

The Rise and Fall of Great Powers

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First published in Great Britain in 2014 by Sceptre
An imprint of Hodder & Stoughton

An Hachette UK company

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

Hardback ISBN 978 1 444 75234 2
Trade Paperback ISBN 978 1 444 75235 9
EBook ISBN 978 1 444 75236 6

Typeset in Sabon MT by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Falkirk, Stirlingshire
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder & Stoughton policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable
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Hodder & Stoughton Ltd
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

www.sceptrebooks.co.uk

For my sister Emily

His pencil wavered above the sales ledger, dipping towards the page as his statements increased in vigour, the pencil tip skimming the pad, then pulling up like a stunt plane, only to plunge at moments of emphasis, producing a constellation of increasingly blunt dots around the lone entry for that morning, the sale of one used copy of *Land Snails of Britain* by A. G. Brunt-Coppell (price: three pounds fifty).

‘Take the Revolution,’ he called out from the front of the bookshop. ‘The French see it completely differently than we do. They aren’t taught it was all chaos and Reign of Terror. For them, it was a good thing. And you can’t blame them. Knocking down the Bastille? The Declaration of Rights?’

The thrust of his argument was that, when considering the French people and their rebellious spirit – well, it wasn’t clear *what* Fogg intended to say. He was a man who formed opinions as he spoke them, or perhaps afterwards, requiring him to ramble at length to grasp what he believed. This made speech an act of discovery for him; others did not necessarily share this view.

His voice resounded between bookcases, down the three steps at the rear of the shop, where his employer, Tooty Zylberberg – in tweed blazer, muddy jeans, rubber boots – was trying to read.

‘Hmm,’ she responded, a battered biography of Anne Boleyn open on her lap. She could have asked Fogg to shush, and he would have obliged. But he revelled in pronouncing on grand issues, like the man of consequence he most certainly was not. It endeared Fogg to her, especially since his oration masked considerable self-doubt – whenever she challenged him, he folded

immediately. Poor Fogg. Her sympathy for the man qualified him to chatter, but it made reading impossible.

‘Because, after all, the fellow who invented the guillotine was a man of medicine,’ he continued, restoring books to the shelves, riffling their pages to kick forth the old-paper aroma, which he inhaled before pushing each volume flush into its slot.

Down the three creaking steps he came, passing under the sign HISTORY – NATURE – POETRY – MILITARY – BALLET to a sunken den known as the snug. The bookshop had been a pub before, and the snug was where rain-drenched drinkers once hung their socks by the hearth, now bricked up but still flanked with tongs and bellows, festooned with little green-and-red Welsh flags and Toby jugs on hooks. An oak table contained photographic volumes on the region, while the walls were lined with shelves of poetry and a disintegrating hardcover series of Shakespeare whose red spines had so faded that to distinguish *King Lear* from *Macbeth* required much scrutiny. Either of these venerable characters, dormant on the overburdened shelves, could at any moment have crashed down into the rocking chair where Tooty sat upon a tartan blanket, which came in handy during winters, when the radiators trembled at the task ahead and switched off.

She tucked back her short black hair, points curling around unpierced lobes, a grey pencil tip poking up behind her ear. The paperback she held before her aimed to discourage his interruptions, but behind its cover her cheeks twitched with amusement at the circling Fogg and his palpable exertion at remaining quiet. He strode around the table, hands in his trouser pockets, jingling change. (Coins were always plummeting through holes in those pockets, down his leg and into his shoe. Towards the end of the day, he removed it – sock coming half off – and emptied a small fortune into his palm.) ‘It behooves them to act decisively in Afghanistan,’ he said. ‘It behooves them to.’

She lowered the book and looked at him, which caused Fogg to turn away. At twenty-eight, he was her junior by only a few years, but the gulf could have been twenty-eight again. He remained a youth in their exchanges, deferential yet soon carried

away with fanciful talk. When pontificating, he toyed with a brass magnifying glass, pressed it to his eye socket like a monocle, which produced a monstrous blue eye until he lost courage, lowered the lens, and the eye became small and blinky once more. Whatever the time of day, he appeared as if recently awakened by a fire drill, the hair at the back of his head splayed flat from the pillow, buttons missing midway down his shirt and others off by an eyelet, so that customers endeavoured not to spy the patch of bare chest inadvertently peeping through. His cargo pants were torn at the hip pockets, where he hooked his thumbs while declaiming; the white laces on his leather shoes had greyed; his untucked pin-striped shirt was frayed at the cuffs; and he had the tubular collarbones and articulated ribs of a man who scarfs down a bacon sandwich for lunch, then forgets to eat again until 3 a.m. His careless fashions were not entirely careless, however, but a marker in Caergenog that he was distinct in the village of his birth – an urban sophisticate, no matter how his location, how his entire life, militated against such a role.

‘It behooves them?’ Tooty asked, smiling.

