

LITERALLY SPEAKING

CHELTENHAM FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE
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TODAY'S HIGHLIGHTS

A TASTE OF HONEY TOWN HALL/1-2PM

Bee Wilson demonstrates how important the honeybee has been to civilization and human ideas.

PAUL BAILEY & BERYL BAINBRIDGE TOWN HALL/4.15-5.15PM

A discussion on the challenges of writing outside one's gender.

NEIL KINNOCK TOWN HALL/6-7PM

The former Labour leader argues for strong engagement in the EU.

BLACK NATION TOWN HALL/8.30-10PM **Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Keith Waithe, Mimi Khalvati and David Dabydeen** perform their poetry.

PD JAMES & RUTH RENDELL EVERYMAN/8.45-10PM

Learn more about the craft of crime writing with two legends of the genre.

OUT OF THE PITT OF POLITICS

DANIEL HAHN

Although he hasn't been away from front-line politics for that long, it's easy to forget William Hague's extraordinary gift as a public speaker; he relishes holding the attention of an audience, which he does with apparent ease and confidence – a quality shared by his equally hapless successor-but-one.

Unlike Michael Howard, though, Hague is also gifted with a dry and self-deprecating wit, which makes him all the more appealing as a performer – and, combined with his clear eye for political nonsense, I suspect makes him a fine biographer too.

William Pitt became Prime Minister at the age of 24; he occupied the office for 19 of the subsequent 22 years. After this long and distinguished service – through a period of intense economic and social change in Britain, through the wars with America and France – he died, still only 46. Even at the time of his death, he was younger than all but two subsequent Prime Ministers at the time they took office. Given this remarkable record, Hague felt that Pitt ought to be better known to the British public, hence his new book,

William Pitt the Younger.

This wide-ranging talk was at its most interesting when comparing the political worlds of Pitt's day and our own; Hague's own experience is, after all, what makes the perspective of this biography unique. He remembered being the butt of some particularly cruel (and particularly

funny) *Private Eye* jokes (and bravely reminded us of many of them), but pointed out how tame these were compared to the biting critical poems in the public press in the 1780s, compared to satirical writers and cartoonists, like Gillray, whose taunts Pitt had to endure.

And though there is some of today's political landscape that Pitt would have recognized, inevitably significant things have changed too – of these, Hague most lamented the marginalizing of the role of Parliament. Parliament is no longer the substance of politics, he said, no longer the place where the real debates take place, where information is really conveyed, but 'a short-hand' for the important things happening elsewhere.

For this reason, he said, given a choice he would rather have been a politician in Pitt's day than his own; it was a time when 'one had to exercise the full force of one's oratorical and rhetorical skills on the floor of the House'. Judging by last night's display, William Hague would have made a very fine eighteenth-century politician indeed.



HORSES FOR COURSES

JON ANDRIESSEN

BBC sports presenter Clare Balding galloped on stage last night for an interview with her father Ian, in what turned out to be a blast of anecdotes from the racing world – including the occasional royal appointment.

Ian has just written his autobiography, *Making the Running*, a testament to a life spent in the horse-racing fraternity, first as a jockey and later as a trainer to the Queen, amongst others. For daughter Clare this meant growing up in a house full of horses and the occasional unexpected regal guest dropping in for breakfast.

On one particular meeting with Her Majesty, having toured the stables, Ian was surprised to find himself presented with the contents of the royal hanky. Pointing at the 'muck' within, the Queen, 'a knowledgeable horsewoman', pointed out the importance of adequate horse-box ventilation. Who says she

doesn't show the common touch?

Inevitably, the question of hunting arose and, in spite of Ian Balding's preference for drag- as opposed to fox-hunting, he remained fully in support of the 'unspeakable', as Wilde would have it. 'It's tragic,' he told us, before asserting – with no redress to irony – 'fox-hunters love the fox'. As we all know, love can be a cruel mistress.



A POISONED CHALICE

ROGER TURNER

We arrived to learn whether Lucrezia Borgia was really a wicked woman or simply a nice lady you'd be happy to have tea with. Instead we got a taste of *The Affair of the Poisons at the court of Louis XIV.* Sadly Sarah Bradford was indisposed – perhaps in suspicious circumstances!

Anne Somerset set out the sordid details with great charm. In 1679 a well-known Marquise was accused of poisoning her father and two brothers, and this opened up a view onto a world of intrigue involving clairvoyants and necromancers. Louis was consumed by paranoia, particularly as his own mistress (mother of seven of his children) was implicated. Eventually the Marquise confessed to giving her father 28 doses of poison; she was gruesomely tortured and executed. By then Louis had set up a draconian commission led by the chief of police.

All France trembled at 'the last

great witch-hunt'. There may have been only about ten actual cases of poisoning, but 104 trials were held, dozens tortured and 34 people executed by hanging, decapitation or by being broken on the wheel.

Fortune-tellers were the suppliers, while aristocratic ladies dispatched rivals or unwanted husbands. There was a stark contrast between the glittering splendour of Versailles and the seedy underworld of superstition, alleged child sacrifice and Satanic rites.

But before we start feeling superior about government hysteria, as Louis made every effort to stamp this out, Anne Somerset reflected on the various royals and ex-government ministers of recent years who have consulted mediums. Poisoning was clearly the 17th-century WMD, an unprecedented terrorist threat that justified an equally savage response from the state.

LEST WE FORGET

ADAM HOROVITZ

One of the first questions posed by Pamela Armstrong, chairing the discussion on 'Architects of the Holocaust' yesterday, was a brutally simple one: 'How could an advanced culture like Germany give in so quickly to the Nazi regime?'

