

journey life
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Pevsner revealed

Jonathan Meades is enthralled by a skilful and frequently amusing biography of an eternally contradictory man

Biography

Nikolaus Pevsner: The Life

Susie Harries (Chatto & Windus, £30, *£24)

NIKOLAUS PEVSNER was a German nationalist. At the age of 19, he converted from Judaism to Lutheranism in the belief that to do so might make him more German—whatever that meant—might gain him preferment as a teacher and might rid him of his anti-semitism. It didn't. A year after Hitler's accession to power, he was forced to relinquish academe in Göttingen for trade in Birmingham. Yet he remained drawn to certain tenets of Nazism and possessed

a snobbish distaste for his fellow refugees. He was a monogamist whose quasi-adolescent and apparently unrequited crushes perennially threatened his marriage. He was a Modernist who disliked what was actually modern, a progressive who abhorred the results of progress and whose notions of national characteristics in art were, like Joseph Goebbels', rooted in Germany's 19th century; they derived specifically from Georg Dehio. His antipathies beyond that towards Orthodox Jewry were legion: Weimar art, France, the Treaty of Versailles, gentlemen scholars, S. S. Teulon and F. T. Pilkington, Oxford society, Brutalism, art for

art's sake and, often, himself.

From this tangle of contradictions, Susie Harries has fashioned an outstandingly good biography. It is thorough, detached, humane and exceptionally skilful in its depiction (or creation) of a protagonist who is constantly mutating. The antipathetic Saxon prig of the early chapters gradually evolves into husband, father, expatriate, internee, rubble-shoveller, journalist, wit, editor, polemicist, historian, broadcaster and much else besides. By the end, he has turned into an often amused and often amusing titan of architectural taxonomy: success, as John Mortimer once pointed out, makes people nicer.

Further—and this is not perhaps what is to be expected from a scholarly life of a peerless scholar—the book is also extremely funny, laugh-out-loud funny. As Colin MacInnes was the first to observe, Pevsner was a writer of great originality and supremely understated style. Mrs Harries is as poker-faced as her subject, who called greasy-spoon cafes 'quick and nasties'. She tells us that he 'had been briefed on the theory and practice of masturbation by a solemn and well-meaning schoolfriend' (that *theory* is priceless) and describes Geoffrey Grigson as 'never needlessly polite'. When they set out to explore South Lancashire for the 'Buildings of England' (BoE) series, Edward Hubbard's mother provided Pevsner and her son with "Perfect Packets" for their lunches—sandwiches carefully wrapped for each day, the dates decided by the keeping properties of the contents: egg, cheese,

sandwich spread and paste'.

A footnote on the page that contains that horribly evocative period menu informs us that Pevsner and Hubbard stayed in the same Bolton hotel as Jayne Mansfield, 'who electrified the dining room with her imposing bosom'. (This begs the question what was Jayne Mansfield doing in Bolton?)

Mrs Harries's descriptions of the journeys undertaken for the BoE are a hoot, as enchanting in their way as the magnificent opus those journeys produced: if only Arthur Lowe were alive to play him in the film of the book. She also recounts the sheer slog and his unflagging industry: this was as much a physical as it was an intellectual exercise, stretching over quarter of a century. The BoE's former bias towards sacred architecture is at least partially explained by the delicious sentence: 'He was not as enamoured of the aristocracy as some other historians



A mass of contradictions, but always fascinating: Nikolaus Pevsner

of the great country houses.'

The many incidental pleasures of this wonderfully rich and satisfying confection, which is rightly subtitled 'The Life' (not, the reader should note, a 'critical biography'), include splendid portraits of mid-century Hampstead Bohemia

when, as Muriel Spark had it, 'all the nice people were poor', of a Birmingham that recalls Walter Allen's, of dandiacal bitches such as Osbert Lancaster and Douglas Cooper, and of architectural-historical sectarian spats, which were all handbags at dawn. ➤