THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed

NO.91 AUTUMN 2026

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'The Man Who Saved England'

NO.91 AUTUMN 2026

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Rebecca Campbell lives and works in London. She trained as an illustrator and this has led to her unique narrative style of work. Her paintings have been described as 'delightful, enigmatic and highly imaginative . . . Rebecca's world is one of variety, eccentricity and joy.' She grew up in the Irish countryside with a menagerie of animals and birds, and has since travelled extensively. Her work has been particularly influenced by India's Mughal miniature paintings with their rich earth colours, bold design and exquisite attention to detail. Her work has been published worldwide in books, magazines and as greeting cards and she has taken part in many large public art events, including with the charity Elephant Family (for whom she is in-house artist and ambassador). In 2025 she was presented with the Tara Award by the Elephant Family presidents, Their Majesties the King and Queen, for her work with the charity. To see more of her paintings visit www.jonathancooper.co.uk.

Back cover fox by Ella Balaam, design by Octavius Murray, layout by Andrew Evans, colophon and tailpiece by David Eccles

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From the Editors

With autumn here and Christmas inexorably approaching, we're reaching the end of the 2026 National Year of Reading, a campaign to get children – and others – reading for pleasure. This is a very different thing from learning to decode words to improve the national literacy statistics, the first being something that lasts a lifetime and the second something that learning to read can easily turn into. It is of course a cause close to our hearts, since reading for pleasure is what *Slightly Foxed* is about.

Howard Phipps, *The River Alde at Iken*, wood engraving

Certainly there's nothing quite like receiving a well-chosen book for Christmas, and we do hope that when you're thinking of presents this year for your near and dear you'll take advantage of the selection of classic memoirs in our lovely Slightly Foxed and Plain Foxed Editions, or of a gift subscription to the Quarterly itself. Not forgetting, for younger readers, our list of beautifully illustrated classic children's books, including the magical stories of Denys Watkins-Pitchford, the countryman who called himself 'BB', and Rosemary Sutcliff's series of brilliantly evocative novels about the Romans in Britain.

This year too we have two new Slightly Foxed Christmas card designs by our illustrator Ella Balaam, whose work appears regularly in *SF*. The two discreetly foxed cards she designed for us last year flew

off the shelves and this year's designs are equally attractive, so do order in good time if you're interested. And for 2027 Jennie has produced another of our popular calendars featuring a selection of seasonal covers from *Slightly Foxed* – a really cheering way to start each month, and a perfect small present.

R. C. Sherriff, the author of our autumn Slightly Foxed Edition (see p.14), is best known for his play *Journey's End*, based on his experiences in the First World War trenches, which he originally wrote to raise money for his local rowing club. After an amateur start in Surbiton, in 1928 the play was given a performance in the West End where it was an unexpected sensation and went on playing for years. *No Leading Lady*, which we're reissuing in two volumes, tells the story of Sherriff's translation from his modest job as an adjustor for the Sun Insurance Company to full-time writer and eventually one of the best-paid scriptwriters in Hollywood at a time when it was still a rough and ready collection of buildings in the desert. His voice is distinctive, quiet, unassuming yet totally assured, and once he's plucked you by the sleeve it's impossible to put this entertaining and unlikely story down.

And finally, on Saturday 24 October we'll be holding our annual Readers' Day at our usual haunt, the Art Workers' Guild in Bloomsbury. It is perhaps our favourite day of the year when we meet up with readers who come from all over the country, and several from other countries too, to enjoy a day of talks on books and bookish topics. We have a great line-up this year, including the distinguished poet and novelist Ben Okri, the travel writer Sara Wheeler, the Editor of *The Idler* Tom Hodgkinson, and Julian Evans, author of the definitive biography of Norman Lewis, *Semi Invisible Man*, and it's always a warm and friendly occasion. The Art Workers' Guild only seats a hundred so tickets are limited, but we still have a few left, so if you're interested do get in touch. See you there we hope!

GAIL PIRKIS & HAZEL WOOD

The Man Who Saved England

FRANCES DONNELLY

In the spring of 1936, James ('Jim') Lees-Milne, a young man of 28, eagerly approached the offices of the National Trust opposite the shunting yard at Victoria Station. Curly-haired, well-born and personable, he was about to take up his dream job. He wrote to a friend: 'The National Trust is starting a scheme for preserving country houses, trying to induce landowners and proprietors to join. It would necessitate going all over England. I think if I searched the whole world there is no job I would rather have.'

