

BOOKS OF THE YEAR HISTORY

Show me both the wood and the trees!

*From spies to statesmen, the
year's best histories balanced
dizzying scope with telling
detail, says Simon Heffer*

Perhaps the most improving history published this year was the great scholar Keith Thomas's fascinating

In Pursuit of Civility: Manners and Civilisation in Early Modern England (Yale, £25). It tells how, between 1530 and 1789, the English well-to-do developed a code of behaviour, necessary not least because of the aristocracy's readiness to kill each other when in receipt of a slight. Thomas leaves no aspect of this process of refinement unexplored: "In 1661, a cookery book specified that one should not put more than two fingers and a thumb on a joint when carving; by 1670, it was said that 'the neatest carvers' never touched the joint at all, save with a knife and fork."

Also outstanding is Ruby Lal's **Empress: The Astonishing Reign of Nur Jahan** (WW Norton, £19.99), the story of the first and only female ruler of the Mughal Empire. As well as being a crack shot – she once dispatched four tigers with just six shots – Nur Jahan, perhaps more remarkably for 17th-century India, navigated "the labyrinth of feudal courtly politics and the male-centred culture of the Mughal world". It is the perfect curtain-raiser to David Gilmour's heavyweight (in every

sense) **The British in India** (Allen Lane, £30), which starts with the granting of the East India Company's charter in 1600 and ends with the hippy invasion in the Sixties.

Diarmaid MacCulloch's **Thomas Cromwell: A Life** (Allen Lane, £30) chronicles the life of a man who helped effect the Reformation for Henry VIII before ending, in the traditional way, on Tower Hill. His was not a charming end, though as the author notes "even botched beheadings are soon over".

In **The King and the Catholics** (Weidenfeld, £25), Antonia Fraser recounts the saga of the emancipation of British Catholics, who finally achieved equal civil rights in 1829. Hitherto Catholicism had, since the Reformation, been considered "a form of national treachery", with Catholics blamed for the Great Fire of London.

So much British history is London-centric but TM Devine, probably the foremost historian of Scotland, challenges that. In **The Scottish Clearances** (Allen Lane, £25) he shows how the Scottish Enlightenment in the 18th century failed to prevent the mistreatment of Highlanders evicted in favour of a "rational" use of land – worse than anything happening in Ireland at the time. The reader is left wondering how a full-scale

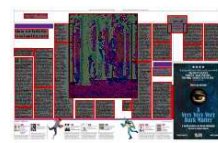
revolt was avoided.

This was a year of important centenaries. That of the Armistice is detailed in Guy Cuthbertson's **Peace at Last** (Yale, £18.99), which covers the day itself, including AJP Taylor's observation that complete strangers were seen in London "copulating in shop doorways, celebrating, as it were, the triumph of life over death".

Richard Overy notes another crucial event in **The Birth of the RAF, 1918** (Allen Lane, £14.99), writing that "the RAF was created out of bitter arguments over its necessity, and for half a decade after 1918 the future of the RAF as an independent service, separate from the Army and Navy, hung by a thread."

July was the centenary of the murders of the Tsar and his family in a cellar in Yekaterinburg by the

Bolsheviks. In **The Race to Save the Romanovs** (Hutchinson, £25), Helen Rappaport correctly ticks off George V for refusing to give them asylum – "it was fear of inflaming the radical Left-wing sentiment for the revolution and against the Imperial Family that was gathering ground in



Britain” that drove him – but concludes that under no circumstances would the Romanovs have been allowed to leave Russia in any case.

Not long after the Great War, in 1924, Britain had its first Labour government, whose downfall after only eight months was assisted by a letter claiming a link between Leninist Russia and British socialism, which Gill Bennett, in her **The Zinoviev Letter: The Conspiracy that Never Dies** (OUP, £25), concludes persuasively was a forgery. The story of espionage receives its definitive treatment in Christopher Andrew’s **The Secret World: A History of Intelligence** (Allen Lane, £35), which starts with Biblical times, then concentrates on European and American spying up to the present.

An immaculately researched case study of the world’s second-oldest profession comes in **The Spy who Changed History** (William Collins, £20), Svetlana Lokhova’s superb account of a Soviet spy-ring operating in the Thirties at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, trying (successfully) to close the superpower technology gap. Also revelatory is **Invisible Agents** (OUP, £20), Nadine Akkerman’s history of female spies in 17th-century Britain, a time of civil wars and revolutions. “While they began as mere couriers,” Akkerman writes, “carrying secret messages in their

hair or between the many layers of clothing they wore, women were soon taking the quill in hand and writing those letters themselves.” If caught, the women were treated more leniently than were the male spies – unless it was decided that they were also witches.

The before, during and after of the Second World War moved, as usual, a great number of historians to take up their pens. Benjamin Carter Hett’s **The Death of Democracy** (Heinemann, £20)

examines Hitler’s rise to power by asking why the Weimar Republic fell. His answer is straightforward: “The Nazis took over the Protestant middle-class camp” because “German Protestants had theological and political reasons to dislike the Weimar Republic”.

