

Hardcover: UK

Men behaving badly in the corridors of power

Though brimming sexual and other scandals, for a book about British politics, Andrew Rawnsley's expose doesn't reveal much about the country

BY GEORGE WALDEN
BLOOMBERG

As a UK general election nears, London newspapers are serving up juicy morsels from a scabrous new book on politics. The extracts, from Andrew Rawnsley's *The End of the Party*, brim with men behaving badly behind the walls of the prime minister's residence at 10 Downing Street.

The book describes how former prime minister Tony Blair held foul-mouthed shouting matches with his chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown. And how Brown, after becoming prime minister, stalked No. 10 in a black rage, throwing solid objects as well as injurious words at long-suffering aides.

The fact that Rawnsley is a political columnist for the left-leaning *Observer* makes things worse. Should Labour lose the election, the book could prove a sordid epitaph to 13 years in power, which began with Blair's landslide victory in 1997.

Leftists at the time viewed Blair as a Christ-like figure sent to banish the satanic era of Margaret Thatcher. Yet he was never a true man of the left, and his conservative instincts soon showed.

In touchy-feely speeches worthy of Princess Diana, he fretted about the chasm between rich and poor but did little to close the gap. Nor was he in any hurry to complete the reform of the House of Lords, a risibly dated institution where ancient bloodstock continue to lord it over humbler citizens.

Like some modish monarch, a teless and jacketless Blair dispensed decisions from a sofa in No. 10, surrounded by cronies, notably his neurotic press officer, Alastair Campbell. Meanwhile the civil service, an ornament of the British constitution famed for its neutrality, was downgraded and ignored, Rawnsley shows.

Least socialist of all was Blair's religion — or religiosity, as it has been called. It helped Blair to overcome his horror at the election of US President George W. Bush, inspired a sense of mission in the War on Terror, and enabled him to say he would answer to his Maker for the deaths in Iraq.

The invasion terminally soured the easygoing atmosphere on Downing Street. Brown's un-sunny disposition didn't help, creating "a depressive, introverted, dysfunctional coterie," as one No. 10 official puts it in the book. Brown was seen as a disaster — a gloomy, nail-biting intellectual and master of emotional malapropisms.

"Enjoy the rest of the summer," the book quotes him as saying while waving goodbye to troops in Afghanistan.

Rawnsley is nonetheless generous on Brown's role in stabilizing the world economy, as was US President Barack Obama, who spoke of Brown's "energy, leadership and initiative." Never mind if the cure meant turning his own principles on their head and spending billions of pounds he didn't possess.

"The man who put Adam Smith on

the banknotes became a born-again Keynesian," Rawnsley says.

Political junkies will relish this gossipy, entertaining saga. The public will find it less amusing, I suspect. This is a book about British politics that, strangely enough, tells you nothing about Britain. Sexual and other scandals are generously covered, yet mass immigration, which for good or ill has transformed the country, gets less than a page.

Other social issues scarcely feature. After massive new spending on the overstretched health service, deaths from the drug-resistant MRSA superbug remain higher and cancer cures lower than elsewhere in Europe. Expenditure on education has doubled, yet more parents than ever send their children to private schools. As the rise of the old Etonian clique around Conservative leader David Cameron illustrates, social mobility has actually gone into reverse under Labour.

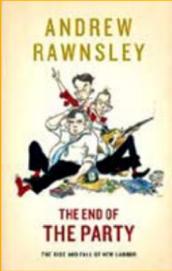
None of this stopped New Labour from echoing Tory boasts that Britain had regained its greatness, with London as the center of the world and its financial district, the City, as the country's turbocharged engine.

"There's nothing in the world to rival it," crowed New Labour's architect, Peter [now Lord] Mandelson.

And so the national hubris continued. The Conservatives had liberated the City's energies, and Brown had supposedly abolished boom-and-bust economics, inaugurating a golden era of growth. Warnings about public spending and personal debt were denounced as doom-mongering.

Seldom has a generation of politicians of all persuasions gotten things so stunningly and comprehensively wrong. It's not just New Labour, but an entire era of national self-delusion that is crashing and grinding to a close.

PUBLICATION NOTES



THE END OF THE PARTY: THE RISE AND FALL OF NEW LABOUR

BY ANDREW RAWNSLEY
801 PAGES
VIKING



Gorillaz
Plastic Beach
Parlophone

BY TAYLOR BRIERE
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Cartoon virtual band Gorillaz is back this month with the release of its third studio album, *Plastic Beach*, this time railing against the hazards of human excess. As you would expect, the guest stars are of breathtaking number and variety. Who else but Gorillaz would be able to convince Lou Reed, Mos Def and The Lebanese National Orchestra for Oriental Arabic Music to work on the same project?

Of course an album this ambitious is prone to problems, and there are times when things simply don't work. The orchestral lead-in to *White Flag* feels out of place, Snoop Dogg's contribution to *Welcome to the Plastic Beach* provides more comic relief than quality work and the track *Broken* probably shouldn't have made the final cut.