It's a pertinent question – pertinent to the point of pain in a time of *schadenfreude*-by-television and mass inoculation to horror and death, coming from all directions – and not one that can even begin to be answered in little more than an hour, however valiant the attempts by Gitta Sereny, David Cesarani and Richard J Evans.

Sereny immediately expressed objection to the use of the term 'The Holocaust': it 'diminishes other genocides', in Kosovo, Cambodia, Rwanda and Sudan. 'How do we distinguish between one genocide and another?' she asked. 'We in the West are making a value judgement... between the dead and the dead.' She expressed concern about how its use as the epitome of viciousness and horror would affect 'the understanding of the present'.

She has a point – for all that the three speakers' research into the glowering depths of such people as Albert Speer, Adolf Eichmann, Heinrich Himmler and Reinhard Heidrich – and the situations that created them – offers a helpful portrait of the times and modes of thinking, such research is prone to getting bogged down in the partisan minutiae of trial and retribution.

It is valuable, therefore, to discover that Germany faced political upheaval after the 1914-18 War, that there was enormous resentment of the Treaty of Versailles' oppression of Germany, that people were fearful after the economic collapse of 1929, that German universities in the 20s were a 'hotbed of Right Wing thinking' and that the Nazis in general, and Eichmann – the 'CEO of Genocide Inc.' – in particular, were 'reduced to pathological' figures by Wilhelm Reich and others, according to Cesarani. 'Modernity creates a mentality where people obey... people in white coats,' he said. Not least, it is valuable to know that only 37.4% of German citizens actually voted for the Nazis in the first place and that it was the moral abnegation of an extremist few, coupled with the strong possibility that a great many ordinary people were 'opting into the economy of genocide out of sheer desperation' that led to the Final Solution.

Last night's discussion made brutally obvious the need to keep scrutinising holocausts. They are a subject which must never be allowed to become merely a palimpsest.

ART: THE POWER AND THE GLORY

HELEN BLACKWOOD

'We are artists working for change – the power is in our hearts because of who we are.' This is the message of Art + Power, a Bristol-based organisation led by disabled people. The audience was treated to a kaleidoscope of performed arts. These are people who have not been heard enough, and Art + Power ensures that even 'the quietest voice will be heard' through poetry, drama and song.

The performance began with a presentation of 'Dormitory Beds', a poem written by the group, confronting the issue of exclusion, which summed up the group's feelings of lost identity: 'They could make us the way they wanted us.' This was followed by an international award-winning film based on Brenda Cook's poem, 'The Wrong Flowers'.

This moving piece highlighted the poet's schoolgirl memories of being 'different': 'My schooldays felt like I've always been picking the wrong flowers.' This evokes all our fears of the darker side to childhood. Brenda herself was a flower in bloom.

The audience was treated to an excerpt of the group's very successful version of Christopher Marlowe's play *Dr Faustus*, which they are hoping to tour the UK with soon. They believe 'the strength of a



story is your involvement in it.'

Overall, this production was awe-inspiring thanks to the pride they held within themselves as individuals, all hoping to create 'a world where everyone is valued', where we all tune up together to make a 'symphony of song'.

PLAYS FOR TODAY



PLAY IN A DAY

The Playhouse was abuzz with creativity yesterday, as GCSE Drama students from across the county converged to create a play in a day. With the help of Playhouse practitioners, students from Chosen Hill, Farmor's, Balcarras, Thomas

Keble and Kingsmead schools worked on short plays inspired by Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. Encompassing cultural influences, from Britney Spears to Heavy Metal, it was interesting to see four such different approaches to one story. Picture and story by Alice Palmer

NOT SO DARK AGES

ALEX RUNCHMAN

Terry Jones claimed last night that he would clear up some misconceptions about the Middle Ages – and 'put a boot in on the Renaissance'. His breathless talk, complete with entertaining slides and energetic gesticulations, convinced me that the period was 'full of life', even if some of his claims seemed questionable.

Citing stories from Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the entrepreneurial abilities of monks, and the rights of Medieval women to complain if their husbands were impotent, Jones oozed enthusiasm for his subject. He pointed out that Medieval maps only seem terrible to us because we don't realize that they were not intended as accurate geographical devices; he extolled the virtues of the period's art, especially its cathedrals; and he even noted that we are returning to herbal remedies that were popular in the so-called Dark Ages.

However, his insistence that chivalry was simply 'a cult of violence' served only to reinforce the common belief that the period was one of 'terror, horror, destruction, cruelty and torture'. He suggested, improbably, that Joan of Arc was burned not for witchcraft but for cross-dressing, although – given his performances for Monty Python – it's hard to be too surprised. It's tenuous, too, to blame Washington Irving for persuading us that everyone in the Middle Ages thought the world was flat.

All the same, it was an enjoyable talk, and gleeful references to gossipy nuns, soldiers catapulting severed heads at their enemies, and a courtier having his pants pulled down reminded us all of Jones's comedic roots.

THE STOAT

Among the many letters recieved by William Hague from his constituents, one in particular stood out, he said yesterday: 'Dear Mr Hague, the Taleban has taken over Ann Widdecombe's body and no-one has noticed. Yours sincerely...'

Having found difficulty with the discipline of writing, Ian Balding pointed an accusatory finger at an audience member last night. 'I blame my old schoolmaster,' he said. 'He never taught me to buckle down – and he's here tonight!'