

audience and his self-aggrandizement in front of them. The adventurer Richard Byrd's abandoned his attempted 6-month solo Antarctic vigil. Byrd was very aware of an audience as he transmitted messages back to the American press. Any endurance is better endured with the knowledge of an audience enduring it admiringly at a safe distance (and paying you for it!). In Paul Auster's *The Invention of Solitude* (1982), Barbour locates solitude as a place where meaningful work can be achieved: writing writes the self out of solitude, a possible communion.

Barbour's book underplays the relationship of boredom and solitude. He mentions boredom in passing on p. 4 but not until p. 69 does he briefly examine it. Many people fear solitude because of the fear of boredom and the inability to enjoy their own company, be self-reflexive or to do without the distractive materialist culture. Many of the desert fathers suffered from *acedia*, the desperate boredom that rises from a lack of dynamism in daily life, because of the unvarying pattern of solitude. The ascetic life of perpetual devotion requires some remission. Asceticism's denial of human and material urges that lead to boredom and *in extremis*, insanity. However, in a culture dominated by celebrity gossip, soaps, stress, work and debt, solitude, or periods of it at least, seem more essential to preserve sanity than ever. This concisely written book is recommended for anyone interested in the use or value of being alone, and especially useful for brief periods of illness or excessive travel.

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NOTHING BUT BIOGRAPHY

Disraeli: a personal history. Christopher Hibbert, 2004. London: HarperCollins; ISBN 000714718X, 401 pp., £9.99, paper.

Benjamin Disraeli (1840–81) who famously observed, 'read no history, nothing but biography' is of particular interest to students of that discipline. How was it possible for such a born outsider – a vain, outlandish, dandified Venetian Jew – to become the leader of the Conservative Party and twice Prime Minister? Certainly, he did not suffer from that that now common contemporary malady, low self-esteem: his high opinion of himself never faltered and he did not suffer the hindrance of noble political ideals. As to his appearance, imagine a very Jewish-looking young man in tight red leggings, a blue jacket, a gold cummerbund and sporting long, black hair arranged in ringlets, his hands and neck bejewelled. While still a young man, his father Isaac D'Israeli (one of the most erudite and learned men in London) took his son to literary evenings, usually held at

the home of the publisher John Murray. It was here that his education – literary, conversational and social – seriously began.

For some reason, a man with a patent dislike of the middle classes, with no taste for demagoguery and with an un-English cast of mind reached greater political heights than any other British politician, with the possible exception of Winston Churchill. How then was this achieved? Disraeli committed himself from his late teens until the end of his life to a ceaseless round – in London and in the country – of socializing with the nobility, the mighty and the influential. Among this group he endeavoured to create intense friendships. In many ways, he was more salesman than politician: he convinced himself of his own sincerity. That was his trick. One was never sure whether he was homosexual, heterosexual or bisexual. He may not have been entirely sure himself – such matters were subordinated in his psychology to the predominant drive of wishing to ally himself with useful and interesting connections – that these should be men or women, young or old were not considerations that occupied him. If he struck some as horribly affected, he struck more as a man to like and then a man to follow. And among his admirers and confidants was Queen Victoria. Disraeli had a specific political gift, which at the height of his success has never been bettered – an ability to expose the weakness of his political opponents. It was this that saw off Peel in 1841 and which began his long period in the limelight of British politics. As a Jew he knew he should make an appeal to traditional institutions – he was a dandy cosmopolitan who derided dandified cosmopolitanism.

Disraeli was debt ridden most of his life. He had continual battles with creditors, bailiffs and moneylenders from whom he often had to go into hiding (not infrequently abroad). Much of his writing was undertaken to make inroads into his dreadful finances. As soon as he managed to pay off some of his creditors and lessen his burden, he immediately got himself into even greater debt. This situation never greatly troubled or discomforted him. He was given some leeway by a fortuitous combination of circumstances, namely the generosity of his wife, the inheritance from his father, the land and title bestowed on him by the Queen and the legacy of a Mrs Brydges (granted on condition that she should be buried in the vault with him and his wife). When he first received Mrs Brydges' offer, he had never heard of the lady. However, a lifelong correspondence ensued of the most flattering kind. Such correspondence with several women and men friends was conducted on an almost daily basis.

The picture drawn of Disraeli is often not a pretty one and yet the reader of Hibbert's biography often finds its subject sympathetic. Why? In part, it is because he had such an original personality and seems so different from the contemporaries he stood among, and, in part, because although spoken ill of (with usually an anti-Semitic slant) he did not speak ill of his less than generous friends and allies.

