imperial and then Soviet culture. Andrei Krasniashchikh, a professor at Kharkiv University and an author who had been writing and publishing in Russian, decried the demolition of Kharkiv by Russian bombardment as destruction of pre-Soviet and Soviet Russian culture in Ukraine by those who had allegedly come to protect it.”

But if history might show Vladimir Putin anything it is that the Ukrainians are resilient people who have risen from the ashes of many losses and disasters.

V is for VERA CRUZ:

All the Veras I have known have had a connection to northern Europe but that well-known Vera, the place in Mexico, obviously was a Spanish ‘creation’. It is both a state and a city, bordering the Gulf of Mexico, with a low-lying coast and a rich hinterland. According to the Enc. Brit. it is also “rich in archaeological remains of the pre-Columbian Olmec, Totonec, and Huastec cultures” and is now a place of cotton, coffee, corn, cattle, rubber, timber, chicle, orchids, along with sugar refineries, distilleries, chemical plants, textile mills and oil production.

The port city was founded by Hernán Cortés in 1519 and he called it La Villa Rica de la Veracruz (Rich Town of the True Cross) but it was a low-lying insalubrious place and vulnerable to attack by everybody from pirates to the USA.

The latter’s incursion is called the Vera Cruz Incident and occurred during the Mexican Civil War in 1914. The crew of the USS “Dolphin” was arrested after landing in a forbidden area. President Woodrow Wilson demanded a 21-gun-salute as apology. When President Huerta refused the US sent in a fleet to seize the port, killing about 200 Mexicans in the process. This was partly pique and partly because of rumours that Germany was supplying Huerta with arms. It prompted Huerta and his opponent Carranza to briefly find common ground but not a sufficiently wide ground. Carranza

defeated Huerta and forced him into exile and the US Marines packed up and left in November of that year.

The casual observer can be forgiven for wondering why Mexico sends its people in their millions to the USA. After all, Mexico is not a grim tyranny like North Korea and it would seem to have a lot going for it. The more cynical observer might ask whether Mexico is a classic illustration of how a country can outrun its natural and manmade resources. And the observer as mere traveler might like to know more about those “rich archaeological remains”.

Eyewitness Travel’s guide to *Mexico* says “The humid Gulf Coast region has a rich hoard of pre-Columbian treasures. Artifacts from various cultures are preserved in Xalapa, in one of Mexico’s best museums; in Villahermosa, meanwhile, an outdoor archeological park exhibits the monumental art of the Olmec civilization. The ruined city of El Tajín, sacred to the god of thunder, should also not to be missed.” And they go on to say of El Tajín “Developed from an earlier settlement, the city of El Tajín was a political and religious center for the Totonac civilization. Many of its buildings date from the early Postclassic period, between AD 900 and 1150. Decorated with relief panels and sculptures, they would have been painted in strong colors such as red, blue, and black. The excavated nucleus of this spectacular ancient city covers about 1 sq km, but the entire urban area once spread over 10 sq km and had a population of 25,000.”

Then there is the Parque-Museo de la Venta. “For nearly 600 years, from 1000 to 400 BC, the settlement at La Venta was the center of Olmec culture. In the 1950s its treasures were threatened by oil exploration nearby. Tabascan anthropologist Carlos Pellicer organized their rescue and had them installed on the shores of the Laguna de las Ilusiones in Villahermosa. To further protect the Olmec heads, altars, stelae, and mosaics, many pieces have been moved inside a museum and replaced by replicas along the winding jungle paths. Part of the park is a wildlife area, with some animals housed in the archeological area.”

The guide says this of the Olmecs: “Mexico’s first notable culture, the Olmec, was established on the hot, humid Gulf Coast by 1200 BC. Often called the *cultura madre* (mother culture) because of their influence on later civilizations, the Olmecs are something of a mystery. Their main sites, at San Lorenzo and La Venta, wielded political, economic, and religious authority over big regions and large numbers of people. The earliest, San Lorenzo, was systematically destroyed in about 900 BC, although why and by whom is a mystery. About the same time La Venta, farther east, reached the peak of its influence, becoming an important religious and political center and establishing far-flung trade routes. Around the beginning of the first millennium AD Olmec civilization gradually faded into obscurity. Today the most impressive reminders of the ancient culture are the colossal carved stone heads, of which the first to be discovered in modern times was found at Tres Zapotes. They were fashioned from massive basalt blocks weighing up to 20 tons, which the Olmecs moved large distances, probably using river rafts.”

And to study them in detail ... the Museo de Antropología de Xalapa is said to be “Second only in importance to the anthropology museum in Mexico City.” “It consists of sculptures and artifacts from the Gulf Coast’s major pre-Columbian civilizations, found at various sites within the region. The first halls are dedicated to the Olmec civilization. Central Veracruz and the Totonacs follow, and the final room exhibits the highly stylized

sculptures of the Huastec culture.” So I will leave you to enjoy those spacious halls and remarkable displays in peace ...

V is for VALE OF TEARS:

All kinds of descriptions are used for places, real and imagined. Vale of tears, slough of despond, city of death, hell on earth, poisoned paradise, island of despair, and apart from natural events like volcanic eruptions they all point to a human habit of destroying places and making people miserable. Many reasons could be put forward but underlying it all is the failure to see wonder and magic and mystery in God’s creation. Fortunately there are some more positive phrases such as valley of vision, vale of soul-making ...