But the songs that are good are very good. The lead single *Stylo* relies on an incredibly propulsive bassline to carry the listener through a series of vocal performances by 2D (Damon Albarn), Mos Def and aging soul singer Bobby Womack, highlighted by 2D's Beegees-esque delivery of the hook-line "coming on to the overload," a reference to world overpopulation.

On an album characterized by many special moments, *Sweepstakes* stands out as the best. The song is left raw in all the right parts and Mos Def delivers a fantastic performance, perfectly framed by the track's swelling pandemonium. It is a truly original track, a great example of the magic that can happen when a talented rapper and his producer are on the same page.

Although *Plastic Beach* would at times benefit from less heavy handed production, there are simply too many great songs to ignore this must-listen.

Vampire Weekend first made a splash on the indie-rock scene in 2008 with its eponymous debut, an album that inspired very strong opinions, both positive and negative. Fans embraced the band's playfulness and coyly clever lyrics tucked neatly within readily accessible genre-bending songs. Detractors bemoaned an apparent lack of depth resulting from an overly simple, cutesy approach to songwriting, feeling the sounds they borrowed from the world of Afro-pop to be used in poor taste.

Contra, the band's second album, sees them running even further down the path laid out on *Vampire Weekend*. But if you have the stomach for it, it is quite a treat. The opening track, *Horchata*, named after a spiced beverage popular in Latin America, is driven along by a happy marimba and thumping electronic kick drum while vocalist Ezra Koenig delivers quirky lines such as "In December drinking horchata/I'd look psychotic in a balaclava." It's shamelessly catchy and sets the tone for the rest of the record. The band typically sounds best on its high-energy tracks, but the album's last and best track is an exception. *I think UR a Contra* is sad, slow, and spacey, with Koenig singing in his sweetest voice atop strings and flowery guitar.

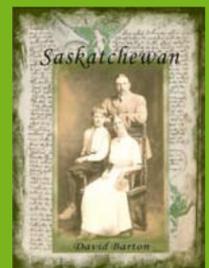
Keyboardist Rostam Batmanglij is also the producer, and he clearly has a talent for laying down unusually vibrant sounds side by side and giving them each the space to breathe in a mix, lending even the more experimental tracks on the record a comfortable, laid-back feel. The result is an album that feels richly adorned but never cramped.

Vampire Weekend

Contra
XL Recordings



PUBLICATION NOTES



SASKATCHEWAN
KUAN TANG INTERNATIONAL
BY DAVID BARTON
191 PAGES

was weird and exhilarating by turns, and often both at the same time, while *Pornography of the Emotions* described the work of prominent but always offbeat Taiwan artists. *Saskatchewan*,

BY BRADLEY WINTERTON
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

David Barton is the Canadian-born professor of English at Taiwan's National Central University who, as he related in an interview with *Taipei Times* on Nov. 25, 2007, when someone in Jhongli had a knife between his ribs in a drunken encounter, casually thought, "Well then, are you going to push it in or aren't you?"

The local artists Barton wrote about in *Pornography of the Emotions* represented "an extremely alienated and violently schizophrenic Taiwan." And in *Teaching Inghelish* in Taiwan (reviewed in *Taipei Times* Oct. 28, 2007) he penned a brawling assault on the whole TOEFL ethos, written by (in his own words) "an uncontrollable, laughable risk-taker riding to certain destruction." Now we have *Saskatchewan*, a novel, and Barton's third zany, but by no means unintelligent, publication.

The story opens in 1909 with the Canadian Prime Minister, Sir Wilfred Laurier (a historical figure), stranded in the northern

wastes and due for detoxification by a native "sweat lodge ceremony" that involves his lying for days in a tent alongside some specially heated boulders. Far away in Russia, meanwhile, two friends, Walter and JoJo, are visiting the aged novelist Tolstoy on his estate.

In this startling second chapter, that by no means presents the great writer as he's usually remembered, the two are urged to carry the sage's pacifist and egalitarian philosophy to Canada, using as emissaries seven Doukhobors, or "spirit wrestlers," all called Grigory, currently masquerading as a troupe of acrobats in an Odessa circus. Together with a group of female tumblers called The Flaming Angels, the whole unlikely party embarks from Copenhagen on the 10-day voyage to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

It's only from the occasional phrase that we learn that Walter in fact stands for Barton's real-life great-grandfather. The sepia photo on the book's cover apparently shows him,

his wife and their son, Barton's grandfather, shortly after their arrival in Canada from Denmark.

The fictional group, though, after acquiring more members in the person of some African musicians, moves from Halifax to Quebec, then Ontario, Toronto and Winnipeg. Christian Scientists are encountered in these cities, and there are various performances by the acrobats and musicians, usually in intoxicated circumstances. Eventually they encounter the unfortunate prime minister, but with no very notable results as far as the plot goes. The book ends with an evocation of the Canadian prairies, ending with this sentence uttered by a local prairie-dweller: "Well, f anybody ever read this they w'ud 'ave a heart attack, they w'd never get better — she thought it was going to be like a luv story, u know where the girl gets sick and died, but it's nothing like that." And indeed it isn't.

