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Book Review: Judith Stinton, *Chesil Beach: A Peopled Solitude*

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Book Review: Judith Stinton, *Chesil Beach: A Peopled Solitude*

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‘Chesil Bank is a landscape for which a balance now has to be maintained between conservation and the ever-growing needs of tourism: an industry which tends to kill the thing it loves.’ So Judith Stinton allusively writes towards the end of her readable and information-packed excursion along the Dorset coast from Portland to West Bay. I know it myself from drives with my wife starting from the rocky, windswept bareness around the red-and-white striped lighthouse at Portland Bill through its hard-faced, stone-built villages, down the steep slope to the causeway to the east of Chesil Beach’s end. Yes, I too have played my part in enacting the author’s application of that famous line from Oscar Wilde’s *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* to the source of livelihoods for so many along the Jurassic Coast.

Stinton’s account of communities and lives down her stretch of that shore begins with a sighting of its breathtaking natural phenomenon curving away from the top of the climb to Portland’s table-mountain-like plateau, the sizes of pebbles steadily diminishing all the way to its initiation at Burton Bradstock. Yet, aside from a momentary pause looking back from the point where the land falls towards Abbotsbury, a view represented on the cover by an unattributed painting, her book is unusually free of picturesque evocations that might have conjured glimpses of this endlessly fascinating intersection of physical and human geography.

While she does spend words accounting for the phenomenon of Chesil Beach and its lagoon, whether formed by the dumping of stone from the end of the last Ice Age or listing the sources of pebbles thrown onto the shore by the curving tide around Lyme Bay, bringing stones from

Sidmouth and West Coker in Devon, or taking them from the ballast of wrecked ships, or carrying them all the way from the Caribbean, her main focus of attention is on the lives of people who made a life here. Though fairly equal attention is paid to the different classes of persons who have inhabited the place, from George III to a couple of Cold War spies in the Portland ring, a good deal of space is devoted to who owns which tracts of land, who sold what to whom at the dissolution of the monasteries, or the breakup of the great estates, for instance.

Her extensive reading in local history sources, ones listed in the bibliography as they contribute to each individual chapter, is enlivened by an interest in the literature that has taken its inspiration from these evocative places. This might be the verses of the local poet George Davie, quoted quite extensively throughout, or the plot of *Moonfleet* by John Meade Faulkner, which I read at school and was glad to be reminded of, or *Weymouth Sands* by John Cowper Powys, which also gets a number of passing mentions – and might have deserved more since quite a bit of its action takes place on the western side of the town with its principal villain, the brewery and quarry magnate, living in a house on the way to Chickerell.

Beginning with an account of the Great Outrage, a hurricane that blew along the coast on 22 November 1824, Judith Stinton regales us with smuggling, and wrecking too, notes who owns the cargoes dispersed along the shore after ships are lost, or describes the torpedo factory and the infectious disease hospital at Wyke Regis, the latter designed by Thomas Hardy's one-time employer George Rackstraw Crickmay. She recalls the testing of Barnes Wallis's bouncing bomb on the Fleet lagoon, one of its prototypes preserved at the Swannery, or Anna Pavlova dancing with her corps de ballet amongst its swans. There is the story of how a gypsy-lady called Mary Squires was provided with an alibi in her murder case by people in Abbotsbury, and how the village has maintained its beautiful distinction. She recounts the attempt to set up a writing community by John Middleton Murry and Violet Le Maistre at Bexington-on-Sea, while in the story of Harry Houghton and Ethel Gee, found guilty of spying for the Soviet Union, she dips into the endlessly haunting connections between romantic attachment and crime.

Still, it would have been good to have the solitude indicated in her subtitle evoked a little more, for it is now only too possible on a day out-of-season to walk for miles along Chesil Bank's curve of stones and hardly encounter any people at all. The Cogden Beach area is so isolated that it may be discreetly haunted by nudists, and Stinton might also have

made a little more of the artists that have found inspiration here, not least David Inshaw, who in a series of paintings has managed to catch the monumentality of the precariously crumbling sandstone of East Cliff at West Bay, where the author brings her book to a close.

Yet Judith Stinton is doubtless right to concentrate on the human stories associated with this coastline's scenery and seascapes, the watering holes and settlements along its bank, whether it be to tell us about the spies in Langton Herring, the travellers at Abbotsbury, or Michael Pitt-Rivers buying lots in his own land sale at Burton Bradstock to protect the coastline from speculative building. After all, if you think of it in the terms of that local poet Thomas Hardy's great 'At Castle Boterel', then what the primeval rocks forming Chesil Beach record would also be 'that we two passed', along with anyone else who happens to go there and cares to think in such psycho-geographical terms, and if so, then the tourism that's killing the things it loves is also providing the underlying reason why its attractions have to be conserved, for without them, there would be nothing to remember us passing facts by.

Note on Contributor

Peter Robinson teaches English and creative writing at the University of Reading. His latest book of poems is *Retrieved Attachments*, published by Two Rivers Press in February 2023.