

Sweet Arcadia

'The Sea View Has Me Again: Uwe Johnson in Sheerness' by Patrick Wright

So where would *you* go? Imagine being born in Pomerania, 1934, your dad dying in a Soviet internment camp after the war. You're not a communist so you get suspended from Leipzig University. Then you follow your mother to West Berlin before the Wall is erected. Your writing gets attention, wins prizes; you spend time in the States. Back 'home' ex-Nazis hold positions of power and your apartment gets taken over by Kommune 1, a filthy heroin-fuelled harem of hedonistic neo-communards. You've had it with The East, had it with The West. And you've got a four-volume two thousand-page masterpiece to finish. You need to get out. Max Frisch has given you a loan. You decide to head for...the Isle of Sheppey.

Uwe Johnson moved to Sheerness on Sheppey in 1974; the locals called him 'Charles'. Patrick Wright takes us to the flatlands of this backwater and talks of an etherized place where the 'Mod Revival' of 1979/80 wasn't, in Billy Bragg's words, technically a revival. This ambitious book interrogates the meaning and history of the island and the why's and whatever's of Johnson's decision to live there. If you haven't been to Sheppey you may have heard people talk about it disparagingly. For years now a friend in nearby Rochester has, as Wright's reporting confirms, referred scathingly to Sheerness as 'Sheermess' or 'Sheernastiness'. This colleague spoke of genetic oddities; incest was implied. Unsurprisingly the locals don't take too kindly to such talk.

Wright is at pains to correct such prejudice, the 'slighting condescension', and tries to locate what Johnson (a 'double dissident') sought in Sheerness. He was looting for a 'moral utopia', a place that had an estranged familiarity not a million miles away from his childhood home on the Baltic. Within weeks of arriving Johnson wrote to Hannah Arendt that he'd found 'an ugly, living community', a place he could love and get nearer to what he saw as 'individual truth, private truth'.

But what truth was that? A world akin to that of *Anniversaries*, his magnum opus set in Manhattan where we meet Gesine Cresspahl, the central character, and learn about the reality of her life through, as Wright puts it, the 'two intersecting vectors of time and space'. The book is calendrical in form: Gesine's days are 'richly augmented by her scrutiny of the *New York Times*' and its pages referring to the terrible events of America, 1968. Her present is forever framed by her remembered past, as with Johnson's own, fixed in Pomerania. Johnson rakes through the shards of her memory; fictionalizes his own memories. The events lead up to the Prague Spring: could that be his longed-for concrete utopia?

That would be a no. Johnson in Kent: a disappointed man. How did he look to the locals? A hulking bald sphinx downing bottles of Shepherd Neame lager; Kojak with a two-day growth and a pipe replacing the lollipop; a humourless

Goldfinger with NHS specs trying to forget Operation Grand Slam. Michael Hamburger said Johnson was 'not merely reticent, but almost morbidly averse even to such intimacies as are considered usual and decent among friends'. He hung out at the Napier Tavern and regularly sank 'eight pints...and a double vodka with tomato juice'. Some nights he sang 'Mack the Knife': Johnson wasn't a laff riot. But Wright is surely correct in suggesting that the writer was more comfortable in the company of 'common people' than the waspy intellectuals of West Berlin. Johnson wrote to Walter Kempowski in 1981 explaining that the locals 'leave him in peace' because 'he clearly prefers coming to terms with it in silence', that *it* being recent German history, the war crimes of the Blitz, Auschwitz.

Wright gives us a Sheerness that's more Del Boy than Dürrenmatt, a ducking and diving world where modern life really is rubbish. Here be tatty caravan sites, a world of make do and mend, floods and crumbling cliffs, crumbling lives. In Wright's words Johnson used the pub as 'an informal research institute'. This was the Britain of paralyzing strikes followed by Thatcherite de-industrialization and the Falklands. Maybe, as Wright has it, Sheerness would be 'a place of dark warnings rather than naïve utopian promise'. We see Johnson's Sheppey as one of the cradles of what Wright identifies as 'a forceful and reactive patriotism'. Combine that with 'a libertarian mistrust' that, where possible, disengages from all branches of government and you can see what this is leading up to: COVID denial and Brexit. Are the locals the left behind or the stayed behind?

Johnson gave no opinions daarn the pub. He was careful, he was watching. Alcohol exacerbated his latent paranoia. He knew the Stasi were interested in him. He suspected, wrongly, tragically, that his wife was working with Czech intelligence. The lager provoked a kind of Othello syndrome and their separation was painful and public.

Wright delivers a gently meandering, expansive, tour of Johnson's world with wide loops and bends of narrative diversion, some as broad as an ox bow lake, that takes in the first U.K. experiments in flight, seawall construction, and the explosive hazard that is the *SS Richard Montgomery*. There she sits stranded on the Thames Estuary with her cargo of bombs, 3,000 tons worth that might, one day, wipe Sheerness off the map. Johnson knew nothing of this when he bought his place on Marine Parade opposite the wreck. He apparently took a kind of sardonic, ironic, pleasure in looking out at the shallow waters and the jutting masts of the *Montgomery* knowing he might have a ringside seat for a Beirut-like Doomsday. At least the threat stops that other Johnson building a third international airport in the estuary.

Reading Wright's magnificent account we sympathize with Johnson's plight. We might even see the exiled German as a spiritual brother to Marvin Gaye remembering that the singer (in an oddly similarly move) hid out in Ostend, another backwater on the opposite North Sea shore. Both of them owlshly looked out at the world and asked plaintively – *what's going on?*