There are of course lots of V places. But Venice and Vienna are groaning under their tourist numbers so I perhaps should not suggest adding to those numbers, and places like Venezuela are facing a confronting future. And then there are even more confronting places such as the Vakhan Corridor in north-eastern Afghanistan in the Pamir Mountains. When the Afghan border was drawn in 1895/6 it became a kind of buffer zone with Tadjhikistan, Pakistan, and what at one time was called the Sinkiang Uighur Autonomous Region around it. But its neighbours have their own troubles and China has not shown any respect for Uighur autonomy and inside Afghanistan there are more than enough threats to keep tourists away. And yet the region is a place of great splendour and beauty. Perhaps some day ...

If there could be a Vale of Tears why not a Vale of Smiles, a Vale of Happiness, a Vale of Joy? I went looking but the best I could come up with was Val-d’Oise which is part of northern Paris with the Oise River flowing through it and Val-d’Or in western Quebec. Though it is not a valley gold *is* mined there, along with things like zinc and lead. So there is clearly a need for a vale to be christened with an uplifting name somewhere. But when I went, just out of curiosity, to see what Val-d’Or can offer I found the city markets itself in very positive terms.

“Founded on what were once Anicinabe hunting grounds, Val-d’Or was born out of a gold rush in 1935.

“Val-d’Or is literally built on top of gold. Hence its name and why the Cité de l’Or welcomes amateur miners. This dynamic, cosmopolitan city is located in a natural setting in the heart of the Canadian Shield. It offers the outdoors, nature, Indigenous traditions and a friendly greeting.”

A friendly greeting suggests a smile ...

And as Anne says in L. M. Montgomery’s *Anne’s House of Dreams*, “And tears can be happy as well as sad. My very happiest moments have been when I had tears in my eyes—when Marilla told me I might stay at Green Gables—when Matthew gave me the first pretty dress I ever had—when I heard you were going to recover from the fever. So give me pearls for our troth ring, Gilbert, and I’ll willingly accept the sorrow of life with its joy.”

W is for WALES:

Wales of course is too big to be confined to a page or two. Tony Millin wrote, “It was about time someone wrote a travelogue about Wales. Or that’s what I thought. And

from behind a glass of local Welsh bitter, I said the thought out loud, telling a friend that if no one else was going to do it then I would. It seemed a good idea until he pointed out that I couldn't afford it. Where would I stay? What would I eat? How would I travel? Maybe it was the beer talking, but I claimed I could do all that on the cheap because, well, um, because the Welsh are generous. In fact, I was so bold that I claimed I could do it for free and christened the project Freeloading Cymru – a name that stuck.”

Tony Millin in *Freeloading Cymru*.

Of course kind and hospitable people do offer meals and a bed to travelers, particularly if they feel you are down on your luck or you can do something for them like helping them with their English, but this was a deliberate plan to travel and live for free on other people's goodwill. He goes on to say, “Cymru, the Welsh for Wales, literally means the land of compatriots or friends so Freeloading Cymru should be far easier than Freeloading Wales, as the word ‘Wales’ is derived from the Anglo-Saxon for foreigner. So hopefully sticking with Cymru will get me off to a good start, even if only psychologically.

“And so it was that Freeloading Cymru became a project to travel around Wales for free, ‘yn rhad ac am ddim’ as the Welsh themselves, or at least some of them, might say. This will be simple because this (is) where, after all, they keep a welcome in the hillside.” He succeeded reasonably well but it isn't a way I would wish to see Wales nor did he succeed in making Wales sound like a Must-Go-To place.

Millin in one of his rare moments of waxing lyrical writes, “The melancholy loneliness returns. But, before the regret of ever starting this journey deepens, the benign pastoral fields become framed by the majestic sweeps of the eastern face of the Brecon Beacons and a brilliant blue sky. I am in love with this land again. The Brecon Beacons are one of Wales's hidden jewels. Most of the local outdoor types have heard about them but most of the English ones haven't. They pack up their Range Rovers with Gore-Tex walking boots and aeronautically-engineered walking sticks and bypass them on their way to the sexier, more rugged climbs of North Wales. But the gentler undulations of the Beacons have their own outstanding beauty – notably the highest climb of Pen-y-Fan at just under the 1,000-metre mark, or the spectacular waterfalls at Ystradfellte. There are many other things to see, including a crashed World War Two bomber, lakes and reservoirs good for fishing and wind surfing, along with sites of historical interest. The relative obscurity means that it is never as crowded as Snowdonia and is ideal for those seeking to get away from it all. This tranquillity seems the result of a complex plan to keep it for the sole use of the locals. For instance, the main part of the National Park, the Brecon Beacons themselves, lie to the west of the Black Mountains and also, surprisingly, to the east of a series of peaks called the Black Mountain. So we have two different ranges called the same thing (almost), only 40 miles apart. Now, don't try to tell me that this is an accident and not deliberate planning to confuse the visitor. If you've never experienced the delights of this, the least well-known of Wales's National Parks, then I commend it to you; it really is worth a visit and you will of course be able to leave with the satisfaction of having outwitted a cunning plan. Unfortunately, however, on this trip there is no time for the Beacons and so, remaining on the bus, I make my way to Brecon.” He of course is in search of his next free meal. But I think I might stay awhile.

