

THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed



NO.89 SPRING 2026

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'A Consummate Professional'



NO.89 SPRING 2026

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Cover illustration: Andrew Gifford, *Oak in Height of Spring, Wistman's Wood, Dartmoor*,
oil on canvas, 190 x 200cm

Andrew Gifford is recognized for his innovative paintings and light installations based on the landscape. His work has been widely exhibited in the UK, New York, Hong Kong, Singapore and Houston and is included in the collections of the New Art Gallery in Walsall, Chatsworth

House and private collections in Europe, the USA and Asia. In the spring of 2024, he embarked on a long-standing project to paint the thin strip of Atlantic rainforest that runs from Cornwall to Scotland. Working on location in the woods, his studies set out to capture the dense, lush flora of these precious pockets of woodland. The resulting large-scale canvases and studies were exhibited in London in November 2025. For more of his work visit the John Martin Gallery, London, at www.jmlondon.com.

*Back cover fox by Ella Balaam, design by Octavius Murray, layout by Andrew Evans,
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From the Editors

As we were sitting round the kitchen table recently, chewing over general thoughts about *SF* and plans for the year ahead, it struck us that some of our most interesting and original pieces have come to us via our Writers' Competitions. One of our aims, when we started *Slightly Foxed*, was to find contributors from as wide a range of backgrounds as possible rather than depending on professional journalists and published writers to fill the magazine. This policy has led us in so many interesting directions and proved that you don't have to be a 'writer' to write well. It's also become obvious from the many letters

and emails we receive from all over the world that our subscribers are a fascinating bunch, well able to hold their own when it comes to putting words together.

So we're delighted to announce another Slightly Foxed Writers' Competition, which is open to readers of all ages. What we're looking for is a piece of not more than 1,500 words on a book of your choice, written in characteristic *SF* style – which is to say a piece that reflects your own experience of the book and why you have chosen it, and makes other people want to read it too. The

winner will receive £300 and the piece will be published in *Slightly Foxed*, while the runner-up will appear on our website. It's a good idea to consult our online index to make sure we haven't already featured the book you've chosen. Entries should reach us by 1 September 2026



Howard Phipps, *Primroses*

so you have all summer to let the creative juices flow. For more information see our website www.foxedquarterly.com or phone us at the office.

Our spring Slightly Foxed Edition *The Making of Me* by the children's author Robert Westall (see p.14) is something very special. Known particularly for his prizewinning first novel *The Machine-Gunners*, Westall grew up in working-class Tyneside during the 1930s and '40s, where his father was a foreman fitter at the local gasworks. He was a modest man who never wrote a memoir, but he left behind some autobiographical sketches that take him from birth through school to the publication of his first book, and these were brilliantly woven together after his death into *The Making of Me* by his partner Lindy McKinnel. Its striking honesty and warmth help to explain why Westall's children's books are still read and admired today.

And finally, congratulations to Fiona Cox in the Lake District, the winner of our 17th annual crossword competition, who receives a free annual subscription. For those still puzzling over that last exasperating clue, you'll find the answers on p. 31.

GAIL PIRKIS & HAZEL WOOD

A Consummate Professional

SUE GEE

I came to Cecil Beaton through Roy Strong, and Strong's vastly entertaining diaries owe much to Cecil Beaton. In 1967, five months after he was appointed the youngest ever Director of the National Portrait Gallery, Strong made 'juvenile jottings' on some of the remarkable people he was meeting. The jottings became, a year later, something much more substantial. 'Beaton's diaries were in the process of being published at the time,' Strong wrote, 'and I was hypnotized by his ability to conjure up characters or a scene. His diaries were not daily, but occasional, made up of set pieces describing particular events or people . . . They were concerned, too, with a social panorama . . . It was that type of diary that I resolved to keep.'

Cecil Beaton kept diaries all his life. Here he is in 1972 on the funeral of the Duke of Windsor, formerly Edward VIII:

The vaulted chapel rather beautiful, and the music good. Then a clank as the trumpeters arrived. Then the louder clank, clank, clank could be heard as the procession started with the governor of Windsor Castle and the Military Knights in their scarlet uniforms, medals clinking, all marching with a loud stamp-shuffle. The slowness and the muffled metal sound were very impressive, and the fact that these Knights were all aged with

The Unexpurgated Beaton (2003) and *Beaton in the Sixties: More Unexpurgated Diaries* (2004), both edited by Hugo Vickers, are out of print, but we can obtain copies.