What it is like is hard to say. Of Barton's two previous books, *Teaching Inghelish* in Taiwan

by contrast, is a novel, and here Barton has to decide on the distribution of zaniness between himself and his characters. That he makes his characters unrelentingly weird is certain, but what he opts for as his own authorial tone is less apparent.

Some things are clear, however. A common general image of Canada is of a tolerant, fair-minded, sober place with massive natural resources and full of good intentions, but lacking the will to power and charisma of its less benign but more colorful southern neighbor. Barton, though, will obviously have no truck with any of this blandness.

There's a great deal of historical knowledge in this book, much of it obscured by the satirical, Rabelaisian tone. Among such knowledge is the fact that in 1909 nine out of 10 Winnipeg inhabitants couldn't speak either English or French. They were a mixture of Germans, Scandinavians, Jewish Eastern Europeans, Chinese and others, and Barton is anxious to represent

their history, albeit in his own distinctive, anarchic style.

"These were people who had been born straight-faced moment in a rare straight-faced moment, "people for whom marginalization was all they had; genetic gypsies who had come this far wandering and scavenging to get away from conformity of any kind." Things may have quieted down since then, but Barton's collection of acrobats, drunks and whores stands for a rebellious, non-conformist history that, as a level-headed academic, he probably doesn't want forgotten.

For the rest, the St Lawrence River is described as "singing the same empty, meaningless song it had always sung" (elsewhere it's referred to as "sucking off half of Canada"), the future — presumably present-day — inhabitants of Saskatchewan are seen as "small-minded, envious, conniving, bitter, prejudiced people," and, in a fascinating digression, Zoroastrianism is perceived as having revived in 18th century Europe the belief in a dualistic system (a good God

in charge of a spiritual world, an evil one in charge of the material one) that had gone underground when the Cathars were wiped out by the Albigensian Crusades of the 12th and 13th centuries. Their Anabaptist heirs, Barton writes, re-surfaced in Saskatchewan.

Comedy, though, is this author's chosen style, and much of *Saskatchewan* is farcical in manner. I didn't always find it funny — the tone is uneven, and the story at times hard to get to grips with. Excellent chapters stand out, however, notably the one featuring Tolstoy and the penultimate one, The Great Winnipeg Orgy of 1909.

All in all, Barton is a writer the likes of whom Canada has probably never seen. Many Canadians will relish this book, and laugh at its in-jokes. It seems strange that it's being published first in Taiwan, and surely the sooner it's available in the country it deals with the better.

Saskatchewan is available at Caves Books (www.cavesbooks.com.tw).

CD Reviews



Loscil
Endless Falls
Kranky Records

Endless Falls is experimental electronica solo artist Loscil's fifth release on the avant-garde label Kranky Records, also responsible for releasing music by such acts as Godspeed You! Black Emperor, Low and Deerhunter.

This is ambient music, so there are no catchy chorus hooks to hum along to and no triumphant chord changes to demand your attention. The album begins and ends with the sound of rain recorded in the musician's backyard, a fitting bookend for a record as unobtrusive as this one. Like falling rain, the music in *Endless Falls* can act as soothing background noise, or, if given an active listen, a catalyst for endless melancholic musings.

At times you may find yourself bobbing your head to beats that barely exist, buried deep beneath swirling harmonic drones and intricate, otherworldly textures. The inclusion of acoustic instruments such as strings and piano gives the record a more organic feel, but I would not go so far as to say it adds warmth. This is, first and foremost, a record that puts space between itself and its listeners in the sincere hope that they will be the ones to bridge the gap with their own thoughts and experiences.

Sophie Madeleine

Life, Love, Ukelele
Bandcamp/BCWax



British multi-instrumentalist singer-songwriter Sophie Madeleine wrote *Love, Life, Ukelele*, while working on her master's degree in songwriting at Bath Spa University. She put the album up for sale on the Internet last year with the help of Bandcamp (www.bandcamp.com), an online digital music company. This year, *Love, Life, Ukelele*, became the first vinyl release of BCWax, a new "unlabel" from Bandcamp that hopes to provide its customers with something that can't be downloaded: a beautiful, collectible piece of art they can hold in their hands. The artwork for the vinyl release is by Dan Stiles, who has also worked with the likes of Sonic Youth, Death Cab for Cutie and Feist and who is slated to provide all the future artwork for BCWax releases.

Love, Life, Ukelele, is a collection of pleasantly simple pop songs. It won't blow anyone away with its originality, but it is solid from top to bottom. The instrumentation (often led by a ukelele, though Madeleine also adds guitar, keys, glockenspiel, melodica, organ and percussion, all played by herself) is eccentric enough to hold your attention, and, most importantly, Madeleine has the sort of effortless voice that can carry a cliché as far as it needs to go.

The album won't make anyone's Top 10 list this year, but it is definitely worth a listen if you have a penchant for folksy pop music.