

his best work, notably *Brimstone and Treacle*. Potter took himself seriously as a moralist; that which hindered his work was sinful.

One of the reasons for this self-regard was the essentially religious nature of his work – one of the first major controversies concerned his passion play *Son of Man*. *Brimstone and Treacle* is a serious consideration of temptation and damnation expressed through a possibly demonic visitation. He was fascinated by religious belief – *Where Adam Stood* deals with the biologist Philip Gosse, whose intellectual wriggling over the contradiction between fossil evidence and his rejection of evolution on scriptural grounds fascinated Potter. The fine anger of much of the writing here has as much to do with the struggle between his high seriousness and the day-to-day problems of working in television and film – having started his career as a BBC trainee, Potter was unusually aware of the practicalities of television drama, which is why he was fascinated by stretching them to the limit.

He was, of course, also cripplingly ill much of his life with the skin disease that he afflicted his protagonist with in *The Singing Detective*. At the end of his life, with his wife already dying of cancer, he was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer – some of the most moving writing here is about his decision to concentrate on two last plays, keeping himself going on painkillers and desperately worried that he would die before he finished. Potter may not have been a saint in the ordinary way – there are, from a contemporary perspective, some problematic aspects to his writing about women, for example – but he was a dedicated saint of art.

ROZ KAVENEY

Religion

Chris Maunder

OUR LADY OF THE NATIONS

Apparitions of Mary in 20th-century Catholic Europe

240pp. Oxford University Press. £25.
978 0 19 871838 3

A byway of Catholic Christianity has been the claimed appearances of the Virgin Mary, typically to children or adolescent girls. Some apparitions achieve local interest, others international acclaim; probably most visions go unheeded, are disbelieved, or simply forgotten. But many tourists and pilgrims now visit the most popular recognized sites, such as Lourdes, Fatima and Knock where shrines, churches or grottoes commemorate the original revelations.

In *Our Lady of the Nations*, Chris Maunder concentrates on twentieth-century European apparitions and devotes separate chapters to different national examples. These are interspersed with chapters on themes such as the Catholic Church's judgement on visions, changes in attitudes encouraged by the second Vatican Council, and the roles of women or of children as visionaries.

A recurring theme is that a local church's initial refusal to accept the veracity of the visionary often changes to a reluctant acceptance or tolerance if the story and its site have gained grass-roots support. Whether apparitions were accepted by the church hierarchy or not, sites that attracted most popular support often resulted in permanent memorials. Maunder relates many apparitions that occurred in Germany, Belgium, Ireland, Italy and the Basque

Country, contending that those visions and accompanying pronouncements increased – or possibly gained a more readily receptive audience – when totalitarian political regimes or social unrest were unsettling local believers. That sociological approach is another major avenue explored here. An appeal to traditionalist conservative Catholicism in rural and usually impoverished lands was often exactly the message sought by unsophisticated and troubled believers. One chapter, on the sightings of Mary in Medjugorje from 1981 onwards, concentrates on the history and political turmoil of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Its apparitions are less well known but Maunder, who in 1991 submitted a doctoral thesis on these events, inevitably has much of interest to report about this ecclesiastically unauthorized yet popular site. Another detailed report on apparitions at Ezkioga situates local reactions in the context of contemporary Basque nationalism.

Maunder adopts an objective, scholarly and journalistic approach to the original events and their aftermath. While alert to rationalizing interpretations of claims about the paranormal, he avoids cynicism. The book is engagingly written and has good and full bibliographical details.

J. K. ELLIOTT

Literature

Joseph M. Sullivan, editor and translator

WIGAMUR

376pp. D. S. Brewer. £75.
978 1 84384 418 1

If you have never read an Arthurian romance before, a story of one of King Arthur's knights, start here. You will hear of Wigamur, a prince abducted as a child by a mermaid who raises him lovingly together with her two daughters in a cave under the sea, until a merman kills the mermaids and again abducts Wigamur, gives him a good education and sends him out into the world to find his biological father.

If the monsters are full of contradictions in this story, the humans are even stranger. The first people whom Wigamur encounters after his unusual upbringing are rushing past him to storm a castle and kill all the inhabitants, which he finds troublesome and peculiar: "If those are people, as I would believe, then they are capable of a fine game; however, I think it hurts pretty badly". The first individual knight whom Wigamur meets attacks him, loses, then offers to become his man. "How do you wish to do that, that you want to be my man and I am not a woman?" Wigamur asks, unfamiliar with the rituals of feudalism and non-heterosexual relationships. Despite his wounds, the knight bursts out laughing. After a lacuna (and not an artificial, postmodern one, but a real gap, some pages missing in the manuscripts that survive), Wigamur spots a hollow rock that not only is filled via pipes supplying hot and cold water, but also looks smoky to a man who has had sex that day, and red to a man who has not. Wigamur jumps in. And this is just the first chapter.

Forget the sexist and bloodthirsty medievalism of *Game of Thrones*. Forget the gail romances with their Christian preoccupations. Forget the agony and adultery of a man's love for a lady in the Lancelot stories. Ignore even the notes and introduction to this edition of *Wigamur* that recap traditional scholarship. Ignore the remarks in the rest of this review

that might taint your enjoyment. Delve right into the story, which is now accessible in this sensible edition and fluent if slightly fusty new American translation, in a nicely and carefully produced book.

