



being on the waves: “to go further in as I go further out”.

God is notably absent. Where in the Old English he is mentioned ten times, in this modern version he appears only once. Hollis’s is a more disembodied spiritualism, imploring us to “detect a greater calling” rather than “fear the Lord” (*Dryhten ... ondrædeþ*). The original poem’s well-known final breath, a solitary “Amen” after the last line of verse, is omitted altogether.

The coda we get instead consists of a series of wonderful monochrome photographs by Norman McBeath. They speak to the poem obliquely, the seafarer always keeping just out of sight. We see coils of rope piled on a beach; a piece of driftwood smoothed by waves; the bow of an old rowboat, paint peeling. The texture of these images is gritty; their composition moves, at times, to the point of abstract geometry. They feel entirely appropriate, their strange beauty hinting at one of the poem’s enduring truths: that by transporting us in and out of understanding - between the familiar and the strange - it resists any attempt at a smooth passage.

Pablo Scheffer

TAKEOVERS

OXFORD’S WAR 1939–1945 ASHLEY JACKSON

408pp. Bodleian Library
Publishing. £30.

During the Second World War, aircraft from the Luftwaffe frequently flew over Oxford to attack the industrial Midlands, but never once dropped a bomb on the city (unlike Cambridge). This is truly astonishing, given Oxford’s fame; the role of Cowley’s factories in manufacturing military equipment and repairing Spitfires and Hurricanes damaged in the Battle of Britain; and the involvement of the university’s academic staff (some of them distinguished refugees from Nazi-occupied countries) and the colleges’ wartime occupants in scientific and counter-intelligence work. The science included the isolation, purification and application of penicillin to medical patients, the invention of centimetric radar for detecting German U-boats at sea and the initial development of the atomic bomb.

Why no German bombs, asks the military historian Ashley Jackson in

his pioneering, highly detailed and vivid investigation of almost all aspects of wartime Oxford life. Supposedly because Adolf Hitler had chosen Oxford as his capital after the intended Nazi invasion of Britain. This idea “clearly gained currency after the war”, writes Jackson, and is today “probably the most well-known ‘fact’ about Oxford and the war”, though it was already circulating at the time. Wartime jests included the notion that a triumphant Hitler wanted his honorary degree awarded in the traditional setting, and that the Luftwaffe was run by Rhodes scholars educated in Oxford. Even today the idea “remains unsubstantiated”, the author notes, despite his consultation with historical experts on Hitler.

Less well known, but fully documented in the book, was the unprecedented takeover of swathes of Oxford college buildings by outsiders from both government departments and elsewhere. St Hugh’s College, for example, was converted into the Combined Services Hospital for Head Injuries, nicknamed the “Nutcracker Suite”. Filled with neurosurgeons, neurologists, anaesthetists, theatre sisters, ward sisters and patients, it focused on treating servicemen who had been shot in the head or hit by shrapnel or shells. Keble College, by contrast, was occupied by hundreds of young women who were bussed every day to Blenheim Palace, north of Oxford, where they worked for the counterintelligence and security agency MI5. Keble’s bursar, a retired lieutenant colonel, complained to MI5 that the new residents were breaking more crockery than undergraduates. The agency, represented by “another old sweat from the First World War”, responded that its staff were resident for much longer than undergraduates.

Andrew Robinson

PLOTTERS

MURDER AT MOUNT FUJI SHIZUKO NATSUKI

Translated by Robert B. Rohmer
304pp. Hutchinson Heinemann.
Paperback, £14.99.

There is much that is comfortingly familiar about Shizuko Natsuki’s crime novel of 1982, now reissued in its original, fuss-free translation of 1984 by Robert B. Rohmer: a snowbound mansion, a holiday gathering, a sudden death, an unconventional detective and a murderer who lurks hidden among the guests. Various members of the Wada clan have assembled to spend new year with their venerable patriarch, Yohei, the autocratic head of a pharmaceutical empire. A late arrival is Jane Prescott, the American student who is helping her classmate Chiyo write a thesis on *Mrs Dalloway*. Jane, a fluent Japanese speaker, is introduced to

the houseguests, one of whom she has already met on the road. The servants have been dismissed and the atmosphere seems strained, but this may be because to include an outsider at such an intimate occasion, let alone a foreigner, is to flout tradition.

