

ROTARY CLUB OF CANTERBURY

Notes of a meeting of the Book Club held on 21st September 2017 chez Mackone

1. PRESENT: Georges, Tony, Gill, Colin, Jennifer, Viv, Neil, Richard, Deborah, Alan, Brian. We welcomed Neil as new member.
2. APOLOGIES: Caroline
3. BOOK: "Inglorious Empire" by Shashi Tharoor. The writer is an Indian MP and member of the National Congress party, and explains in the preface that the idea for the book emerged when he was asked to speak to the Oxford Union motion that Britain owes reparations to its former colonies, including India. What follows is an examination of British conduct in India on a subject by subject basis, rather than one that is chronological, though it does begin with the activities of the British East India company, supported by the military, looting (his word) the country by pretty straightforward theft. Viv thought the book gave the picture within the 1st few pages and felt it sounded well researched with lots of notes. The account contrasted with the usual rosy picture of empire usually fed to the British public and felt children should be taught what really happened - it particularly bugged him that, in this country, any questioning of the empire was considered unpatriotic, and pointed out that the Germans had faced up to their history in the wars. Deborah's dad had been with the army in India. She was a bit shocked by the book not known much about the real history. Alan had been impressed by the huge palaces left in Rajasthan and pointed out that all religions had been tolerated, but the British policy of divide and rule led eventually to the disastrous arbitrary lines of the Partition. Neil thought it well written, thought, with Alan the questions posed by the author on the lines of whether the country would have evolved into something more prosperous in its own more relevant. The book lacked contrast with what might otherwise have happened and some factual inaccuracies (such as the claim an Indian pilot flew in the Battle of Britain, which was not the case) led him, to distrust other allegations (though in the Preface the author does say that he does not claim infallibility on all facts). Tony felt it wrong to judge what happened by current standards: he preferred the book by Neil Ferguson which is much less condemnatory and did not believe a lot of the statistics. Georges, who said he got more and more Marxist with age, felt extremely uncomfortable in reading the book and felt one's own political views affected how we viewed the book. Colin felt the film "The viceroy's house" showed the country too big to rule as a whole, and that the book had been written by an ambitious Indian politician. Gill was made very uncomfortable and ashamed by the book. Jennifer felt the book terribly depressing - she had had rather a romantic view of the country. However, it was good to understand the forces that made India of today. There were many references to particularly outrageous practices including the tax farmers appointed by the British and our fighting the opium wars with China to force the Chinese to take Indian opium, the taxes on which finished up in the coffers of the British govt right up to the 1947. Neil brought things up to date by comparing the E India Co with the EU (ruling without representation) and found the activities of the British no more morally reprehensible than those of the big US companies such as Apple in extracting money from other countries (though I have not heard that the activities of Apple caused anyone to starve to death). Everyone had a lot to say about this book, and I am sorry that I have not done justice to all views. I think though that overall, we thought it well written, if sometimes in rather intemperate language and a bit repetitious. On its veracity, the main thrust would appear borne out by such non-fiction works as those of William Dalrymple (The White Mughals, Return of the King, and John Keay (Midnight's Children) as well as The Case for India by Will Durrant which is referred to. Does it tell us about ourselves?
- "Ah would our Lord the gift give us to see ourselves as others see us"
4. OTHER READS: Deborah - had become grandmother and, perhaps coincidentally, started reading a book about genes, author unrecalled. Richard had started counselling, and books

