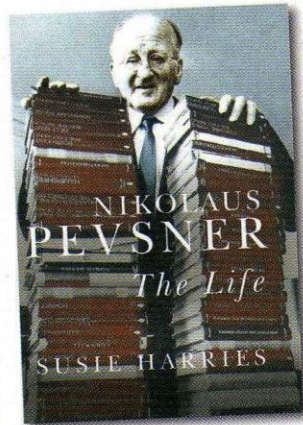


that grief-stricken moment', she writes, 'the bright patterns of this constellation had been branded onto his memory.' There is only one problem here. When Palmer's son died, it was daylight. There is no way that Palmer could have seen any stars in the sky at that 'grief-stricken moment'. The text is peppered with minor errors. To take a handful: she misdates his first exhibit at the Royal Academy and the earliest record of his presence in Shoreham, muddles up his grandfathers and substantially overestimates the extent of his inheritance. Irritating though such slips are, they do not undermine the value that the book will have for introducing Palmer to a new audience and helping to enhance his reputation.

William Vaughan is an Art Fund Trustee and an expert on art of the Romantic era.

Susie Harries
Nikolaus Pevsner:
The Life
Chatto & Windus,
2011, £30

On the dustjacket of this magnificent, definitive biography is the famous photograph of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner taken in 1974 to celebrate the publication of *Staffordshire*, the 46th and final volume of his most enduring monument, *The Buildings of England*. The books form two wobbly-looking towers, framing Pevsner's bespectacled face. His smile may be hesitant, but it is also proud: he is after all standing next to the culmination of nearly 30 years' work. That achievement placed him among the greatest art historians of the 20th century, but how can a life almost entirely devoted to scholarship have produced enough material for a blockbuster biography, over 900 pages long?



The answer is that in Susie Harries's hands, Pevsner's story unlocks a vitally important chapter in 20th-century history. We are used to the idea that Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany greatly enriched Britain and America, but the experience of what it was like to be uprooted from a much-loved native culture – Pevsner was an assimilated Jew from Leipzig who converted to Lutheranism – has rarely been depicted in such rich and moving detail. Susie Harries has had unique access to Pevsner's private papers, and she uses them wonderfully well to depict his upbringing in Weimar Germany, his quickly dissipated feeling that there might be something positive in the rise of Hitler, and his determined response to the challenge of making a life in England.

Although Pevsner became an institution in his adopted country, he was not always welcomed. Many people – notably John Betje-

man – distrusted his insistence on scholarship and contempt for parochialism, attitudes they thought were humourless and un-English. In addition, Pevsner's belief that Modernism was the only acceptable form of contemporary architecture because it embodied the *Zeitgeist*, or spirit of the age, came under fierce attack as the consensus about the Modern Movement collapsed in the 1970s. The conservative romanticism that was such

an important element in mid-20th-century English culture found Pevsner hard to take. That is one of the reasons why his biography is so compelling: here is a life that explains a great deal about what Englishness was in the 20th century and what it became, told with warmth, lucidity and wit.

Michael Hall's most recent book is The Victorian Country House: From the Archives of Country Life.