‘What they have to realize,’ he proceeded, ‘is that we don’t know even what the opposition is. My friend’s enemy is not my—’ He leaned down to glimpse the cover of her paperback. ‘She had thirteen fingers.’

‘What?’

‘Anne Boleyn did. Henry VIII’s wife. Had thirteen fingers.’

‘I haven’t got to that part yet. She’s still only at ten.’ Tooty stood, the empty chair rocking, and made for the front of the shop.

It was late spring, but the clouds over Wales bothered little with seasons. Rain had pelted down all morning, preventing her daily walk into the hills, though she had driven out to the priory nonetheless and sat in her car, enjoying the patter on the roof. Was it drizzling still?

‘We took in the Honesty Barrel, didn’t we?’ This was a cask of overstock that passers-by could take (suggested contribution,

one pound per book). The problem was not the honesty – encouragingly, most people did drop coins into the lockbox – but the downpours, which ruined the volumes. So they had become seasoned sky-watchers, appraising the clouds, dragging the barrel out and in.

‘Never put it out in the first place.’

‘Didn’t we? Forgetfulness pays off.’ She stood at the counter, gazing out the front window. The awning dribbled brown raindrops. Looked a bit like. ‘Coffee,’ she said.

‘You want one?’ Fogg was constantly seeking pretexts to fetch cappuccino from the Monna Lisa Café, part of his attempt to court an Estonian barista there. Since Tooly preferred to brew her own tea, Fogg was obliged to consume cup after cup himself. Indeed, Tooly had first discerned his crush on the barista by the frequency with which he needed the toilet, leading her to remark that his cappuccino conspiracy was affecting the correct organ but in the incorrect manner.

‘Back in a minute,’ he said, meaning thirty, and shouldered open the door, its bell tinkling as he plodded up Roberts Road.

She stepped outside herself, standing before the shop and contemplating the church parking lot across the street, her old Fiat 500 alone among the spaces. She stretched noisily, arms out like a waking cat, and gave a little squeak. Two birds fluttered off the church roof, talons out, battling over a nest. What species were those? But the birds wheeled away.

Caergenog – just across the Welsh side of the border with England – was populated by a few hundred souls, a village demarcated for centuries by two pubs, one at the top of Roberts Road and the other at its foot. The high ground belonged to the Butcher’s Hook, named in recognition of the weekly livestock market across the street, while the low ground, opposite the church and roundabout, was occupied by World’s End, a reference to that pub’s location at the outer boundary of the village. World’s End had always been the less popular option (who wanted to carouse with a view of iron crosses in the church graveyard?) and the pub closed for good in the late 1970s. The

building stood empty for years, boarded up and vandalized, until a married couple – retired academics from the University of Bristol – bought the property and converted it into a used bookshop.

Their business plan had been to subsist on spillover custom from the annual literary festival in nearby Hay-on-Wye, and the eleven-day event did funnel trade to World's End. Unfortunately, it had a negligible effect during the remaining three hundred and fifty-four days in the calendar. After a decade, the Mintons sought a buyer for the business, while retaining ownership of the seventeenth-century timber-and-stone property they had restored, including frosted pub windows, wrought-iron serveries, plus inn rooms upstairs. An ad on the village bulletin board – crowded out by the notice of a performance by the Harlech Youth Brass Band – received no responses. Nor did a subsequent insertion in the *Abergavenny Chronicle*. Nor the distracted efforts of a gum-chewing real-estate agent named Ron. Their final attempt involved classifieds in a small-circulation literary publication, one crumpled copy of which found its way onto a train platform in Lisbon in 2009, where Tooly had picked it up. The ad said, 'Bookshop for Sale.'

On Tooly's visit to the place, the Mintons admitted that theirs was a money-losing business and that revenue had declined each year since their arrival. The best that Mr Minton could say was, 'Perhaps it'd be interesting for someone who wants to read a lot. With a bit of youthful energy and such, you might do better than we have, financially speaking. But you won't get rich.' Tooly paid their asking price for the business, twenty-five thousand pounds, which included the stock of ten thousand volumes. They were moving back to Bristol, and agreed that the low monthly rent for the shop would include accommodation upstairs, along with the use of the sputtering purple Fiat.

For Tooly, to suddenly become the owner of thousands of books had been overwhelming. Tall shelves ran down the shop from front to back, the highest-altitude stock unsold, dusty,

resentful. On the walls were framed prints: a nineteenth-century map of the world; a cityscape of Constantinople; an Edward Gorey illustration of a villain clutching a sumptuous volume, having shoved its owner off a cliff. The caption was a quote from John Locke:

Books seem to me to be pestilent things, and infect all that trade in them . . . with something very perverse and brutal. Printers, binders, sellers, and others that make a trade and gain out of them have universally so odd a turn and corruption of mind that they have a way of dealing peculiar to themselves, and not conformed to the good of society and that general fairness which cements mankind.

