

## Flibbertigibbets

Reviewed by Michael Moynihan

ON JULY 26, 1924, *THE Daily Mail* reported that an insouciant gang of youths had been spotted, extravagantly costumed, trundling through London on an evening treasure hunt. The actress Tallulah Bankhead had been in attendance, as well as various less famous, but no less well-heeled, members of London's smart set. The carefree party culture of England's bourgeoisie predated this event, of course, but the *Mail* made clear that its reporter had just witnessed the debut of the "Bright Young People." Those who think America's rapacious celebrity culture—heirs and heiresses whose only discernable talent is the effortless credit card swipe—is unique in its excess and vapidness are advised to read British writer D. J. Taylor's *Bright Young People*, an engrossing social history of the blue bloods, bohos, and bobos who constituted the "lost generation" of post-World War I England.

Readers familiar with Evelyn Waugh's early novels—notably *Vile Bodies* (1930), the *ur-text* of Bright Young culture—will find the milieu that Taylor describes familiar. Waugh shifted between participant and observer of the Bright Young parties, and had a keen eye for the minutiae of upper-class society—the generation-specific neologisms, the absurdly posh names. Not only was this cultural hothouse the *mise en scène* for writers such as Waugh and gadabout journalist Tom Driberg, but, as Taylor writes, the Bright Young circle also midwived the careers of "half a dozen leading figures in ballet, photography, and surrealist painting."

In many respects, Taylor writes, the Bright Young People were "a symptom of the continuing reaction against the stuffiness of prewar social arrangements." The children of the Brit-

### BRIGHT YOUNG PEOPLE:

The Lost Generation of London's Jazz Age.

By D. J. Taylor.  
*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*. 384 pp. \$27

ish bourgeoisie, having just watched a generation of young men slaughtered at the Somme, rapidly took to indulging in drug- and alcohol-fueled parties, which had the side effect of blurring traditional class boundaries. The "doomed youth," too young to have fought in the Great War but unconscious beneficiaries of the melancholic poetry and literature it produced, banded together in bacchanalian revelry. "England," Taylor writes, "was turning more democratic."

It was an age when parties had names and themes, at which the assembled mugged for the cameras and drowned themselves in drink. Widely publicized events such as the White Party are clear predecessors of Truman Capote's 1966 Black and White Ball, while the infamous Bruno Hat exhibition, a collection of Modernist paintings by a fictitious artist, doubtless influenced Scottish novelist William Boyd's "discovery" of the "artist" Nat Tate in a 1998 biography, later revealed as a hoax. It was a Bright Young hobby—the hopelessly pretentious puncturing of pretension.

But the story is also deeply tragic, as evidenced by the fate of party fixture Elizabeth Ponsonby, the socialite daughter of Labor Party member of Parliament Arthur Ponsonby. Using hitherto unpublished family diaries, Taylor provides a running narrative of the young woman's aimlessness and ultimately fatal decline into substance abuse. Her father sighed that she possessed "all the crudest faults of the modern girl," and lamented that his daughter's "preference for disreputable people is . . . incorrigible." She was dead from alcoholism before she reached 40.

The political and economic crises of the 1930s pushed some partygoers toward more serious pursuits. The writer Beverley Nichols, a circuit regular in the 1920s, declared that he "could not go on much longer, drinking cocktails and talking nonsense while the clouds were gathering over Europe," and became a pacifist. Diana Mitford adored the pageantry of the 1920s party culture, but soon cuckolded

her husband and embraced the political pageantry of fascism. Betrayed by his first wife, Evelyn Waugh escaped the scene that had provided him fame, converted to Catholicism, and remarried.

It is difficult to divine just what the collapse of the movement presaged. A rather uninteresting answer is that the participants' inexorable slide toward adulthood was as much responsible for the end of Bright Young culture as anything. And as Taylor notes, media scrutiny made bohemian culture seem labored and inauthentic, the movement transmogrified "from an original style to a mass-market imitation of it," and the label Bright Young Person came to apply to "all the young in Britain who did anything unusual at all." Nevertheless, the alternative youth culture of the Bright Young Things defined an epoch in England—while helping to redefine the British class system.

MICHAEL MOYNIHAN is a senior editor of *Reason* magazine.

## HISTORY

### Preserved in Time

Reviewed by Andrew Curry

ON A SUMMER DAY 1,930 years ago, Italy's Mount Vesuvius erupted, overwhelming the town of Pompeii and its inhabitants within minutes in a flood of superheated gas and volcanic ash. Since the 1700s, when the town's excavation began, generations of archaeologists and historians have regarded the site as an invaluable snapshot of life in a typical Roman city: Pompeii, in the popular imagination, is a city "frozen in time."

But is it really? The truth, as University of Cambridge classics professor Mary Beard emphasizes in *The Fires of Vesuvius*, is quite different. Pompeii, near modern-day Naples, was apparently a midsize port and popular

vacation destination for wealthy Romans. Yet far from a snapshot of daily Roman life, what archaeologists unearthed was a town under extreme duress. The numbers tell the tale:

Only 1,100 bodies have been found in the ruins, while estimates for the town's population range from 6,400 up to 30,000. In Pompeii's final hours, its populace fled, carrying their valuables. The ghoulish plaster casts of the dead for which the site is famous capture not unsuspecting townspeople, but the final moments of an unlucky few who waited too long to clear out. And some of the ruins we see today may have been ruins back then too: At the time of the eruption, Pompeii was still rebuilding after a severe earthquake that had devastated the area 17 years earlier.

In a survey that encompasses Pompeians' religion, diet, and even traffic patterns, Beard sets out to correct many of the misimpressions that countless guidebooks—and guides—have foisted on tourists. The town's ruins became a mandatory stop on the Grand Tour of 18th- and 19th-century Europeans. Visitors were captivated by the idea of witnessing a moment in time—and by the twisted forms of ancient Romans. Writers from Percy Bysshe Shelley to Edward Bulwer-Lytton penned Pompeii-inspired reflections on the fragility of life and love. The town's residences were given romantic names such as the House of the Tragic Poet, the House of the Golden Bracelet, and the House of the Prince of Naples by excavators, visitors, and sponsors. More than two centuries of tourism and excavation have left a legacy of assumptions that cloud our understanding of the site—and, since Pompeii contains some of the best evidence about daily life in the Roman world, about Rome itself.

*The Fires of Vesuvius* lays out decades of specialist debate in clear, reader-friendly prose. To present the scholarship as smoothly as possible, Beard has gathered her sources in an appendix, often alluding to them in the main text with frustratingly vague phrases

#### THE FIRES OF VESUVIUS: Pompeii Lost and Found.

By Mary Beard.  
Harvard Univ. Press.  
304 pp. \$26.95