

Financial Times

August 12, 2011 6:23 pm

Nikolaus Pevsner

Review by AN Wilson

Susie Harries' biography of the German historian offers a hilarious view of 20th-century England

This is a tremendous book about a subject that engages us all. On one level, it is simply a biography of the architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, who came to England from Germany as a refugee in 1933 and wrote the magisterial Buildings of England series for Penguin. However, it is much more than the story of one man.

As befits the study of one of our greatest cultural historians, it is also a story of why architecture matters and, at a deeper level, how Europeans evolved the particular living spaces and political systems we see today.

Susie Harries' Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life is, among other things, a hilarious picture of England seen through the gold pince-nez of this tall, fastidious German academic. Two vignettes from this book stand out. One occurred at the end of one of Pevsner's field trips in Norwich, with students from Birkbeck College and the Courtauld Institute. They had experienced one of the professor's exhaustive tours of every architectural feature of the place. ("He would go through Lincoln Cathedral capital by bloody capital," complained one of his students.) They would retire at the end of such trips to a cheap café. In Norwich, the menu advertised foot-long frankfurters. Everyone was tired, tempers a little frayed. When his dish arrived, Pevsner produced a tape measure. "It was only 11 inches," recalled John Newman, who collaborated on the Kent volume of The Buildings of England, "so this restored his humour". I like this story because, like many other moments in Harries's book, it reveals Pevsner's humour. Yes, he took architecture, art, history and work extremely seriously but he was not simply the pedant of caricature.

The other vignette occurred in his very early days in Britain when he was on one of his many walking tours. From Wales, he wrote to his wife Lola, "No signposts, because nobody walks here. In 30 years' time it will be different, of course."

His Buildings of England series was a part of that optimistic, post-Festival of Britain rediscovery of the archipelago and its heritage. For those of us who also like exploring every village, and every bit of urban sprawl, every warehouse, cathedral

and railway station, it has been impossible to contemplate doing so without Pevsner in our pocket. He, therefore, educated an entire generation to see England anew. Like other refugees, his view could be sentimental, as in his charming Reith lectures, “The Englishness of English Art”. He had no eye for nastiness, English or German, so the Hogarthian, Rowlandson side of England passed him by. The same myopia allowed him, because Pevsner himself was honestly nationalist and socialist, to hope for the best when Hitler came to power.

Pevsner was, as he said himself, “an inveterate Puritan and thirties man”. Had he not been of purely Jewish extraction in Hitler’s Europe, this brilliant young Leipzig art student would have pursued his doctoral thesis on the Italian mannerists and become, probably, one of the most solid in a long line of German art historians. But history disrupted all that. Although he admired many aspects of the Nazi regime (the Night of the Long Knives drew the approving comment, “My first reaction was admiration for the incredibly direct and rather brave intervention of Hitler himself”), there was obviously no prospect of a career in Germany – even though Pevsner had been converted from Judaism to lukewarm Lutheranism. (You *can* hold firm to lukewarm convictions.)

There followed exile, an apparently dud job cataloguing the achievements of British design, a growing obsession with architecture and its problems, and then – yet another piece of the story that makes one reach for the word providential – his friendship with Allen Lane, the founder of Penguin. The consequence was that bestselling Pelican book, *The Outline of European Architecture*, and *The Buildings of England*. For my generation (born 1950), *The Outline* was *the* book – not only on architecture but on Europe too. He was never, as his detractors claimed, an unthinking advocate of all modern buildings or a detractor of Victorian architecture at its best. He deplored the brutalism of the 1960s as much as the monstrous ugliness of Teulon’s Victorian churches. William Morris was, for him, the greatest man of the 19th century.

He resisted the destruction of English cities quite as fiercely as John Betjeman. And it was touching to read here that Betjeman, who was endlessly malicious about Pevsner, remained a favourite poet of both the professor and his wife Lola. Harries surely hits the nail on the head – in defining what made the two men such chalk and cheese – by saying that no one was less camp than Pevsner.

Inevitably, in a book about a workaholic who was tirelessly public-spirited, there will be sentences such as: “Meanwhile in 1961 another body was set up to implement the recommendations of the Coldstream Committee.” But this immense book is a rattling good read and it is, above all, fair. Pevsner’s faults as a husband are not glossed over

(crushes, not full adultery) and it is surely to the credit of Pevsner that all three children chose, when they had themselves married, to live in the same or adjoining streets. Harries is especially good to Pevsner's adversaries. She gives them their say but, in the end, her hero emerges, I think, as the greater man.

AN Wilson's 'The Elizabethans' is published next month by Hutchinson

Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life, by Susie Harries, *Chatto & Windus, RRP£30, 834 pages*