Hugo Vickers's biography, *Cecil Beaton: The Authorized Biography* (1985), is published by Hodder & Stoughton: Pb • 832pp • £16.99 • ISBN 9781529316247.

clear pink skins made it all quite remarkable . . . Wonderful as the service was, I was not moved by the death of this man who for less than a year had been our King.

He does indeed do great occasions so well, but many of the diary entries are far more personal. They began when he went up to Cambridge in 1922 – ‘What a horror I was then!’ he wrote decades later – and in three years of theatricals, dressing up, extravagant parties and encounters with extraordinary individuals he filled thirty-eight notebooks. He had gone up to read History, wrote ‘pages and pages of rot’ in his Finals, and came down without a degree, but he knew now what he wanted from life, and it wasn’t the solid middle-class Hampstead whence he came.

Already he was a photographer, already sending pictures of his mother and sisters, dressed up for parties and coming-out balls, to the *Sketch* and *Tatler* – no one could have tried harder



to climb Society’s greasy pole, and with an eventual commission from American *Vogue* he was on his way. In his diary for 1955 he recalls being told by a knight of the realm: ‘I hear of you everywhere, Cecil, you are getting so famous.’ ‘I hope I am,’ Beaton retorted. ‘I’ve worked hard enough for the damn thing.’

He was a photographer of everyone from William Walton to Gilbert & George, via countless beauties and the Queen. He was costume and theatre designer, painter, illustrator and cartoonist – some brilliant caricatures adorned *Vogue*’s pages. And he was a diarist of the first rank, publishing in all six volumes, recording his working life, his travels, friendships and love affairs for well over half a century.

A page recording a visit to Tunis in 1953 shows the smallest, closest, most dense and barely legible lines of handwriting. Secretaries down the years transcribed it, the last and most important being Eileen Hose, who joined him that year and stayed until the end, becoming, as his biographer Hugo Vickers describes it, housekeeper, nurse, amanuensis, accountant and best friend.

In his (excellent) biography (1985), Vickers writes: ‘Cecil treated the diaries in much the same way as he treated his published portrait photographs. He retouched them shamelessly until he achieved the effect he sought. Thus, in the published diary, opinions are softened, celebrated figures are hailed as wonders and triumphs, whereas in the originals [he] can be as venomous as anyone I have heard or read.’

It was Vickers who long after Beaton’s death published some of these ‘originals’: two volumes of ‘unexpurgated’ diaries. The first is *The Unexpurgated Beaton: The Cecil Beaton Diaries as They Were Written* (2003), which covers the years 1970–80. The second is *Beaton in the Sixties: More Unexpurgated Diaries* (2004).

‘Unexpurgated’ sells copies, of course. And certainly there is plenty in these two volumes to satisfy a thirst to see the rich, the glamorous and the world-famous unmasked as appalling people. Here is Katherine Hepburn, with her ‘rocking-horse nostrils’, starring in the American stage production of the musical *Coco*, the sets for which Beaton designed in 1969. In rehearsals she was intolerable.

She is the egomaniac of all time . . . her performance . . . as unfeminine and unlike the fascinating Chanel as anyone could be . . . She knows fundamentally that she has no great talent as an actress. This gives her great insecurity so she must expend enormous effort in . . . asserting herself in as strident a manner as only she knows how. She must always be proved right.

As for Elizabeth Taylor, whom he was commissioned to photograph at a flamboyant Paris costume ball in 1971: ‘Round her neck was a velvet ribbon with the biggest diamond in the world pinned on

it. On her fat, coarse hands, more of the biggest diamonds and emeralds . . . In comparison, everyone else looked ladylike.’