Against the stacks rested a stepladder that Tooty was always moving to Mountaineering and that Fogg – not recognizing her joke – kept returning to French History. Hidden behind every row was another of as many copies again, a shadow bookshop. On the floor were unsorted boxes, so that one clambered rather than walked through the place. And the damask carpeting was matted with moulted cat hairs, once attached to a long-departed pet named Cleopatra.

To indicate sections, the Mintons had attached cardboard signs to the shelves, the subject in tiny cursive if written by Mr Minton or in looping print with indicative sketches if by Mrs Minton. Most sections were ordinary: TREES, PLANTS, FUNGI; RECIPES & EATING. Others were peculiar (always in Mr Minton's tiny print), including ARTISTS WHO WERE UNPLEASANT TO THEIR SPOUSES; HISTORY, THE DULL BITS; and BOOKS YOU PRETEND TO HAVE READ BUT HAVEN'T.

Tooty had neither read most of her stock nor pretended to. But gradually she settled among all these books, aided by the amiable presence of Fogg, who'd assisted at the shop since his school days. The Mintons had encouraged him to leave the village and study European literature at university. Instead, he kept coming back with cappuccinos.

On this occasion, he had one for Tooty as well, since he'd

forgotten her answer. Settling on his bar stool behind the servery, he mouse-clicked the computer to life, streaming a BBC Radio 4 broadcast whose host strove to panic his audience about the modern world, citing Moore's law and cloud computing and the Turing test and the decline of the brain. 'On any smartphone today,' the broadcaster declared, 'one has access to the entirety of human knowledge.'

'They need a gadget,' Fogg commented, muting the show, 'that records everything that ever happens to you.'

'What do you mean?'

'My point is that . . . what is my point? Yes, here: if these computers are getting so much the better, then soon – it's not beyond thinking of it, to be brutally honest – someone will invent a gadget to store everything that happens in your life. When you're little, you'd get implanted with it, a chip or something. Never have to worry about remembering passwords or arguing over what took place. In a legal dispute, you just pop out your memory chip and show it to the court.'

'And when you get old,' Tooty added, 'you could watch the best bits again.'

'They'll do it in our lifetime. It's a matter of time, to be brutally honest.' Whenever Fogg stated something obvious, such as 'it's a matter of time' (and what wasn't?), he spruced it up with 'to be brutally honest'.

'What happens to the memory chip after you die?' Tooty asked.

'They save it,' he said. 'Future generations could go back and see their great-great-grandparents doing things, and find out what they were like.'

'Except for anyone who'd existed before the invention – people like us. We'd seem the equivalent of prehistoric humans. Don't you think? We'd be wiped away, "swept into the same oblivion with the generations of ants and beavers",' Tooty said, quoting a line whose author escaped her.

Fogg scratched his blondish stubble and looked up at the pressed-tin ceiling, as if generations of ants and beavers were

gazing down, awaiting his rejoinder. 'But our future ancestors could retrieve our memories somehow,' he said. 'People in the future could, sort of, come back and save bits that already happened.'

'You're getting silly now. I need to file you under Sci-Fi. Anyway, if every second of your life was stored, there'd be too much to deal with. Nobody would have time to go over a memory chip containing everything that happened – you'd waste your life checking the past. You'd have to give up and trust your brain to keep the bits worth saving. And we'd be where we are now.' She disappeared down an aisle, wending past boxes of stock. Tooty had such a particular gait, toes touching down first, balls of her feet slowly cushioning the heel to ground. When she stopped, her feet splayed, back straightened, chin down, a surveying gaze that warmed when she smiled at him, eyes igniting first, lips not quite parting. She descended the creaking stairs to the snug, sat in her rocking chair, resumed the Anne Boleyn paperback.

'The thing I wonder,' Fogg said, having trailed after, ledger pencil flicking in his hand, 'is whether horse is an acquired taste or if there's something genetic in liking it.'

She laughed, enjoying this typically Foggian swerve of subject.

'Though I reckon,' he continued, 'that the French only started eating their mares and their colts and their other horse varieties during the Napoleonic Wars, when the Russian campaign fell to pieces, when they were retreating, and it was awful cold, and they had no proper food left. All they had was horses, so they made supper of them. Which is where the French habit of nibbling horses got its start.'

'It was also at that moment that the French began eating frogs, which some of the smaller troops had ridden into battle,' she said. 'How much better life would've been if they'd arrived at the Russian front on marbled beef!'

'You can't actually ride cows,' Fogg said earnestly. 'Can't be done. This boy at my school, Aled, tried it once and it can't be done. As for a battle situation, a cow would be

out of the question. What's important to realize about the French is that . . .'

The background Fogg calmed her. She had no desire to read more about the unfortunate Anne Boleyn. She knew how that story ended.