The Lonely Planet Guide to Wales helped me unravel this puzzle:
Black Mountain. Y Mynydd Du. “Rolling across the western fringes of the national park, the Black Mountain is a lonely expanse of barren peaks that throws down an irresistible gauntlet to intrepid hikers. Scoured by glaciers and shaped by human action from pre-history through the Romans to today, it’s a bleak, wild and utterly captivating place.”
Black Mountains. Y Mynyddoedd Duon. “Puckering up between Abergavenny and Hay-on-Wye, the Black Mountains are untamed and largely uninhabited (if you ignore sheep and red kites, that is). They top out at 811m at the windswept summit of Waun Fach and its graceful sweep of gold-green moorland. Getting lost on single-track lanes is part of the fun; this is remote road-trip country, with drivers making their way through forgotten valleys to lookouts with soul-stirring views, walking trails where you’ll be accompanied by the skylark’s serenade, and medieval ruins that fired the imagination of the great romantics.” And, like Exmoor, it is part of the Dark Sky Reserve ‘movement’.

X ‘MARKS THE SPOT’:

Maps with X marking the spot, usually of a buried treasure, were a staple of children’s adventure stories many years ago. I am not sure if anyone has ever found a treasure via a real life treasure map. In fact most treasures seem to have been found quite unexpectedly. A farmer ploughing a paddock, someone out with a metal detector, a contractor with a backhoe digging a hole for the foundations of a building, someone scratching round with a stick while they wait for a lift.

Robert Lloyd Praeger gives several of these lucky ‘accidents’ in his book about Ireland, *The Way That I Went*: “The “Great Clare find”, made by workmen in a cutting during the construction of the Limerick and Ennis railway in 1854, consisted of hundreds of gold objects, of which the net value of the metal, at present prices, must have been in the neighbourhood of £10,000: unfortunately most of the ornaments were sold and melted down, but those which eventually reached the National Museum make an imposing display there.”

He tells of two stranger (but happier) finds. “In Burren (north Clare) the dog of a young fellow, Pat Connolan, started a rabbit, which took refuge among some limestone rocks. Peering into crevices to see where it had gone, Connolan saw something shining. He drew it out, a large thin curved object of yellow metal, and took it home. His uncle declared it to be brass-work off an old coffin, and advised him that it was unlucky to have such a thing about the house, so he pitched it into a nearby bush. A couple of years later, District Justice Gleeson, when rabbit-shooting, happened to pass that way, and conversation turned on the occurrence of antiquities of one kind or another. Connolan called to mind the curious brass ornament: he grubbed in the bush, found it there still, and handed the astonished magistrate the finest gold gorget ever found in Ireland—a truly magnificent object, dating from about 700 B.C., of great size, and quite perfect. To either end of the richly embossed lunule a large concave gold disk, tooled with a series of fine concentric circles, was fastened with gold wire. The wire itself was a marvel of skill—little thicker than sewing-cotton, and twisted as finely and closely as thread, so as to increase its holding power. In its great size (more than a foot across) and weight (over half a pound), in the profusion and richness of its beautifully executed ornament, and the excellence of its condition, this Clare gorget is a truly astonishing relic of the Bronze Age.”

And “Not long afterwards, the schoolmaster at the village of Balla in Mayo, giving a lesson on the early history of Ireland, showed his pupils a picture of a fibula—a curved stem with two greatly expanded ends, probably often used as a cloak-fastener between two buttonholes, and a frequent form of gold ornament in Ireland. Up went the hand of an urchin of eleven—“Please, sir, I’ve got one of those.” “Indeed? Where did you get it?” “I found it in the bog. I’m using it to play with.” “Well, bring it with you tomorrow and let me see it.” Next morning the child produced a gold fibula in perfect condition and of astonishing size, measuring nearly half a foot across. The find-place (*fundort*, as Dr. Mahr would call it), was, as I am told by Professor O’Riordan, a boggy field over which were strewn those burned broken stones so common on prehistoric living-sites, which indicate the boiling of water by dropping hot stones from the embers into earthenware pots which themselves could not stand the direct heat of the fire.”

Both gold objects can now be seen in the National Museum in Dublin. In adventure stories there are happy outcomes for the children, though not necessarily for the baddies also on the track of the treasure, but in real life it can become complicated.

Praeger also tells this story: “The mention of Limavady recalls the Gold Ornaments Trial of 1893, which was a remarkable and indeed unique legal episode.” It began with a “man ploughing at Broughter, situated on the flat ground near the tidal Roe, in a field the surface of which was about four feet above high-water, turned up some rare and beautiful objects of gold—a collar richly ornamented with repoussé designs of the Celtic Period; a little boat, with oars, etc., complete; a bowl, a torc, a necklace, and so on. He parted with them to his employer for a few pounds; the latter sold them to that active collector Robert Day of Cork for a greatly enhanced sum; and Mr Day disposed of them to the British Museum for £600. It was only after the conclusion of these transactions that the Royal Irish Academy heard of the discovery, and through the State Solicitor they claimed them as treasure trove, the Academy being the body appointed to represent the Crown in such matters. Roughly stated, the law of treasure trove amounts to this: if precious objects such as these are found under circumstances which point to their having been lost or abandoned, then it is a case of “finders keepers”; but if there is evidence that they were concealed or deposited with the intention of ultimate recovery, then the Crown claims them on behalf of the unknown next of kin.” (I think there have been some changes to the law since then.) “The Trustees of the British Museum refused to deliver up the objects, on the ground that they were not treasure trove: and so the issue was joined, and the Irish Government requested the English law officers to take action for their recovery.”