In **Arnhem: The Battle for the Bridges, 1944** (Viking, £25), Antony Beevor gives a day-by-day chronicle of this serious setback for the Allies. Beevor broadly agrees with Churchill, who told the

Commons that “‘Not in vain’ is the epitaph of those who fell.”

Churchill and Roosevelt were sent more than 600 wartime communications by Stalin, and their correspondence is collected in **The Kremlin Letters** (Yale, £25) by David Reynolds and Vladimir Pechatnov. Anyone wishing to understand how the Allied powers brought about Hitler’s defeat must read these letters, not least to fathom the exasperation that “Uncle Joe” inflicted on his allies. “I have at all times been sincere in my relations with you,” Churchill protests after Stalin has sent him another manipulative missive

in June 1943, during the demand for a “second front”. “I am satisfied that I have done everything in human power to help you.”

Churchill: Walking with Destiny (Allen Lane, £35) is a biography that its author, Andrew Roberts, admits has been preceded by a thousand others, but Roberts’ is a little shorter on hagiography and longer on wit than most rivals. Churchill’s imprecation to his crapulous son, Randolph, not to interrupt when Churchill himself is interrupting is one of the many gems in this book.

A less humorous man, but the subject of a truly great

biography, is Charles de Gaulle, anatomised to the point of brilliance by Julian Jackson in **A Certain Idea of France** (Allen Lane, £35). The General’s fanatical devotion to his conception of his country – and his ungrateful ambivalence towards his British allies – are masterfully brought out. The late John Julius Norwich offers a change of pace in **France: A History from Gaul to de Gaulle** (John Murray, £25), “a sort of thank-offering to France for all the

happiness that glorious country has given me over the years”.

The Marshall Plan (OUP, £25), by Benn Steil, one of several books about the start of the Cold War, looks at the impetus for America’s European aid programme, which came from six weeks of talks between US Secretary of State George C Marshall and his Soviet counterparts in 1947, in which he encountered untrustworthiness and aggression. “It was the

Moscow conference,” another American diplomat said, “which really rang down the Iron Curtain.”

Italy found itself on the right side of that curtain – but only just, given the activities of communists in the post-war period. These, and much else, are detailed in John Foot’s rigorous **The Archipelago: Italy Since 1945** (Bloomsbury, £25). He writes that, at times since the war, “Italy has appeared to be on fast-forward, rushing towards the future, and at others it has

almost seemed to stop altogether, or to go backwards.”

The Cold War was not unique to Europe; it was fought partly by proxy around the world, as we are reminded in **Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975** (William Collins, £30). Max Hastings himself covered the war and spent time in America during this period, so saw both sides of the coin. Writing of what he calls “the last act” before America abandoned the struggle, he quotes a cynical Henry Kissinger telling an official, minatorily, “in the devil theory of history we have to have someone to blame”.

The seizure of power in China by Mao, and its effect on the entire region – not least Korea and Vietnam – is one of the themes dealt with by Jonathan Fenby in his **Crucible: Thirteen Months that Forged Our World** (Simon & Schuster, £25). The months in question are June 1947 to June 1948, which also saw the

foundation of Israel and the independence and partition of India, and the assertion of ever more brutal power in Eastern Europe by Stalin. He reminds us how, so soon after the horrors of Nazi occupation, hard-Left workers in Czechoslovakia entered into “a state of battle” against those trying to secure democracy and liberty.

Miles Goslett examines a more recent assault on reason in his well-researched book on the death in 2003 of the weapons scientist Dr David Kelly. **An Inconvenient**

Death (Head of Zeus, £16.99) does not merely evoke what is fast becoming ancient political history – the arrogance of the New Labour project – but raises disturbing questions about the overwhelming evidence, not least of abuse of process, that demands Kelly’s inquest be reopened.

A lighter subject is covered in Hugo Vickers’ magnificent edition of James Pope-Hennessy’s hitherto unpublished papers accumulated

in his research for his life of Queen Mary in the late Fifties.

The Quest for Queen Mary (Hodder & Stoughton, £25) includes unmissable vignettes of most European royalty of the first half of the last century, crowned by an account of Pope-Hennessy’s visit to the Duke and Duchess of Windsor, the latter looking like “a medieval playing-card”.

Another entertaining book, in a year when so much history has been about grimmer subjects, is Adrian Tinniswood’s superb **Behind the Throne: A Domestic History of the Royal Household** (Jonathan Cape, £25), which contains gems such as the household’s nickname for David Eccles, the minister responsible for overseeing the public works required for the Coronation in 1953 – “the Abominable Showman”. Such things are a reminder that history needs anecdote to make us relate to it, something Tinniswood and Vickers do brilliantly.

Civil War women
spies were treated
well, unless they were
thought to be witches

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HIGH**
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1965, found in
Videogames by
Marie Foulston
(V&A, £25)