Chiyo is Yohei Wada’s great-niece, but so close that she calls him Grandpa. The girls’ plans to study are fatally disrupted on the first night when a blood-spattered Chiyo staggers into the living room, sobbing, “I’ve just stabbed Grandpa to death”. Unthinkably, Yohei has made sexual advances to his great-niece, and to conceal the shame, protect the business and shield the universally beloved Chiyo, the decision is made to make the murder look as though it has been committed by an intruder. As so often, it is not the crime that creates the difficulty, but the cover-up.

Yohei’s personal physician helps to retard the apparent time of death with a nausea-inducing intervention, while a plausible alternative scenario (footsteps in the snow, missing valuables, an unlocked door) is devised. Jane is not constrained to join the plotters simply from fear of the Wadas (“their eyes [were] cold, suspicious and vigilant”); she cannot believe her friend capable of the crime.

With the arrival of a quizzical detective, the perspective abruptly shifts. Nakazato is as swift-thinking as he is physically indolent, forever forgetting the plastic filter that his wife begs him to use with his chokingly strong cigarettes. The author has already given us a prominent clue that there is more to the bizarre crime than first appears; an element of comedy intrudes with the pompous superintendent, who cannot resist blurting out his latest theory at the daily press conference, only to have to backtrack the next morning. Beyond the specifics of Japanese inheritance law that play a crucial role in this story, the nested reveals of *Murder at Mt Fuji* have a satisfyingly classic appeal.

Suzi Feay

DEITIES

THE SHRINKING GODDESS

Power, myth and the
female body

MINEKE SCHIPPER

336pp. Westbourne Press.
£16.99.

Mineke Schipper draws on a lifetime’s study of stories and proverbs across the world to chart the ways in which ideas about women, creation and power have been deployed over time. From Palaeolithic sculptures to Hera, whose breast milk is the origin of the Milky Way, the great goddesses are maternal, nurturing and powerful. With the advent of agriculture, however, the goddess began to demand sacrifice: of animals or first-fruit crops. She was no longer

all-loving, but capricious and fierce: Cybele, the Magna Mater or great mother, was served by men who castrated themselves. When, c.4000 BCE, men invented the plough and built cities, male deities took over as creators of humanity, shaping men and, only secondarily, women.

The book’s second section addresses the outcomes of male pregnancy envy. The religions centred on male creator gods - Judaism and Islam - demonized or destroyed rival goddess figures. Christianity incorporated the feminine in the paradoxical Virgin Mother of God. Schipper argues that as well as being an object of reverence and desire, the vulva was now regarded as apotropaic and frightening, deployed to drive away evil.

Schipper looks at some fascinating myths about the origins of menstruation. In some traditions men were the original menstruators; stories that unsettle the idea of menses as punishment. In a tale from India, menstruating men risked being eaten by tigers when working in the fields; since women could stay at home and bleed in security, they took over this characteristic. While pregnancy and infertility are explored through a range of unusual stories and beliefs, in theories about conception the importance of the male contribution is progressively magnified. Finally, Schipper turns to bodies and power, a section that covers the importance of the phallus, followed by a catalogue of contemporary issues around women’s bodies and patriarchal power. Topics include selective infanticide, female genital mutilation, women’s and girls’ alienation from their own bodies, and the rigorous policing of women’s lives. Deep-seated fear - and envy - of women’s bodies is posited as driving misogyny. This chapter rounds up some brutal and violent myths about the origins of heterosexuality before the book ends with a call to step outside the binaries with which the book has been concerned: for women to realize and exercise their power; and for all of us to listen to the experiences of intersex, non-binary and trans people whose perspectives resist the millennia of mythic and folk indoctrination.

In places there are troubling generalizations, and references are often lacking. Schipper is on solid ground when she talks about the ancient world, equatorial Africa or China: the evidence she marshals is convincing and often remarkable. When myths from elsewhere are adduced, she is less sure-footed. Can an Inuit story really refer to “Artemis” producing fish from her nipples, for example? Her overall arguments are familiar from decades of feminist scholarship, but they are strengthened and renewed through the addition of mythological and folktale evidence from outside Europe. ■

Carolyn Larrington