The English position was that the land had been under the waters of Lough Foyle so there had never been any intention to recover them and that they had possibly been cast into the sea as votive objects. Praeger was asked “to demonstrate if possible that the site where the ornaments had been ploughed up had been actually dry land at the time of their deposit there (the objects dated from about the beginning of the Christian era).” This was not a simple question but Praeger was helped by the fact that Stone Age flints had been found on similar land nearby, proving that the land had been above water well before the gold objects could have been made.

The case opened before Justice Farwell in London in June 1903. The British Museum offered a defence via a long and erudite history of votive offerings, even dragging in the Celtic sea god Mananaan MacLir and quotes from Sir James Frazer’s *The*

Golden Bough. The judge was not impressed, saying, "I must express my opinion that the Court has been occupied for a considerable time in listening to fanciful suggestions more suited to the poem of a Celtic bard than the prose of an English Law Report. The defendants' suggestion is that the articles were thrown into the sea, which they suggest then covered the spot in question, as a votive offering by some Irish sea king or chief to some Irish sea god at some period between 300 B.C. and A.D. 100, and for this purpose they ask the Court to infer the existence of the sea on the spot in question, the existence of an Irish sea god, the existence of a custom to make votive offerings in Ireland during the period suggested, and the existence of kings or chiefs who would be likely to make such votive offerings." He went on to say "The whole of their evidence (if I may so describe it) on these points is of the vaguest description" and that "it is really little short of extravagant to ask the Court to assume the existence of a votive offering of a sort hitherto unknown, in a land where such offerings are hitherto unknown, in a sea not known to have existed for 2000 years, and possibly for 4000 years, to a sea god by a chieftain both equally unknown, and to prefer this to the commonplace but natural inference that these articles were a hoard hidden for safety in a land disturbed by frequent raids, and forgotten by reason of the death or slavery of the depositor" and so he ordered the gold objects to be returned to Ireland. Praeger wrote, "Since then they have occupied a place of honour in the Academy's unique collection of Irish prehistoric gold in the National Museum."

Y is for YEREVAN:

There is one thing you will now NOT see when you arrive in Yerevan, the capital of Armenia. Vasily Grossman went there in the early 1960s to work on re-writing a literal Russian translation of an Armenian book. He wrote of this visit, in *An Armenian Sketchbook*, "On a hill above Yerevan stands a statue of Stalin. No matter where you are in the city, you can clearly see the titanic bronze marshal. If a cosmonaut from a far-off planet were to see this bronze giant towering over the capital of Armenia, he would understand at once that it is a monument to a great and terrible ruler.

"Stalin wears a long bronze greatcoat, and he has a forage cap on his head. One of his bronze hands is tucked beneath the lapel of his greatcoat. He strides along, and his stride is slow, smooth, and weighty." Weighty it undoubtedly was. "The statue itself is seventeen meters high; together with the building on whose roof it stands, it is seventy-eight meters. When the monument was being assembled and parts of the vast bronze body were still lying on the ground, workers could walk through Stalin's hollow leg without bowing their heads." The monument went up in 1951 with the usual pomp and speeches and bombast. "The orators, naturally, gave speeches about the greatest, wisest, most brilliant, most dearly loved of all great, wise, brilliant, and dearly loved fathers and teachers."

"On the evening of November 7, 1961, together with two of my Yerevan acquaintances, I climbed the hill on which stood the statue of Stalin. The sun was going down. We sat in a small restaurant, looking at the pink snows of Mount Ararat. ... I went up to the statue and saw an astonishing sight. Dozens of *cannons* formed a half circle around the base of the monument. With each salvo, long tongues of flame lit up the surrounding mountains and the titanic figure of Stalin would emerge from the darkness. Bright incandescent smoke and flame swirled around the bronze feet of the Master."

“Officials from the Yerevan City Party Committee told me that, at a general meeting of collective farmers in a village in the Ararat valley, in response to a proposal to take down the statue of Stalin, the peasants had said, “The state collected a hundred thousand rubles from us in order to erect this statue. Now the state wants to destroy it. By all means, go ahead and destroy it—but give us back our hundred thousand rubles.” And one old man adds the sensible suggestion: why not bury it so it could be disinterred for the next strong man who comes along and wants a statue of himself. The statue could simply be reused rather than the state demanding money for a new statue.

But the Armenians have kept a statue Grossman admired. “I saw a large square in front of the station, and a huge half-naked young man on a bronze horse. His sword was drawn, and I realized this must be David of Sasun. I was struck by the power of this statue: David himself, his steed, his sword—everything was huge, full of movement and strength.”

