The Perfect Summer: England 1911, Just Before the Storm by Juliet Nicolson

Missing The Point

The Perfect Summer chronicles a glorious English summer a century ago when the world was on the cusp of irrevocable change. Through the tight lens of four months, Juliet Nicolson's rich storytelling gifts rivet us with the sights, colors, and feelings of a bygone era. That summer of 1911 a new king was crowned and the aristocracy was at play, bounding from one house party to the next. But perfection was not for all. Cracks in the social fabric were showing. The country was brought to a standstill by industrial strikes. Temperatures rose steadily to more than 100 degrees; by August deaths from heatstroke were too many for newspapers to report. Drawing on material from intimate and rarely seen sources and narrated through the eyes of a series of exceptional individuals—among them a debutante, a choirboy, a politician, a trade unionist, a butler, and the Queen—the Perfect Summer is a vividly rendered glimpse of the twilight of the Edwardian era.

The British edition came out last year. Washington Post reviewer Yardley actually paints a very good picture. Nicolson is giving us interesting social history, set within a looming historical context of overwhelming magnitude, well written and engaging. There is little new in her book, but it is not material that has been presented this way in a generation or so, so Nicolson is making a real contribution by reviving not only the narrative of the period, but writing it for the present generation of readers. If Yardley's review suggests that this is the sort of thing you will like, then you will like this sort of thing.

Yardley seems to have spectacularly missed the point of the title, though, and spoils his review by repeatedly finding material in the text to slag the use of the word perfect. Even after nearly a century, no British reviewer would have so utterly failed to understand the reference and its meaning. Knowing that context would have helped Yardley to get the point, and
would help any American reader appreciate the book for its qualities and flaws alike.

World War I struck Britain hard at every level of society and deep into the psyche of generations of Britons. Britains more obvious national heroism and apparent unity in WW2, and its having not been occupied, makes that latter war seem more positive and less shattering an event than WW1, even though it truly finished off Britains empire and gutted its prosperity more completely. As a result, WW1 looms more vividly in the British mind and culture than it does in nations damaged much worse by it. France and Germany have had worse since. 1914-18 remains the great dividing line of modern British history. Perhaps the serenely ahistorical young Britons of today no longer remember. Anyone born before about 1980 is still touched by the presence of the Great War in the national narrative.

From very shortly after 1918, nostalgia for the Edwardian era, including the first few years of George V, was very powerful. It was the age before the cataclysm. Working men would say that even the beer tasted better, only half joking. Anyone grown to adulthood before 1914 remained a member of a generation apart from the life experience of the younger. Cultural and popular life was thought forever changed. All that had come before 1914 was remembered in a rosy glow.

All knew that this national myth was true in many ways, and all knew that it was also false in others. For those who didnt know, works such as The Strange Death of Liberal England (1931) recounted all of the social conflicts great and small that had troubled the age before the war, and indeed connected them to the causes of the war.

And yet on some level it was still true, and Britain has never let go of it because of that. The appreciation of both its truth and its irony is palpable in Nicolson's retelling, as it has been so many times before.

The summer of 1914 has often been given the pride of place in this narrative. It too was a sunny summer of both peace and social strife, the very last halcyon days. But it was also too close to the cliff edge.

The summer of 1911 was the last summer of the strict Edwardian Age, the time Edward still lived and the darkness was farther below the horizon. If 1914 is given second place, then 1911 is raised to first.

And so for all its known ironies, that is why 1911 was The Perfect Summer. Nicolson knows both sides of it, and presents them well. Good for her.

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