Roy Strong, who in 1968 made himself and Beaton household names with a fabulous exhibition of Beaton’s photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, once described him as ‘a great hater’. Scattered throughout these two volumes are indeed caustic remarks about dozens of the celebrities he came to know: ‘common little Lord Snowdon’; Vanessa Redgrave (‘Freddie Ashton thought her a well brought-up horse’), ‘beautiful one minute, quite hideous the next’; Nureyev, ‘a vague host, without manners or responsibility . . . he is a Tartar and is happy when drunk, when he has sex and 20 hours sleep, miserable when he goes to bed early and alone’.

But although there is plenty of this there are also deeply affectionate and admiring entries: on those many friends he loved; on the death of his younger sister Baba; on the birthday party hosted in 1969 for an ancient aunt: ‘The blind old girl has shown such courage and such spirit and interest . . . I had to propose a toast and, as usual, made a fool of myself by not being able to overcome my emotion, but she replied with tremendous aplomb.’

In a lifetime spent in his first love, the theatre – sometimes as actor, which he adored – there are acute and illuminating observations: not of the diva or the egomaniac but the real thing. In 1970 he went to see *Uncle Vanya* at the Royal Court.

It is the best version of any Russian play I have ever seen. I have never known such remarkable acting . . . At one moment [Paul] Scofield, embarrassed, harassed at making a half-hearted love declaration, wound his arms in the air as if a cat was fighting. [He] sounds as if he was thinking and saying things for the first time . . .

Beaton can also be very funny. Edith Sitwell’s arrival at a lunch party in 1964 at his London house – the Queen Mother was among the guests – comes to mind:

A huge ambulance drove up to the house, as a group of stalwart men moved to bring the poet out into the daylight. A pair of very long medieval shoes appeared, and then a muffled figure, and finally a huge golden melon of a hat. Edith was wheeled into place and given two strong martinis.

And then there are the war diaries. In 1940 Beaton was appointed Official War Photographer by the Ministry of Information. Gone now were the beautiful society women, the models for *Vogue*, the film stars, actors and actresses of the Twenties and Thirties. Now he was photographing Anthony Eden, Ernest Bevin and Winston Churchill, whom he recorded staring into the camera 'like some sort of animal gazing across from the back of its sty'. His pictures of the Queen were circulated all over the world; on the home front his image of a little girl recovering in hospital after an air raid appeared on the front cover of *Life* magazine. In 1941, taking photographs for the RAF, he deplored the waste of life: 'Night after night these young fellows, kids many of them, are sent out to pay the price of the follies of old incompetent politicians.'

Then he was sent abroad: to the Middle East, and thence to Burma, China, India. Behind the scenes, or close to the front line, he recorded village life and the dead and the wounded. He himself came horribly close to death in a plane crash; he endured dysentery and blinding headaches. His wartime diaries, published as *The Years Between, 1939-44*, reveal how much those years did to develop him as a man. In May 1944, on leaving China, its poverty and discomforts, he wrote:

The toughness of the trip has been beneficial . . . For it does one no harm to get tired and to walk too much, to be either too hot or too cold, to go hungry for a few hours. I am heartened to realize how well my constitution stands up to these tests. But I have become painfully conscious of my limitations and mental weaknesses. My brain is a poor one, poorly trained.

In all, he took some 7,000 photographs, now housed in the Imperial War Museum. He himself came to regard them as his single most important body of work.

And what of his personal life? Beaton was a consummate professional, and also a highly emotional man who wept easily and loved ardently. He had affairs with both men and women. But there were three great loves, whose photographs he kept by his bed until the end of his life. One was Greta Garbo. His account of their love affair occupies the greater part of his third volume of diaries, *The Happy Years, 1944–8*, though life with Garbo was often difficult. In New York in 1947 he records how over dinner at his hotel, ‘Our talk suddenly became intent. What was there to stop our living for the rest of our lives together . . . Greta explained, “You must realize that I am a sad person: I am a misfit in life.”’

His second love was Peter Watson, aristocratic art historian, co-founder of the ICA, charmer and sadist. He comes and goes through the diaries from 1930 to 1958, giving Beaton hell for much of the time. And the third was a young man called Kin, whom he met in a gay bar in San Francisco in 1963 while working on the film of *My Fair Lady*.