Stalin was taken down in 1962 and eventually replaced by a bronze statue of ‘Mother Armenia’. But the roots of David go back not to Biblical times but to a medieval epic, *The Daredevils of Sasun*, in which the hero David, or a hero as there are several, expels invaders from Armenia. It is the national epic of Armenia known there as *Samsa Tsrer*. Its author or authors are unknown. Sirarpie Der Nersessian in *The Armenians* wrote, “The layman Frik is an exception among the poets of this period. He lived at the time of the Mongol invasion of Great Armenia and his poems, written in the vulgar and not classical language, echo the sufferings of the people by cruel wars. ... Other laymen, bards and singers, composed poems, many of which are scattered in manuscripts and have not yet been seriously studied. Their publication would serve to present a more accurate image of medieval society in Armenia than do the religious poems. Some aspects of this may be seen in the tales grouped under the name of David of Sasun, which were preserved orally until collected and set down in several variants in the late nineteenth century. The first two cycles present successive generations of heroes of the province of Sasun. The last two centre around David, the young hero of fabulous strength who killed the tyrant Mesramelik’ and liberated his country, while also referring to his son Mher. A national epic, its action takes place in the mountainous region of Sasun, south-west of Lake Van. It contains elements going back to early legends, while the sections which have an historical core refer to the time of Arab domination in Armenia in the eighth-ninth centuries AD. There are many points of resemblance between it and the Byzantine epic of Digenis Akritas, though the two are independent, for it came into being at approximately the same period and in a similar border region.”

While Grossman was in Yerevan he took several trips out into the countryside including to Lake Sevan which “lies in the middle of a great scattering of stones. It is very strange—amid the stones you suddenly see deep-blue water. ... This blue water seems unearthly; it seems to have peeled off from the sky. Probably it is closer to sky level than to sea level. It even seems strange that fish can live in this cold, transparent, deep-blue water; what one expects to see, flying beneath the surface, are the birds of heaven. Admittedly, there are some very special fish in this lake—the silvery-gray trout, speckled with stars, that the Armenians call *ishkhan*, or prince fish.” But the water is wanted for generating hydro-electric power. “After yet another twist in the road, our car seemed to be soaring over the lake: We saw the snowy crests of mountains lit by the sun.

They were pale blue, as if the snow had absorbed both the blue of the sky and the blue of the lake. And there on a rough stone dish—a dish that was black and brown and the color of rust—lay Lake Sevan, deep blue, almost boundless” and “On a humpbacked island, now joined to the mainland because of the drop in the water level, stands an ancient chapel, built with a simplicity and a perfection incomprehensible to modern man. According to legend, Princess Mariam built this chapel for a young monk whose beauty had filled her with awe. The air here is transparent and clear, and so, every morning, the princess was able to see the young monk from the windows of her mountain castle.”

He goes on to say, “There are many old churches, chapels, and monasteries in Armenia. One of the most famous is the Geghard monastery, which is gouged out of a mountainside. This miracle born within stone is the fruit of thirty years of labor; it is the work of a man endowed with colossal talent and also with colossal faith. The man who hewed out this graceful and harmonious church also chiseled out, in classical Armenian, the words “Remember Me in Your Prayers.”

“A road planted with flowers has been laid from Yerevan to Echmiadzin, the small town that contains the official residence of Vazgen I, the Catholicos of All Armenians, and also a fine cathedral, a monastery, and a seminary.”

“I think that ancient Armenian churches and chapels also embody perfection. Perfection is always simple, and it is always natural. Perfection is the deepest understanding and fullest expression of what is essential. Perfection is the shortest path to a goal, the simplest proof, the clearest expression. Perfection is always democratic; it is always generally accessible.” And “Through its outward simplicity an ancient Armenian church shows that within its walls lives the God of Shepherds, of beautiful young women, scholars, old crones, warriors, stonecutters—the God of all people.”

And so, back to Yerevan with its buildings of pink tufa and its streets lined with plane trees. “I already knew that it was Tamanyan who had created the architectural style of the new Yerevan, and that he had drawn his inspiration from ancient Armenian churches; I knew he had resurrected an ancient ornamental pattern depicting a bunch of grapes and the head of an eagle....Later, people showed me the very finest creations of Armenian architects; they took me to see a street of detached houses, every one of which was a masterpiece.”

“I see today’s Yerevan with its factories, its huge, tall blocks of new apartments for workers, its splendid opera house, its magnificent pink schools, its academic institutions, its precious repository for books and manuscripts—the Matenadaran—and its famous Academy of Sciences.” And as a tantalising backdrop “I see Mount Ararat—it stands high in the blue sky. With its gentle, tender contours, it seems to grow not out of the earth but out of the sky, as if it has condensed from its white clouds and its deep blue.”

But although the people of Armenia can *see* Mount Ararat they no longer *own* it. And since Grossman’s visit the country was hit by a devastating earthquake in 1988. But the real danger to ancient Armenia came with the Soviets and their love of concrete.

On a hill called Karmirblur not far from the city of Yerevan the ancient fortress of Teishebaini was excavated in the 20th century. It is thought to date from the 6th century BC when this was part of the ancient kingdom of Uru-Artu. The *Enc. Britannica* says of what was found: “Among the most important objects uncovered were the remains of

wooden stools with their bronze fittings; a statuette of the god Teisheba, after whom the town was named; numerous examples of gold and silver jewelry; and a particularly rich find of bronze war gear, including pointed helmets, shields, quivers, and belts. Also found in large quantity were stone seals and beads, carved ivory objects, and pottery bowls and vessels.” So what happened?

