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Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life, By Susie Harries

From the outside looking in: the man who opened a window on Englishness

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Pevsner: An early sufferer of what Jeremy Paxman has called 'imposter syndrome'



To say a building is "mentioned in Pevsner" is no less a wow factor than a listing in the Domesday Book.

The Buildings of England series, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's 46 county guidebooks – of which he was the sole author of 32 – remains the definitive inventory of our architectural heritage.

It's quite a legacy, but as Susie Harries shows in a biography almost as comprehensive as the BofE itself, (she took 20 years; he wrote Cornwall in 1951 and ended with Staffordshire in 1974) Pevsner remained niggled by self-doubt throughout his life.

As a teenager, he described himself as "basically superficial and second-rate". Looking back on his work, he would wryly observe that whenever he saw his name in print, it would usually be preceded by the word "not", as in "19th century plasterwork – not, as Pevsner assumed, Elizabethan".

It would be easy to attribute this self-doubt to his perpetual outsider status. Born to Russian Jewish parents in Leipzig, he longed to be assimilated, only to experience life as an alien all over again on coming to England as a German. Harries has had access to Pevsner's Heftchen, his secret diaries written from the age of 14, which show him to have been his own harshest critic, an early sufferer of what Jeremy Paxman has called "imposter syndrome".

Pevsner made up for what he perceived to be his own lack of innate talent through hard graft. Described by one contemporary as a "tight-lipped eye-glassed professor", his diaries reveal that he was also capable of passion, as his intense love for his wife Lola reveals. He loved England and Englishness, but would apply a rigorous, Germanic approach to his appreciation of its art and architecture. Famously, this annoyed John Betjeman, and Harries dedicates a chapter to the supposed rivalry with Betjeman, which actually shows Pevsner at his most likeable. Harries shows how the feud was largely of Betjeman's creation: Pevsner was aware that he was disliked by him, but continued to praise his work.

The story of how Pevsner got the commission for BofE is typical of the haphazard English manner that his own rigorous work ethic so starkly contrasts. Strolling in the summer of 1945 with the publisher Allen Lane in the grounds of Lane's country home, Pevsner was asked what he would publish in a fantasy world. Off the top of his head he named two ludicrously ambitious projects: a survey of European art in "20 or 25 volumes", and an inventory of British buildings equivalent to what Georg Dehio had already done for Germany. Lane commissioned them both.

By the time Pevsner's contract with Penguin had been finalised, he had agreed to complete four separate series over the next decade. The money was not good, and he would spend the next 20 years criss-crossing England in a succession of unreliable old cars, writing up his notes every evening in some unglamorous cheap hotel.

The result was imperfect. Pevsner's ideal was that every schoolboy would carry a copy of his own county in his pocket. But few volumes are genuinely pocket-sized, and Pevsner's dry technical analysis rendered the books somewhat joyless. He was aware of his occasional mistakes and inconsistencies, and approvingly quoted Walt Whitman to describe himself: "Do I contradict myself? Very well then, I contradict myself. I am large. I contain multitudes." It's been worth the 20 year wait for Harries to bring them all to light.