

Watercolour Memories

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Bernard Smith

A Pavane for Another Time

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IT'S A PROUSTIAN TITLE, or at any rate a Powellian one, that Bernard Smith has produced for this memoir of his life in the long-ago 1940s, and, yes, there on the cover is Anthony Powell's hero, Poussin. That's doubly appropriate because one of the more vivid figures (though also one of the more saturnine ones) in this remembrance of things past is Anthony Blunt, great scholar of Poussin's work, master spy, eminent director of the Courtauld and critical educator of the Young Bernard.

Blunt is a fascinating shadow in this story, not least because of the younger Smith's Marxism and his hope that the great art historian will remember his own affinity for Marxist approaches. Instead, Blunt (who at this very period is providing information to the Soviets via Burgess) is all patrician superciliousness. He has renounced his Marxist trappings — possibly as a form of cover — and he gives Smith's *Place, Taste and Tradition* a cursory flick, only to remark condescendingly, 'Oh, you have surrealist painting there, too, do you?'

Still, it is Blunt who introduces Smith to Charles Mitchell, the man who will become his Socrates, teaching him not to write 'too well' and introducing him to the ideal, as well as the rigours, of research. And it's not hard to see England as something more than Bernard Smith's blacking factory, indeed as a kind of salvation. Smith goes to Britain as a young colonial — albeit one with considerable belief in himself — who has renounced the expressionist painting that might have been his destiny, but he comes back as a critic who has had his intellectual epiphany with Ernst Gombrich and has discovered — in Freudian terms — his dream painting in a work attributed to Rogier van der Weyden. More particularly, the iron has entered his soul. He has mastered art historical method. He is a man of the Warburg Institute and has published in its journal. He is now in a position where he can set about writing *European Vision and the South Pacific 1768–1850* (1960).

But there are two Englands in this book, and they both exercise a power in the direction of vividness. There is the world of postwar Britain that gives the level of reportage and incident a quickened interest, but there is also Kate Challis, the woman Smith married in Sydney in 1941. In a complex way, she seems always to have been his home country and the

making of him. It is almost as though the great historian and art critic could realise his radical vision with its inversion of centrality to the Antipodes because he had his Mother Britain wherever he went.

The marriage does not seem to have been conventionally passionate (at least on Kate's side), though Smith records that, at one point during the war, she insisted that he 'take' her every night — whereas, with the candour of old age, Smith says that he was basically a once-a-week man. He says that Kate told him she would have left him immediately if he had refused her.

If Kate's feeling for Bernard was not in the usual sense grounded in sexual passion, it was certainly grounded in something. She clearly loved the young working boy who revered the ballet and used to flutter his arms at his sides like a clown. His feeling for his dead wife is clearly one of adoration, and he records that the tapestry she made depicting him as Petruschka is one of his most treasured possessions.

Smith says that Kate settled for love and companionship (and children), but he makes no bones about the fact that her doing so was tied up with the murky psychosexuality of her adoptive father, Cuthbert Adeney. Both Cuthbert and Kate stalk through this old man's remembrance of a book like ghosts of an older dispensation that Smith is enthralled by and at the same time needs to have some distance on. If Kate represents the enthrallment of a lost ease of language and the effortless golden refinement of a higher mode of being (class

is too small a word), Cuthbert is the vengeful black beast of a paterfamilias, the sullied ‘father’ who has been sexually attracted to Kate and who, incidentally, finds Bernard maddening during the couple’s protracted British visit.

One of the most remarkable things about *A Pavane for Another Time* (and something that burns a hole in the burble and murmur of donnish recollection) is that Smith is intent from the outset on quoting from the diaries of Kate and Cuthbert, as though they represent the sunshine and the darkness of some higher music, more classical and more free.

In practice they do. Kate knows how to express her feelings in casual written words, whereas in Bernard’s case (we get his letters, too) it’s always, or often, as if the occasion — of emotional intensity or spousal obligation — is too small a thing for the articulation to be natural. He only really lets rip when he’s talking about Assisi and the mementoes of St Francis or the ‘wonderful’ character of Savonarola (so Marxist in his disdain for the vanities that maketh the bonfire but never canonised because he made such a meal of Alexander VI). Bernard Smith, young art historian to be, only writes well on the spot, when he’s visiting the monuments that have stirred his imagination and now inflame his eyes.