Sirarpie Der Nersessian in *The Armenians* wrote, “The Urartians appear to have been one of the tribal groups of Nairi, of Hurrian extraction, who gained ascendancy over the others and organized a strong central state. Shalmaneser III (860-823 BC) waged war against them intermittently throughout his reign. The reliefs on the famous bronze gates from Balawat, now in the British Museum, show episodes of his victorious campaigns, the destruction of the town of Sagunia of ‘Aramu the Urartian’ and the capture of the fortress of Arzashku. In 834 BC, Shalmaneser led an expedition against the Urartian king Sarduri whose capital was at Tushpa, that is the actual city of Van.

“During the reign of Sarduri’s son, Ishpuini, and those of his successors Menua, Argishti and Sarduri II, the Urartians consolidated their power. In the eighth century Urartian rule extended over the region between Lake Van and Lake Urmia, as far north as Transcaucasia, and to the west as far as North Syria. Urartu then became the largest state in Western Asia, and its control of the trade-routes to the Mediterranean was a serious threat to the Assyrian economy. Urartian wares were exported to Phrygia, to the mainland of Greece and some have even been found in Italy. Argishti built the fortress palace of Erebuni, on the plain of Ararat, the name of which is still preserved in Erevan, the capital of Armenia, and he founded the important administrative centre of Argishtihinili, also in the plain of Ararat.

“The situation changed in the late eighth century, when Tiglath-pileser III and especially Sargon II invaded Urartu, sacked several towns and inflicted heavy losses on the army. There was a short period of recovery under Argishti II and Rusa II, evidenced by the foundation of new towns, in particular Teishebaini, near Erevan, now known as Karmir-blur.

“But the central power gradually weakened, through inner struggles, the dissatisfaction of the allied groups, the mass flight of slaves, as well as through the inroads made by the Cimmerians and the Scythians. Urartu survived but a few years after the downfall of Assyria, in 610/609 BC. the Medes destroyed the capital of Tushpa, while some years later they entered the plain of Ararat, seized Teishebaini and took over the entire region.”

Urartu as a kingdom gradually disappeared but left behind ruins of temples, palaces, fortresses, canals and other public works. “Erebuni appears to have been abandoned and some of its treasures carried to Teishebaini (Karmir-blur) which after its foundation by Rusa II became the administrative and economic centre of Transcaucasia. The citadel with the palace of the governor covered an area of about 1600 sq. m.” and it was decorated with wall paintings. It was a storage and armoury as well as a living and administrative building and the objects found show a high level of artistic and technical achievement. “The objects found in various parts of the buildings comprised bronze shields, helmets, belts, quivers and other objects of military equipment, many of them decorated with reliefs of animals, representations of gods, warriors, sacred trees and so forth. These and the bronzes found at Toprak-kale such as the ornamental figures of winged lions which probably formed part of a decorated throne, as well as the ivories

from Altintepe, and the statuettes and gold jewellery found on different sites, show the high quality of an art allied to that of Assyria, but having its distinctive features, for the Urartians display a more marked tendency to schematize the human, animal and plant forms.” But the intervening period between the slow downfall of Urartu and the rise of Armenia is still to be documented.

The *Lonely Planet* guide to Georgia, Armenia & Azerbaijan takes me to a place in Yerevan I would love to visit: “Standing at the top of Yerevan’s grandest avenue, this cathedral-like manuscript library is a source of enormous pride to all Armenians. The first *matenadaran* (book depository) for Armenian texts was built by Mesrop Mashtots, the inventor of the Armenian alphabet, at Etchmiadzin in the 5th century and held thousands of manuscripts. Invasions over the centuries led to enormous losses through looting and burning, but 1800 exquisitely illustrated and bound manuscripts survived. These form the basis of the stunning collection here.

“At the base of the purpose-designed building, which dates from 1957, is a statue of Mashtots teaching his alphabet to a disciple. Six other statues of great scholars and writers stand by the door. The outdoor gallery has carved rock tombs and *khachkars* brought here from ancient sites around Armenia.

“Inside, there are more than 23,000 manuscripts, fragments, documents and maps, although only a small number are on display. The central hall focuses on the development of Armenian medieval sciences, literature and arts throughout the centuries.” Also there is the 13th-century *Homilies of Mush*, so heavy that it was ripped in half to try and keep it safe during the 1915 Turkish massacres. It is good to know the two parts are again united and safe.

Yury Bit-Yunan and Robert Chandler explain why they changed the name of Grossman’s book when they translated it into English. “Grossman’s own title for this memoir, *Dobro vam*, is a strange but effective phrase. The literal meaning ... is “Good to you.” This is not a Russian idiom but a literal, unidiomatic translation of a standard Armenian greeting, *Barev dzez*. The phrase works better in Russian than in English, because the Russian *dobro* is clearly a noun, whereas the English “good” could be either a noun or an adjective. For this and other reasons, it seemed best to give this English translation a different and more explanatory title. Grossman’s own title, however, was clearly important to him, and in the last lines of this memoir he returns to the Armenian greeting that inspired it: *Barev dzez*—“All good to you, Armenians and non-Armenians!”

Y is for YACKANDANDAH:

I assumed Yackandandah was an Aboriginal word but I thought I should actually check that as it might be a combined word or an imagined word. It is the sort of name which makes you want to laugh if someone says casually ‘Oh yes, I come from Yackandandah’ but at the same time it is a name which stays in the mind. Other names stay in the mind, like Burpengary, but you wouldn’t necessarily want to live there—particularly if your name was Gary.

