

Personal choice

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WRITING ABOUT books of the year at the end of 1973 seems almost like doing a Nero. Veteran Fleet Streeters say they have never known such a year for hard news—Watergate, Lonhro, Lambton, payola at the Beeb, an uneasy peace in Vietnam, the death of Chilean democracy, the Middle East War, all overtures to the major work on the programme—the sinking of the West in a pool of Arab oil.

But if we can't get about, we can at least stay at home with a book. Enforced immobility may swell the birth rate. It may also swell publishers' sales, providing they can get the paper. So here are just a few of the books I've enjoyed, my very personal choices for a winter besieged.

Usually it's difficult to select a Best Book of the Year. This time I have no hesitation. Michael Foot's exciting, elegantly-written *Aneurin Bevan* must get the vote. Even Enoch Powell, reviewing it in *The Listener*, called it one of the great political biographies of the twentieth century. And Enoch's politics are a thousand miles away from those of author and subject.

One of my favourite anecdotes in Foot's book is the story of Bevin and Bevan. Somebody said to Ernest Bevin, Foreign Secretary in the 1945 Labour Government: 'You know, Nye Bevan is his own worst enemy.' Bevin replied: 'Not while I'm alive, he ain't.'

It's been a particularly good year for biography. The Bevan one won only by a nose from Sybille Bedford's life of *Aldous Huxley*. This provided a fascinating new look at an author whose novels stay fresh and significant. (The BBC version of *Eyeless in Gaza*, repeated last year, was a model for televisioners of novels.)

I enjoyed Margaret Forster's life of *Bonny Prince Charlie*, who was obviously not her darling—and after reading Miss Forster you wonder why he was anybody's, Flora Macdonald included. Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage* was interesting more as a high minded Goon Show than a serious study of a lesbian relationship. 'Portrait of a What?', one review page headlined it. I've nothing to add to that.

Thinking back on the year's novels, I've got to vote again for Anthony Powell—again a very private choice. *Temporary Kings*, the penultimate volume in his Music of Life Time series was magnificent—a novel of strange discords in which Powell's characters are dancing into darkness. The only worry I've got is that there is only one more to come. And will Kenneth (now Lord) Widmerpool get his come-uppance?

Graham Greene was beautifully on the ball again with *The Honorary Consul* proving that in a year in which Brighton Palace Pier collapsed, its immortaliser is showing no signs of wear and tear. Norman Mailer dazzled us with *Marilyn* (I make no excuse for including it among the novels—everything Mailer writes is a novel). 'This man loved Marilyn so much you can smell it', one daily newspaper reviewer wrote. Well, it's his phrase, not mine, but I get the message.

It didn't strike me as a great year for crime fiction, or maybe I didn't read as many new ones as usual. I saw nothing better than Ross Macdonald's *Sleeping Beauty*. And while I'm on this subject, the year's most welcome reprint was *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, that fascinating collection

of letters in which the master pontificates on himself, Philip Marlowe, life, thrillers, cats and literature.

But my favourite 1973 thriller was Joseph Hansen's *Death Claims*, in which he took the fortunes of his homosexual private eye, David Brandstetter, a stage further. A Gay Libation of a book this, the gay world's answer to Mickey Spillane, I'm glad to say.

Still among those mean streets down which a man must go, I filled an instructive couple of hours with *Serpico*, a book about a real-life New York detective who set out to probe corruption in his own force and was shot in the face during a drug stake-out. The author, American journalist Peter Maas poses the question whether *Serpico* was gunned down by one of his own police colleagues and the whole thing rigged as a gang shooting. The book is a revealing study of a compulsive law enforcer—you can admire him, but it's hard to like him. And in the year of Watergate, it provides another journey into the American Nightmare.

I always try to choose a Paperback of the Year. This time it's easy. I'll treasure Pan's *Modest History of the Pin-Up* which I wrote about in a recent Bookmarks column. I remember enthusing about the photographs, a sea of breast and buttock which I make no excuses to my Women's Lib friends for drooling over. So I must add that the text, by Mark Gabor, is intelligent and informative.

Back among the hardbacks, the second volume of *The Goon Show Scripts* didn't disappoint, in spite of that excruciating foreword by Prince Charles. In a mixed bag of books which kept me awake when it was necessary, I include Montgomery Hyde's *Baldwin*, Manny Shinwell's *I've Lived Through It All* and the reprint of Irish Easter Rising hero James Connolly's political writings in the *Roots of the Left* series.

I missed any major work by Conor Cruise O'Brien. Maybe his Ministerial job is keeping him too busy. His great contribution to the year, was his pronouncement that he is ready to stand up and be counted against the Dublin establishment on birth control, abortion and censorship.

I came across no real English political novel, no novel by a woman writer I want in my list and this is unusual. The nearest to the great political novel I'm always hoping for was J G Farrell's *Siege of Krishnapur*, the Indian Mutiny story which won Farrell the Booker Prize.

It was a year in which there were too many deaths for the good of literature—Auden, Neruda, Nancy Mitford, John Creasey (I'm not apologising for putting him in this company), B S Johnson at a tragically early age. Our new Poet Laureate hasn't exactly won his spurs yet, but maybe the energy crisis will bring out his best—epic poems about shivering bank clerks in Penge and rust-gathering cars in Coulesdon Woods.

I'm refusing to look forward to 1974, except to suggest the Tourist Board might angle their whole campaign on: 'Spend Your Holiday in 1940s Britain.' We could even let people sleep in tube stations again. With cheap utility suits at Marks and Sparks, the battle to find which pub has beer tonight and doing the Blackout Stroll at the Lyceum we could rival the mini-bus safari business. And surely the cleverer publishers could find a way of getting into the act.