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The virtues of a Cambridge history

On the woeful failure of the new Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature.

Where are the Greens when you need them? You know: those environmentally sensitive folks who hammer metal spikes into trees in order (so they say) to protect our arboreal friends from the depredations of evil loggers. Never mind that said loggers might be injured or killed trying to harvest such booby-trapped trees◎for the Greens, that is only condign punishment for, for, for well, you know: for capitalism, for patriarchy, for ◎speciesism,◎ etc.

Possibly you suspect that this behavior on the part of the Greens has more to do with making a spectacle of their own presumed virtue than with protecting the environment. That◎s what we think. But what we wish to know is, why are they so *selective* in their exhibition of outrage? A logging camp in Maine or the Pacific Northwest gets the full Green treatment: demonstrations, press conferences, sabotage. But what about a major university press whose activities darken hundreds of acres of wood pulp for no good reason?

What we have in mind at the moment are items like the new *Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature*. This hefty tome weighs in at nearly 900 pages (and costs $160). Edited by Laura Marcus and Peter Nicholls, both of the University of Sussex, this self-described ◎authoritative narrative◎ consists of forty-four long essays by academics renowned (Ronald Bush, e.g.) and obscure (most of the rest). How many trees do you suppose perished in order to bring this (according to the flap copy) ◎major event for anyone concerned with twentieth century literature◎ into being?

Let◎s start at the end, with the index. In his review of the volume for*The Times Literary Supplement*, John Sutherland waded briefly through this shambles. Did you know that D. H. Lawrence wrote something called *The Planned Serpent*? (A manual of socialism for snakes, perchance?) Thomas Pynchon, we read, wrote a book called *The Crying of Lot*◎presumably his first foray into Biblical fiction◎while Maxim Gorky, mirabile dictu, devoted himself to at least two books on Thomas Hardy. Gorky◎s bibliography is larger than usual, but poor Bertolt Brecht would have been surprised to discover that Oscar Lewenstein wrote *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* and *Threepenny Opera*. In this index, T. E. Hulme becomes T. H. Hulme, while E. P. Thompson is robbed not only of the ◎p◎

in his last name but also the authorship of his most famous book *The Making of the English Working Class*, which is attributed to one Denys Thompson. Many readers will recall that William Golding, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1983, wrote *Lord of the Flies*. But this reference work, which is said by the publisher to contain ◎all the virtues of a Cambridge History,◎ attributes *The* (sic) *Lord of the Flies* to Giles Cooper. And so on.

Of course, editors of such a volume do not generally compile its index. Still, one might expect them at least to glance through it. And it must be said that the index is only the beginning of what is wrong with this waste of wood pulp. Sutherland expressed chagrin that neither John Betjeman nor P. G. Wodehouse should make it into a putatively ◎authoritative◎ history of twentieth-century English literature. Those are indeed shocking omissions. As a public-spirited individual named David Herman pointed out in a letter to the *TLS*, however, Betjeman and Wodehouse are in good company. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle didn◎t make it into this ◎authoritative◎ history, either. Nor did John Masefield, J. M. Barrie, Walter de la Mare, Anthony Burgess, John Mortimer, or Christopher Fry. Lawrence Durrell? No. H. E. Bates (*The Darling Buds of May*, *Love for Lydia*)? No. Norman Douglas, Kenneth Grahame, A. A. Milne? No, no, and no. Ditto for Ian Fleming, David Lodge, Hugh Walpole, Richard Hughes, Ray Bradbury, and V. S. Pritchett. In other words, as Mr. Herman sadly wrote, ◎No Peter Pan, Piglet or Pooh; no Holmes, Zapp or Bond; no Ratty or Rumpole.◎ Don◎t bother looking for Stephen Potter in the Cambridge History, either: the author of *Lifemanship* is not there. Nor are Geoffrey Willans, Constantine FitzGibbon, Patrick O◎Brian, or dozens of others.

As Mr. Herman observes, ◎It is not hard to see what these writers have in common. All are male, all are white.◎ (Though we note that Barbara Pym is missing as well.) This authoritative major event doesn◎t have room for Wodehouse or Milne, for Barrie or Burgess. But it has plenty of space for that doyenne of French feminism Hélène Cixous, the Marxist art critic T. J. Clark, and the Palestinian apologist Edward Said. John Masefield doesn◎t make the cut, but the deconstructionist Gayatri Spivak does, as does the postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, and that early champion of third-world terrorism, Frantz Fanon.

And what of the essays? Some rise to the level of the pedestrian. The rest flirt with the preposterous. ◎Hybridity◎ is a popular term in these pages. ◎Much Postmodern literature and theory,◎ we read in the Introduction, ◎exploits a generic hybridity that takes on a sharper cultural and political edge in the literatures and theories of postcolonialism.◎ What would it mean to ◎exploit◎ hybridity, whether ◎generic◎ or some fancier variety? While musing about that important question, consider, too, that although ◎Hybridity, Bhabha argues, subverts the narrative of colonial power and dominant cultures,◎ ◎one must guard against hybridity becoming a dehistoricizing gesture.◎

In other words, *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* is an ◎entrepôt◎ (another word favored by postcolonialists) of trendy politicized lit-speak. It features essays on non-topics like ◎The Gender of Modernity◎ (why not ◎The Laziness of Tomorrow◎?) and ◎Fiction and Postmodernity.◎ Nineteenth-century British novels, we read, were ◎disseminated across the

Anglophone world as so many instruction manuals for bourgeois subjectivity.◎ Eh?

The Introduction to this new Cambridge History assures readers that the ◎very category of ◎English literature◎◎ has now become ◎suspect.◎ If English literature were what this book describes, we should have to agree◎indeed, we would have to go further and admit that English literature never really existed *as* literature but only as an appendage of politics and sociology. But, like so many academic productions these days (Daniel Johnson discusses a partial exception in his essay on German literature later in this issue), *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century English Literature* describes a parallel universe, one that exists alongside, but without ever touching, the real universe of literary and cultural experience. It is a universe fraught with perfervid political imaginings, inspissated prose, and baseless scenarios of grievance and exploitation. It is a sad, impoverished country that is charted in its pages, far, far removed from the actual workings of literature. Reading in such books, one finds pity competing with weariness and exasperation. Do such reader-proof tomes really contain ◎all the virtues of a Cambridge History◎? If so, things are even worse than we had suspected.

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