John Dunmore Lang referred to some of Australia’s more colourful names in his poem ‘Colonial Nomenclature’:

I like the native names, as Parramatta,

And Illawarra, and Woolloomoolloo;
Nandowra, Woogarora, Bulkomatta,
Tomah, Toongabbie, Mittagong, Meroo;
Buckobble, Cumleroy, and Coolingatta,
The Warragumby, Bargo, Burradoo;
Cookbundoon, Carrabaiga, Wingecarribbee,
The Wollondilly, Yurumbon, Bungarribbee.

While I was browsing in *The Sunday Tasmanian* I came across an article called '10 Top Australian Pubs' which featured Yackandandah. "Yackandandah is a charmingly cosy gold-rush town in Victoria's northeast, 25km(s) south of Wodonga. Two hotels bookend the leafy main street, with craft and antique stores and an enviable choice of bakeries occupying the ageing premises in between. Nestled at the western end is the Star Hotel, where you can grab a great meal or order craft beers on tap while international roots musicians such as Lloyd Spiegel and Eilen Jewell put on a show. Come on any Wednesday night and an assortment of local musos cram into the Public Bar for informal jam sessions." I also found the town described as being "nestled in the foothills of the Stanley State Forest". The word 'nestled' does imply something cosy. And the town's attractions do focus on gold and nature in things such as the Karr's Reef Goldmine Tour and walks through the Stringbark Reserve with its attractive wildflowers including small orchids.

But yes, the name is an Aboriginal word from the Dhudhuroa people and is said to mean "one boulder on top of another at the junction of two creeks"; the two creeks being the Yackandandah and Commissioners ...

Z is for ...

The only place in Australia I could think of starting with Z was the Tasmanian town of Zeehan. (And a friend offered the Brisbane suburb of Zillmere.) So I went to my postcode book to see if they listed anything else. In fact there were several. They included Zadows Landing in South Australia, Zara in NSW, Zanthus in Western Australia, Zumsteins in Victoria, and Zilzie in Queensland. I was intrigued. How did they get their names and what was actually there?

Zadows Landing is a small town on the Murray River not far from South Australia's wine country.

Zara is a small town inland from Murwillumbah and Mullimbimby in northern New South Wales.

Zilzie is a small coastal town a '35 minute scenic drive' south from Rockhampton.

You will notice that they all described as 'small towns'. I thought they all sounded rather attractive, not as a place for a long holiday perhaps but a nice place to stop for lunch or to stay overnight. And in a world where huge cities overwhelm people maybe we should be doing more to promote the simple delights small towns can still offer.

But Zumsteins and Zanthus are no longer inhabited. Zumsteins was the home of Walter Zumstein who set his beehives up in the Grampian Mountains in the central west of Victoria. He then thought it would be a nice place for people to come to picnic and

explore. The Zumstein family is gone and their home is now inside the Grampians National Park but you can still go there to picnic and walk. Zanthus was a depôt on the Indian-Pacific railway line when the line was being built, east of Kalgoorlie in Western Australia. It was a station in the early days of train travel across Australia when trains stopped to take on fuel or water or passengers in remote places. Now the trains hurtle through but the nearly forgotten station still has a postcode, 6434, which intrigued me. This suggests that somewhere in the vicinity and wanting to get some mail, now and then, are some *people*. So who are they? Hardy graziers? Aboriginal communities? Hermits? Or has Australia Post not noticed that the people have gone but the little forlorn station in the middle of 'nowhere' is still there? It makes me want to go to Zanthus and say 'You have not been forgotten' ...

THE END

Notes: I mentioned Yalta briefly in *More Comings and Goings* so you might like to know something of its recent fate. Karl Schlögel in *Ukraine* writes: “In February and March 2014, Russia, in an operation executed with surgical precision, annexed Crimea. After Viktor Yanukovich was toppled and fled Ukraine, protests against the new government in Kiev broke out in Simferopol, the capital of Crimea, on 23 February 2014, and the mayor was ousted. On 17 February unidentified soldiers occupied the regional parliament and several government buildings. An election held behind closed doors installed a new pro-Russian leadership, which promised a referendum on Crimea’s independence. Over the following days, ‘polite little green men’ – around 20,000 soldiers without badges of rank or national insignia who had entered from Russia and the Russian naval base in Sevastopol – took control of strategic points throughout the peninsula. On 1 March, the newly appointed governor Sergei Aksyonov called on Russia to ‘protect the Russian-speaking population of Crimea’. On 6 March, his government announced that a referendum would be held on Crimea’s accession to the Russian Federation, and ten days later, 96.8 per cent of voters – a number the Russian Human Rights Council called fraudulent – approved ‘reunification with Russia’. The Republic of Crimea requested to be admitted to Russia on 17 March, and the Treaty of Accession of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol to the Russian Federation was signed the next day. The annexation of Crimea, a brutal contravention of international law, was complete. One year later, many of those involved in the operation have described their machinations in great detail; on the first anniversary, Putin himself boasted of its efficiency.

