



Pevsner: a biographer's dream

## Bringer of riches

Alexandra Harris

**Nikolaus Pevsner: the Life**  
Susie Harries

Chatto & Windus, 928pp, £30

A year in to her work on this magnificent biography of the art critic and architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner, Susie Harries was presented with a metal trunk containing hundreds of letters. Pevsner had stowed them away, labelling them with a warning sign: "MR THIEF. This is not locked. It contains nothing of value." Rarely has a "note on sources" been so mesmerising. This box, which might have disappointed a burglar, was a biographer's dream.

Pevsner was a phenomenal documenter of life both personal and professional. At the age of 13 he started a diary in the third person, exploring every nuance in the life of "P"; many ruled blue notebooks later, at 80, he was still going. These private journals are rivalled in scope and detail only by his published books, from his first work in English, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936), to the magnum opus that dominated his later life, the 46 volumes of *The Buildings of England*.

Appropriately, Harries's biography was conceived on a Pevsnerian scale. The reader setting off through these 900-plus pages may feel tired at the mere prospect, and wonder whether Pevsner matters quite this much. Such doubts don't last long. This is a biographical masterpiece that shows how the life of one man can become a prism through which can be read the stories of both England and Germany in the 20th century.

Pevsner, who was born in 1902, grew up in Leipzig, and was the second son of cultivated Jewish parents whose comfortable way of life

embarrassed him. The serious-minded boy regarded his mother's post-concert crab supper parties with dismay. Things got better when, still a teenager, he mapped out a career for himself as "a professor of art history, in a small house of my own, with the lady wife and a child, teaching, going about my business, maybe now and again writing – a German idyll".

Though he made much of this dream come true, it was not to be a German idyll. After fighting to secure an academic post, no sooner was he installed at the University of Göttingen than he was "encouraged to resign" from professional life. As the Nazis took hold of Pevsner's beloved country, he was forced to rebuild his life elsewhere. It is striking to think that he might easily have moved to Italy, rather than England. (Would the Italians be driving around now with *The Buildings of Umbria* in the glove compartment?) He might also have gone to Australia: only narrowly did he avoid transportation as an alien internee.

Pevsner had a long struggle to establish himself in a country suspicious of his accent and his methods. To him, English art history looked more like occupational therapy for the upper classes than the scholarly discipline he had known in Germany; the modernism he loved in his homeland was unappreciated here. He was a lonely figure, eating sandwiches from a paper bag in foggy Regent's Park.

Thankfully, Pevsner had the stamina to persist. In middle age he started to be recognised, and by the late 1950s he was a national institution, much loved as a teacher at Birkbeck, the Courtauld Institute and at Cambridge, and known to thousands as a public educator, sharing his great appetite for art and his vision of the built environment.

Harries carefully tells the story of a difficult but devoted marriage. Pevsner warned Lola when they got engaged that she must not be jealous of his work. She could hardly help it. Though the relationship was tested by passing sexual infatuations, architectural history was the real third party in the marriage. Pevsner proposed in a rose garden: out walking with his Penguin publisher, Allen Lane, he suggested an inventory of English buildings. And that was that; the county-by-county *Buildings of England* series was under way.

The story of its making is astonishing. Pevsner was the sole author of 32 of the volumes and delegated further work to trusted collaborators only when he realised that he might not live to complete the series. This vast undertaking went on alongside his work as a lecturer, editor of the *Pelican History of Art*, chair of the Victorian Society, international speaker, campaigner and committee member. Each Easter and September, squeezing all of England into the university vacations, he would head off to the next county on his list, often with Lola at the wheel of their ever-unreliable cars.

Eight-hour days spent examining buildings, notebook in hand, were followed by five-hour evenings writing up the findings in whatever guest house could be found. There was no time for leisure or distraction: "a lunch invitation could spell disaster for the schedule". Unmoved by the upper classes, Pevsner left behind him trails of perturbed homeowners, bemused that he had taken only 20 minutes to admire their treasured house, and hadn't even asked about their family history.

Pevsner's style had its critics. John Betjeman thought his relentlessly factual inventories missed out the important things about architecture – atmosphere, people, opinions. Yet he was not nearly so ascetic as the reputation that precedes him. With baffled, self-effacing good humour, he examined American leisurewear or measured a frankfurter, or noted the "excessively cross-legged knight" on a tomb.

Pevsner left at least one thief disappointed: his slides for a lecture tour were stored in a Bendicks Bittermints box that went missing one night and was later found in a flower bed. Presumably the contents were less appetising than someone had hoped. Few will feel the same about Harries's biography. She writes about Pevsner as "a bringer of riches", and her book is of infinite value. ●

Alexandra Harris is the author of *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (Thames & Hudson, £19.95)

## Marshal law

Mark Bostridge

**The Chief: Douglas Haig and the British Army**  
Gary Sheffield

Aurum Press, 400pp, £25

Field Marshal Sir Douglas Haig, commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force between 1915 and 1918, is etched on to the popular imagination as the most villainous of the generals of the First World War. One scene from the 1989 series of the television comedy *Blackadder*, in which the Haig character brushes toy soldiers off a model battlefield and sweeps them up in a dustpan, sums up the popular overall impression of an incompetent "donkey", consigning the soldiers to bloody and unnecessary slaughter.

Yet in the decade following the 1918 armistice and leading up to his sudden death in 1928, Haig was one of the most feted figures in Britain. During the war, "Duggy", as he was known, had been too remote a figure to inspire much affection. But as a result of his dedicated