Cuthbert and Kate are natural diarists and, in Cuthbert’s case, it’s the still fires of hell that seem to burn in them. He is an intelligent, cultivated, detestable Englishman of the upper middle class, as well as the kind of ‘nasty Christian’ (to use Turgenev’s phrase) whose will to love, and whose aversion to charity, are self-consciously crooked and perverse. He is one of the black delights of this book, even though you know his vicious, intelligent words are only being reproduced because they exist, by some principle of intimate proximity, in the medium of Bernard’s love for Kate. It is as if he kisses every part of the memory of her body, including what was marred or bruised by her background.

It makes this book more interesting and a bit more kinky than it might otherwise have been, though there’s plenty here, in the narration of a life of steadiness and achievement, that will fascinate a range of readers.

That great leftist giant of the Teacher’s Federation, Sam Lewis, tells Bernard that, as a good Communist, he should enlist in the army for the war effort. Bernard snaps back that no one’s making that decision on his behalf, thank you very much, and sits out the war as a teacher — admittedly one who is translated into quasi-academic and curatorial life. He organises art exhibitions to travel in the bush and clashes with a man called Haefliger (who, in articulate fashion, despises Smith’s Marxism and denies the originality of an Australian art that, save for the Aborigines, can scarcely come from the soil). The latter-day Smith points out, without rancour, that his antagonist’s father was a Nazi and tends to suggest the smell of fascism in this kind of soil-based idealism.

It’s funny to think that Smith, probably the greatest

humanities academic to spend his career in this country (and one of the greatest by any standards), went off to the Courtauld on his British Council scholarship after only a couple of years at Sydney University, studying English and archaeology of all things. He has a good story about what a snaky logician A.J.A. Waldock, excavator of Milton and Hamlet, was. He also (as a young curator) moans to Joe Burke, the man who will be his predecessor as Herald Professor of Fine Arts at Melbourne University, about some mushy nineteenth-century French bit of floral work. ‘Yes, I know exactly what you mean,’ Burke says to him. ‘But you see I’m an art historian and I love the bad ones too.’

Smith’s road to Damascus comes in the postwar London that was the dusty, battered inheritor of the proud tradition of the European diaspora. The revelation in his reading comes when Charles Mitchell gets him to look at Panofsky: all that painstaking learning and iconography and care for the material minutiae of a culture that is expressive of life. The aural equivalent is when he hears Gombrich say that all art is conceptual, and a key to something more than mythologies turns in his mind.

This is a rich, rambling book, full of real things. It’s hard to forget the young gay artist who tries to seduce Smith or the young Venetian prostitute (the only one in a long lifetime) who succeeds, in that city of San Marco by the waters. Harder still to forget his natural uncle who bubbles with delight to meet his nephew from Australia and spits on the floor in excitement as they listen to the football, and who later, in his loneliness, hangs himself because his dear wife is gone, dead from cancer.

This is a book full of good and wise things, and it’s a testament to the modesty and sanity, not just the ambition and drive, of the man who lived the life it records. It’s quiet in tone, sometimes even mousey (apart from those diabolic Limey diarists), but it reflects that rarest thing, the calm of a great academic who no longer feels any need to show off.

At one point, the 86-year-old Smith remarks of *European Vision and the South Pacific* that it’s sometimes taken to support the fashionable nonsense that there was no way the first Europeans in the Antipodes could depict the objective world with accuracy. This is not what he meant at all, Smith says. All he meant was that what they did depict was stylised by the conventions in which they thought and imagined. It’s a mild moment in a book that has walk-on parts for everyone from Bert Tucker and Henry Moore — he takes Bernard to a pub and talks of the tension between the popular and the compelled — to Dr Evatt and his wife, Mary Alice.

A Pavane for Another Time is almost a reversion to a lost way of recording the past, all quietude and detail and water-colour memories. But there’s an artist in here somewhere, as well as a lover and fierce intellect. How does the book begin? ‘Yes, it’s true most of them are dead now and many were English.’