“For Crimea, this ‘Russian Spring’ marks a new chapter in its history – and the end of a history I had sketched in 2000 under the title ‘Promenade in Yalta’. ‘Promenade’ was written in the wake of the empire’s decline. The cultural imprint, the physical and mental legacy, of Russian and Soviet imperial rule were omnipresent, and there was no sign of discord between Ukrainians, Russians, Crimean Tatars and the other ethnicities that make up the peninsula’s population. Not even Yury Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, whose rhetoric had frequently veered into strident nationalism, had gone so far as to claim that the Russians in Crimea were victims of persecution, threatened by ‘annihilation’. The focus of my trip in 2000 was a very different one: how would a post-Soviet Ukrainian Crimea ‘reinvent’ and ‘reposition’ itself? How was it managing the transition from ‘Red Riviera’ to European holiday destination? How might the all-Union sanatorium and recreation combine with other European holiday regions without blighting its distinctive magic, the unique density of its cultural and historic heritage? The shift from a communist to a consumerist economy, from Yalta to Mallorca, presented daunting challenges. As state-organized tourism dwindled, would Crimea’s paradisiacal landscapes be privatized, the pieces snapped up by oligarchs who would grab whatever they wanted – Chekhov’s villa, Prince Vorontsov’s castle? Would one of Europe’s most charming coastlines be sold off to the highest bidders? And what about the rights of the Crimean Tatars, who had been forcibly deported (in 1944) from their native land? Putin’s Russia has robbed Crimea and all its people of the chance to nurture this paradise to a new bloom.”

He paints a grim picture. “What could be a holidaymakers’ paradise is turning into a missile base” and we know where those missiles are heading. Military bases are not

famous for nurturing beauty but we can go on hoping the military occupation will be short-lived.

Who was Gareth Jones? I came upon the information his mother had been governess to the children of a Welshman, John Hughes, who had been invited by the Tsar to create an iron ore industry in the eastern Ukraine. In turn he recruited Welsh miners to come to develop the coal mines and iron smelter. The city he created was called Hughesovka/Yuzovka in commemoration of his contribution. But it became Stalino in 1923 and after Stalin it was named Donetsk in 1961. I thought it should be called Jonesovka or something similar but as the Ukrainian alphabet doesn't have the letter J perhaps Donetsk is close enough.

Alex Dawai, a Bougainvillean student at the University of Papua New Guinea in Port Moresby chose to write his 1985 thesis as part of the requirement for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Honours (History) on 'The Emergence of Black Theology in Aboriginal Australia'. He gave me his typed manuscript to read and I typed it on to a computer disk for him as he had thoughts of finding some way to publish it. He begins it:

'This thesis is about Australian Aboriginal black theological expressions which have arisen among what are surely some of the most oppressed peoples of the world.

Aboriginal Australians have suffered major demographic decline and cultural deprivation at the hands of European colonists. By-and-large they have adopted the Christian religion, but theologically they were encouraged to unquestionably take the variety offered by European missionaries, pastors and priests. The result has been unfortunate. This thesis grew out of an interest in liberation theology and black theology world wide and their application to Australian Aboriginal Christians. Based on two months of field research during 1985 and an experience gained while working at Santa Teresa mission eighty kilometres from Alice Springs, during 1984, the thesis is an attempt to examine Aboriginal Christianity in relation to worldwide patterns in Christian Theology. The Thesis examines evidence that a form of black liberation theology is in the process of developing among Aboriginal people.'

He goes on to say: 'Most black theology in Australia develops around six crucial issues. Most of these issues have been raised by people who by Western standards do not have high education accomplishments, and who have emerged right out of the shackles of oppressive conditions themselves. The issues are (1) land rights; (2) racism because of the colour of skin; (3) loss of economic self-management; (4) loss of political self-determination; (5) educational and employment inequality; and (6) destruction of culture. The World Council of Churches report on the justice for Aboriginal Australians says that:

"Aboriginal communities want to recover their human dignity and respect so that they can break their chains of dependence: alienation from their (own) culture and recover their history and dignity. They want their self-development through social justice, self-reliance and economic well-being and not through permanent dependency as the price for survival, and alienation from their people and history as a price for decent housing, proper medical facilities and white Australian educational models.

People want to be free to be human, with freedom to say "no" and the dignity to make their own mistakes."

I took it out to re-read while looking at Bougainville. Alex died several years ago and I found myself regretting he had never found the means to either publish or add new material to his studies. Because there seems to be a very relevant question in there to add to what he wrote 40 years ago: In what ways has Aboriginal Theology grown and changed and developed since then?

Saint Cecilio: I had heard of St Cecilia but not of Cecilio so who was he and how did he come to Spain? He was said to have been sent to Spain by St Peter. This would suggest he was Roman. But he was allegedly martyred by the Romans then in control of Granada. I found several versions of how he died. None suggested that, like Christians in Rome, he'd died in the arena at the hands of gladiators or the teeth of lions. Instead I found the suggestion he had been burnt to death. I looked in three Books of Saints without finding him. Then David Farmer's *Oxford Dictionary of Saints* gave him a cautious entry. "St Cecilius, bishop of Granada (date uncertain). All that can certainly be said about him is that he was the first bishop of Granada. Legend claimed that he was one of seven disciples of James the Great, supposedly consecrated by Peter the Apostle to be bishops in Spain. In reality, as in France, apostolic origins cannot be claimed for the early bishoprics. Cecilius more probably belongs to the 3rd century than to the first." Yet I had no problem in believing he went to Spain in the first century—because of that great outpouring of missionary zeal which saw Jesus' disciples and the next generation of converts travel widely, taking the Good News far and wide, planting churches, sometimes being martyred for their pains, and for Latin-speaking converts to travel from Rome to the Roman colonies in Spain seems a natural step.