

DECEMBER 2004 - NO. 158

Bookends

by Kevin Crowe

Andrew Drummond "An Abridged History" Polygon, Edinburgh, 2004, £9.99. (Complete title: "An Abridged History of the Construction of the Railway Line Between Garve, Ullapool and Lochinver; And other pertinent matters; Being the Professional Journal and Regular Chronicle of Alexander Auchmuty Seth Kinimonth".)

Satire can be difficult to write, particularly when the author takes on the persona and style of someone from a previous era. However, Drummond, in his first novel, succeeds brilliantly.

His targets include fictional realism, incompetent publishers, diarists, big business, overblown engineering and building projects, pretensions of people who think themselves important, religious bigotry and sectarianism, and political corruption. Initially, this might seem like a scatter-gun approach doomed to failure. However, Drummond avoids this danger.

Written in diary form, beginning August 1893, and ending February 1898, all the events are described through the eyes of the engineer employed to oversee the railway's construction, Alexander Auchmuty Seth Kinimonth, who at times proves an unreliable chronicler. He is an innocent caught up in events that bewilder him, leaving him floundering for explanations and, unaware of his own naivety, considers himself an experienced man of the world. Whilst Kinimonth is battling midges, rain, wind and snow, and working out how to build across bogs and round mountains, the reader becomes aware of human forces outwith his control and events that he stumbles into, unwittingly playing a central part in their unfolding.

The structure is similar to seventeenth and eighteenth century novels (Defoe's "Robinson Crusoe" and Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" come to mind): the narrative is linear, chronological, and written in the first person by a self-important innocent who blunders into situations he doesn't understand. The author also tips his hat to the grandiose scientific romances of Verne and Wells, in the process satirising the grand schemes of nineteenth century science; schemes that perhaps have been replicated in our own time by the farces surrounding the Millennium Dome and the building of the Scottish Parliament.

Kinimonth (who takes great offence at people mispronouncing his name) arrives in Garve in the

summer of 1893 with little knowledge of the landscape, weather or people, full of optimism and assuring his landlady that her fears about the project are groundless. His intends to write a daily journal on what he sees as a great civilising undertaking. His second entry is six days later, less optimistic, and recounts problems building a railway across bogs; difficulties with workers, who prefer the pub to work; and plagues of midges whom he describes as "...calculated to turn the gentlest human being into a reckless destroyer of natural life..."

As his landlady foresaw, it proves to be a long, tortuous journey, with the Highland weather doing its best to slow progress as summer becomes winter. Kinimonth becomes a sad, isolated and pathetic figure, easy prey for supercilious employers, drunken workers, lonely landladies and itinerant preachers. The journey becomes even longer with diversions to Peebleshire, Edinburgh and Jura. The proposed extension of the line to Lochinver is abandoned after Kinimonth firmly states: "Beyond the western edge of Ullapool is the End of the Earth, and those who wish to make this journey can do so by cart, boat or balloon — but not by train".

Without quite realising what is happening, he becomes involved with an apocalyptic sectarian preacher and his followers who are drunk on both the lord and whisky; watches bemused as they split into smaller factions; falls in love, describing his fantasies in laughingly chaste language; falls foul of the law; and — in one particularly funny sequence — sets fire to himself, to a coach, and ends up in Loch Broom.

The diary is presented as history with a foreword written by one Alfred Marjoribanks, of Dobie & McIntosh publishers, describing how the manuscript came into his possession and was almost destroyed. He describes an occasion when another manuscript was destroyed, concluding: "...although Mr Buchan will probably never rise to fame and we have by my error lost nothing, I have determined never to repeat this oversight". The back contains hilarious fictitious adverts for other publications and advertisements for spoof products and services.

I cannot recommend this book too highly: it is hugely entertaining, very funny; satirical, and intelligently written. It works on several different levels simultaneously, and is one of those rare novels that can be read repeatedly. It ought to be a best seller, and short-listed for major literary awards. Sadly, I suspect it will do neither.

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