on trauma. He was working with 15 year olds at the Rising sun domestic violence centre and was going on a training course. Alan - "The Ministry of utmost Happiness" by Arundhati Roy - (author of the "God of Small things") . New book is about a group of transvestites - 3 lovers set in Kashmir and involving secret police. Very lively. Also, "Prisoners of Geography" - 10 maps that tell you all you need to know about geopolitics by Tim Marshall. Had got as far as Russia and somewhere else I cannot read - he suggested we might take 2 maps each and i will try to investigate this. Also "The Red Haired woman" Orhan Pamuk - about relationships in the upper echelons of Turkish society by the author of "Museum of Innocents". Viv - going through the Morse series. Also, Gerald Seymour "The Corporal's wife" involves beautiful woman with whom everyone falls in love and MI5. Georges - only reading as a sleep maker but had read "The last kingdom"- 11th book in the Saxon series by Bernard Cornwell - about relationship with Alfred. Neil - reads quite a lot and is in another book club. Buys from charity shops . Recents - Fredk Forsyth - "The outsider" about a fighter pilot; Alistair Urquhart "The Lost Highlander" ; all Lee Child's books; Denim Lewis (really?) "Nazi hunters". Tony Ishiguro " When were orphans" - a man returns to China to seek his parents from whom he became separated in the 1930s. Also, Andrew Marr "Children of the Master"- a spoof on Tony Blair. Also John Morton "Rumpole of the Old Bailey" - fun. Colin - Michael Wright - "Je t'aime a la folie" - about a Brit who bought a small house in France but made a real effort to integrate. Gill - too busy travelling about. Jennifer - Robert Harris - "Ghost" about ghost writer for an ex PM (aka Blair) of his memoirs. Also "the husband hunters" Anne DeCourcy about American heiresses seeking to marry titles in Britain. Brian - "Hag Seed" Margaret Atwood - most ingenious plot set around a performance of "The tempest" in a prison with the criminals as the actors, "Music at midnight" John Drury - biography of George Herbert - painstaking and an interesting window on early C17 courtly life as well as Herbert's poetry. "The secret Life of trees" - Peter Wohlleben - a real forester's non fiction account of how trees communicate and protect themselves and others which seems as outlandish as any fiction. "Set Free" - Emma Slade - also read by Richard whose house was the venue for the launch of this autobiography of a bright girl from Whitstable who became a Buddhist nun

5. THINGS DONE: Deborah - Cox's & Kings tour of Classical Greece with a group of strangers; Charming visit to a Abbotsbury Swannery in Dorset with her son. Richard - holiday in Cap Ferrat (cheap end!) with visits to the Greek and Rothschild villas there. Alan - family hol in SW France - visit to Anderterre(?) with oldest rock-cut church in Europe. Also, visit to Brdeaux for the day - very lively scene. Had been to the "Queer art" exhibition at Tate Britain - hadn't realised how many artists were homosexual between 1950 & 67. Also film "Victoria and Abdul" entertaining account of the Queen's relationship with her young Muslim servant who was apparently unceremoniously disposed of back to India when she died by the charming Establishment. Viv - enjoyed the film "Dunkirk" and the folkstone triennial, but the highlight was cycling 300 miles down the Danube (Pauline following in the rescue truck). Wonderfully maintained flat cycle routes. Visits to a gallery with huge Picasso collection, Melk abbey, Dresden . Georges - explained that 5 years ago he had bought a huge tank for storage of rainwater in his garden, but could not bring himself to dig an equally enormous hole to put it in. However, this year , with grandson, he went to "Diggerland" - greatest fun he'd ever had (including sex) , operating various diggers (notwithstanding it is on the Rochester side of the Medway tunnel), and, following that, he had hired a small digger which apparently had the capability of retracting its tracks, thus enabling it to traverse the lounge and dig up the lawn. sadly, he has not yet worked out what to do with the spoil heap . Neil - trip to Harz mountains - lots of leftovers from the Cold War and the church where Himm,ler installed swastikas. Then to Nordhausen where they made V1 and 2 rockets. . Tony river cruise from Cologne to Strasburg followed by a relaxing visit to Baden Baden. He confided he had always wanted to be a tap dancer, so enjoyed "42nd street" followed by Kensington Palace and Aspsley

House, film "Beguiled" about the Civil War and "The Play that went wrong" at the Marlowe.

Comment [1]:

Colin and Jennifer - film of "A man called Ove" - we read book , few days in Poole with son and visit to Eastbourne, and "Art in the Park" in Westgate Gardens where both Jennifer and Jean Pomeroy exhibited. Also film "Bridgend". Gill - 2 trips to Bath; films - Man called Ove, Dunkirk, The Graduate. Attempted , and failed, to visit Wisley, and went to the walker Gallery instead , which was delightful. Brian - visit to Graham Clarke's studio, Jewish museum in Camden Town which is worth a trip, quite big, and included a special section on amie winehouse , old St Pancras church in Camden (not the one opposite Euston) - goes back to Saxon times - or did, before the Victorians got at it , lots of dogwatch and ducks.

6. DONM: Thursday 9th November 7.30pm chez colin and Jennifer, Book - "Mort" Terry Pratchett