Of the three, it is Kin, a sportsman and academic, whom one might describe as a fully human being; Christopher Isherwood found him ‘so exceptional and such a rare person’. He came to live with Beaton in London, while studying at the Slade, but it didn’t work, and his departure in 1965 broke Beaton’s heart. ‘Everything had dropped out of my world . . . I wept so much that breathing became difficult.’ It says much for them both that they got through this, becoming lifelong friends.

Beaton’s other loves were his houses. He had a town house in Kensington and two manor houses in Wiltshire. The first manor, Ashcombe, a fine Georgian house, he fell in love with on sight in 1930; the second, Reddish House, he bought in 1947. In all, he entertained lavishly. But Reddish, his last and most beloved home,

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became for fifty years a true sanctuary from hectic London life.

His diaries over and over again record the flood of relief on returning there, not least to the garden, maintained by Jack Smallpeice, steady and quiet in his corduroys, with whom he spent happy hours planning and planting. And it was at Reddish that Beaton ended his days. In 1974 he had a stroke, and thought his life was over. Roy Strong, on a visit, found 'a tragic furrowed bundle' gazing out over the garden. But willpower pulled him through and he learned to paint and write with his left hand. The last diary entry, on 11 January 1980, records the death of one Timothy White – not a celebrity, but his beloved cat.

He had his own ways, which could not be altered. He liked the sunny side of the street . . . Now . . . I was still alive, but Timmy had gone through to oblivion. He was perhaps lucky. Who knows?

One night a week later Beaton himself slipped peacefully away.

SUE GEE'S essay on the life and work of Roy Strong is in her collection *Just You & the Page: Encounters with Twelve Writers* (2021).



A Life Well Lived

BRANDON ROBshaw

Historians of children's literature sometimes speak of a First and a Second Golden Age. The First was the Victorian/Edwardian period, when many of the most enduring classics were written – *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Black Beauty*, *Treasure Island*, *Little Women*, *Peter Pan*, *The Wind in the Willows* – and the main genres of children's literature (fantasy, adventure, animal stories, school stories, family sagas) were established. This period is generally thought to have come to an end around the outbreak of the First World War. For whatever reasons, the interwar period produced rather less memorable children's literature.

The Second Golden Age dates from (roughly) the end of the Second World War to (roughly) the end of the 1970s, and is marked by novels of greater seriousness and complexity, tackling such themes as bullying, violence, death, war, family break-ups, sex – a world of literary realism quite different from the whimsy that had come before. In these stories children are acquainted with poverty, injustice and squalor, defy grown-ups, swear, fight, get injured and risk their lives. A child of the 1960s, I was born slap-bang in the middle of the Second Golden Age, and I grew up reading serious, sophisticated novels by such writers as Nina Bawden, Philippa Pearce – and Robert Westall.

Robert Westall was one of the giants of this postwar Golden Age. Indeed, his writing continued well beyond that age's somewhat arbitrary cut-off date – he produced over fifty books and was still writing up until his death in 1993. He won the prestigious Carnegie Medal twice (one of only a handful of children's authors to do so), as well as

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Coming attractions

HARRY EYRES discovers *A Fox in the Attic* • POSY FALLOWFIELD meets a trio of bluestockings • PATRICK WELLAND faces death with *The Railway Man* • NOONIE MINOGUE goes in search of *The Portrait of a Lady* • PHILIP GOODEN scents murder among the Oxford colleges • MARIANNE ELLIOTT learns to make perry • ALAN JUDD follows the fate of a Jewish banker • KATHRYN HUGHES joins Monica Dickens on her hospital ward • JULIA JONES shares a boat with Arthur Ransome • RICHARD HAWKING enjoys *Springtime in Britain*

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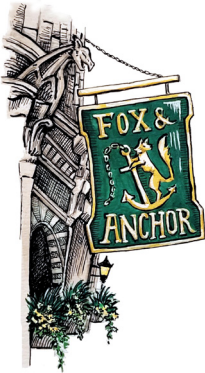
No. 54, *The Many Lives of Muriel Spark* with Muriel Spark's biographer Martin Stannard

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‘The business of reading should please the hand and eye as well as the brain, and *Slightly Foxed* is an elegant creation. Content follows form, offering new discoveries and old favourites to curious and discriminating readers.’

Hilary Mantel



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