After a bloodied beginning, he became a brilliant orator. His speeches rarely lasted less than three hours, often four, and sometimes five. He spoke in a quiet voice and without notes, his arguments were lucidly structured and almost always he had the full attention of the House. When he neared the climax of a section of his speech he modulated his voice with great effect until, with panache, he administered the *coup de grâce*. (Palmerston was so skewered – after which Disraeli would walk over to him and exchange a few comforting words.) The House would be enthralled at his often-repeated bravura performances. Of the many congratulations he received, his own were conspicuous among them.

During the late 1870s, Disraeli suffered increasingly bad health. He was tormented by dreadful attacks of gout as well as severe bronchitis. In spite of this, he would not ease up on attending dinner parties, usually while in the greatest of pain and discomfort. Particularly, he would never evade a visit to the Queen, who was always very anxious to see him and was most caring and solicitous towards him. He loathed Balmoral but never shirked the long journey. Only once did Disraeli fail to accommodate the Queen. It was when he had to persuade her to allow Princess Alexandra to go home to Denmark during the Prince's six months visit to India, a trip on which the Prince had refused to take his wife.

The relationship of the Queen and Disraeli can perhaps be best described as a caring and profound platonic love affair. Disraeli agonized over ever new ways to please the Queen. Why not make her Empress of India? As he prepared the ground, it was wise and advantageous to obtain an important stake in the Suez Canal. He knew he would never get the four million pounds required from Parliament, so he approached the Rothschilds, who simply enquired to whom the cheque was to be made out. At the Congress of Berlin, he obtained Cyprus for the Crown.

Disraeli also wrote a number of good novels. One thinks with dread of what Alec Douglas Home, Margaret Thatcher or John Major might have ever turned out in that line. *Coningsby*, *Sybil* and *Tancred* sold in their thousands and are important 'condition of England' novels. *Lothair* is a work of rare political satire and still hugely enjoyable. For *Endymion* Disraeli was paid £10,000, which in today's terms would be the equivalent of 50 times that figure. In spite of all his vanity, Disraeli's novels taken together demonstrate his feeling for the poor and the beaten down and he did say of his writings, 'my works are my life'.

Needless to say, Hibbert's excellent book treats Disraeli's political life seriously, but what remains for me most remarkable in the work is his bringing home to those of us interested in biography how strange it was that a man like Disraeli should have been British prime minister. Disraeli died of respiratory failure at his house in Curzon Street on 19 April 1881. The Queen had offered to visit him during his last days, but he declined

saying, 'no it is better not. She would only ask me to take a letter to Albert'. The Prince and Princess of Wales, his parliamentary and cabinet colleagues, his friends, the high aristocracy and many others attended his funeral. Mr Gladstone did not.

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METABIOGRAPHY, INTERESTINGNESS AND GENUINE COMPLEXITY

Alexander von Humboldt: a metabiography. Nicolaas A. Rupke, 2005. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Berne, Brussels, New York, Oxford and Vienna: Peter Lang; ISBN 3631539320, 320 pp., £22.80, cloth.

I had not encountered metabiography before reading Nicolaas Rupke's exemplification, but I have been impressed by the insights that it has produced. Metabiography does not set out to reveal the essential person by constructing a chronological narrative of their life in the conventional way. Rather it looks at the way the person has been presented, or represented, by different biographers at various periods of time. Rupke reveals that the vast literature on Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), mostly in German, presents a plurality of representations, each expressing the interests of biographers working during particular phases of German history. Thus, before the emergence of the German Empire, Humboldt was presented as a political liberal, sympathetic to the project of German unification. Under the Empire, however, and into the period of the Weimar Republic, he was seen as a supreme example of German cultural genius, whose research in South America not only preceded that of Darwin, but also prefigured the theory of evolution. It was an easy step for Humboldt's scientific achievements in botany and geology to be used during the Third Reich to show the superiority of German intellectual achievement and how the combination of the national soil (*Boden*) and racial blood (*Blut*) produced great geniuses. His friendship with Goethe (from 1794) was used to link him to German idealism and the notion that human knowledge is a unity, as opposed to French rationalism and the break-up of knowledge into separate disciplines. Humboldt's francophilia, and the fact that his major scientific works were written in French, were a problem to all German nationalists, but the Nazis dealt with this by stressing the purity of Humboldt's *Blut*. With the end of the Second World War and the division of Germany, two distinctive portraits emerged. In socialist East Germany, Humboldt, the former mining inspector, was turned into a supporter of the proletariat and his aristocratic connections were played