Wigamur is so far hardly known even among specialists of medieval German literature, for no better reason than that the manuscripts' survival has been patchy and the great white male philologists of the nineteenth century did not like the text's style and classed it as epigonal. When I first tried to read *Wigamur* years ago, I kept thinking I must have misunderstood because the plot twists were so unlikely. But what annoyed the first modern editors will delight postmodern readers: chance encounters, powerful moments, strict poetic language, and spirit of adventure rather than intentionality.

BETTINA BILDHAUER

History

Robert Bothwell

YOUR COUNTRY, MY COUNTRY

A unified history of the United States and Canada

432pp. Oxford University Press. £22.99
(US \$35).
978 0 19 544880 1

Robert Bothwell's ambitious dual history of the United States and Canada throws familiar episodes and figures into new light. There are US politicians who mused about invading British North America, including Thomas Jefferson, William Seward and Ulysses Grant. While considering President Wilson as something close to a poltroon, Teddy Roosevelt, by contrast, praised Canada's role in the First World War; his cousin Franklin would, famously, place a military guarantee on Canada and unveil a plaque at a border crossing saying, "Welcome, friend".

Also interesting is how the same loyalists and their descendants who left the fledgling United States later dismayed the original British settlers of what became Canada with demands for reform, and even independent republican government, that sounded suspiciously like those of the American revolutionaries. By citing such US government projects as the Erie Canal, Bothwell punctures the view that the US was built by rugged individualists while Canada was developed by government. He sketches fine thumbnail portraits, including one of US General Lesley Groves, who arrived in Ottawa in the 1940s to discuss plans for the Manhattan Project with "an ample distrust of foreigners" until he discovered that Minister of Munitions and Supply was also an MIT graduate: "all his doubts were put to rest".

Any history that spans two countries and more than two centuries will have errors and lacunae. The members of the US House of Representatives, for example, sit in front of the Speaker, not in "serried ranks behind" him or her. The great victory at Vimy Ridge (1917) is mentioned, but not the gas attack at Ypres (1915), the destruction of the Newfoundland battalion at Beaumont-Hamel on the first day of the Somme, the Canadian victory at Courcellette or the Hundred Days at the end of the Great War. Curiously, Bothwell, who in the second part of the book is at his best describing the diplomatic *pas de deux* between the two countries, does not mention American interest in the Conscript Crisis of 1917, which was

covered on the front pages of the *New York Times*. Bothwell is correct that with the Fall of France in 1940, Canada's east coast became something of a front line – and then is silent on the U-boat attacks off the coast and in the St Lawrence River in 1942 and 1944, though he finds room to sketch Laurence Olivier's role in *The 49th Parallel*, which is about a U-boat landing in Canada. The image of staid civil servants dancing around the table when they heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor (because it would bring America into the war) would seem very different if Bothwell had noted that within hours 2,000 Canadian troops in Hong Kong would be under attack and that by Christmas Day some 1,800 Canadians and thousands more British troops would start three-and-a-half years in the hell of Japanese POW camps.

NATHAN M. GREENFIELD

Crime Fiction

Gianrico Carofiglio

A FINE LINE

Translated by Howard Curtis
286pp. Bitter Lemon Press. Paperback, £8.99.
978 1 90852 461 4

Guido Guerrieri is a thoughtful man who enjoys fine cuisine, as investigators in today's Italian crime novels tend to do, but as a defence lawyer in Puglia, one of the regions of Southern Italy polluted by organized crime, he has one of the most dangerous beats in Europe. His problem in this case is not to establish who done it, nor even exactly why they did it, but why he himself does what he does. What are the rights of brutal criminals, especially when they are known to be guilty? What are the limits that separate the right to defence from the demands of justice? It is an issue to challenge Plato.

The problem takes on concrete form when Guerrieri is contacted by an Appeal Court Judge, Pierluigi Larocca, whom he had known in his university days when he was regarded as brilliant and guaranteed to go far. The obstacle to being his appointed Chief Justice is an accusation, seemingly taken seriously by the prosecution service, that Larocca had accepted bribes to acquit previously convicted mafiosi. Guerrieri has to think twice before taking on the brief, for he is choosy about the clients he will defend.

While initially believing Larocca to be innocent, he worries in the abstract over the principles which should apply to his defence. Larocca might be able to help here, since he is due to deliver a lecture on "Ethics and Roles in the Criminal Trial Procedure". Gianrico Carofiglio has written accessible but probing essays on questions of evidence, and his dialogue sparkles with discussions of ethics and legality.

The novel, elegantly and fluently translated by Howard Curtis is, unlike much crime fiction, an inner drama of conscience, focusing on the dilemma outlined in the lecture by Larocca. It traverses that murky territory which is the domain of writers like Graham Greene or François Mauriac. Guerrieri's confidants are not priests or spiritual directors but a police friend who is too indiscreet, or the colourful, vividly drawn Annapaola Doria, a journalist turned detective, but no respecter of the niceties of legal procedure. Carofiglio delves with subtlety and insight into delicate psychological and moral questions, while also telling a gripping story.

JOSEPH FARRELL