Up to the 1930s, saving land, not country houses, had been the Trust's priority. But fifty years of agricultural depression meant even the greatest estates were struggling. The Trust had the means to help. Its predecessors, the Commons Preservation Society and the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, were simply campaigning charities. But the Trust, founded in 1895, was a holding body, able to acquire and preserve land and buildings for the nation. By 1935 its holdings had increased to nearly 50,000 acres.

No wonder Jim had a spring in his step. He had been a dim and unremarkable boy (his words) at Eton, to the extent that his father thought a university education would be wasted and instead signed him up for six unhappy months as the sole male at Miss Blakeney's Stenography School for Young Ladies in Chelsea. Only a film by

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James Lees-Milne, *Ancestral Voices* (1975), *Prophesying Peace* (1977), *Caves of Ice* (1983) and *Midway on the Waves* (1985), are all out of print, but we can try to obtain second-hand copies. His memoir *Another Self* (1970) is available from Slightly Foxed as a Plain Foxed Edition.

Merchant-Ivory could do full justice to this 1927 visual gem: Jim, a pretty young man in a boater, clacking typewriter keys about a quick brown fox and a lazy dog alongside girls in cloche hats. Like them, he was living in penury, in rented rooms. But unlike them, he was spending glamorous weekends at the Mitfords' house, Swinbrook, in Gloucestershire. An equal opportunities lover, Jim, after an intense Eton romance with Tom Mitford, was now pointlessly smitten by Diana, Tom's beautiful younger sister.

The course completed, Jim's mother stepped in and inveigled her son into Oxford. He emerged with a Third, but his connections were first-class. And the typing proved invaluable. There were many well-connected, susceptible older men who required secretarial help. Harold Nicolson was one such. His great gift to Jim was to show him that a daily diary, written with care, could lead to publication. Jim wanted to write but had no idea about what. More immediately, an undirected young man became a committed campaigner to save a small part of a vanishing world of 'big houses and their landscapes'.

There are echoes of Evelyn Waugh's great novel *Brideshead Revisited* (1945) in this period of Jim's life. Charles Ryder, the book's laconic narrator, lover of Sebastian Flyte and later of his sister Julia, is an architectural artist. In the late 1920s his career is kickstarted when he is asked to paint the Flytes' London residence, about to be demolished to make way for flats. This leads to commissions from other owners in similar straits (a staggering 128 country houses were pulled down after the First World War). Charles is able to collate his work in the bestselling *Ryder's Country Houses* and his success is assured.

The National Trust was able to offer owners a chance to survive by suggesting they donate their houses to the nation. Though the idea was not always greeted with joy, 225 owners initially expressed an interest. In the event, only 42 finally agreed to be interviewed by a Trust representative.

Cometh the interview, cometh Jim on a bicycle. The Trust couldn't afford a car. The bicycle went in the guard's van as Jim 'entrained' the

length and breadth of England to meet great men in great houses, with varying degrees of success. At Longleat, in Wiltshire, he had a fruitless interview with the owner Lord Bath, a patrician old gentleman in a frock coat, who then courteously escorted him to the front door. As was the custom of the house for departing guests, the steps to the drive were flanked on either side by quietly derisive footmen. As Jim reached the final step, another footman appeared, wheeling his bike. The entire party then stood and watched Jim cycle the length of the very long drive until he mercifully reached the shelter of trees.

Though this visit was not a success, he had at least got inside the house. When he visited Charlecote in Warwickshire, the choleric Sir Henry Fairfax-Lucy, husband of the actual owner, showed him the grounds but flatly refused to even open the front door. 'There's absolutely no need for you to see it inside,' Jim was brusquely informed. 'Charlecote is known to be one of the greatest houses in England. Good morning.'

The Trust's task must have seemed monumental. It was not enough to persuade an owner to donate their house: the land and contents had to be sold as well to provide for its upkeep. Think of the maintenance involved at Knole in Kent with its *seven acres* of roofs. Due to Jim's energy, progress was made. By 1939, half a dozen splendid properties had been promised, with half a dozen others looking hopeful.

Then, with the outbreak of war, country-house life was abruptly over. Stately homes were requisitioned. Servicemen were the most feared tenants: one's best hope was a girls' school or, ideally, nuns. Jim was called up but a year later was so badly injured in a London bombing raid that he was discharged from the army. It was galling, in 1941, not to be in uniform in a world on a war footing. But

the Trust, now evacuated to West Wycombe in Buckinghamshire, received him back with open arms. The trickle of owners wanting to donate their houses had swollen to a torrent. He couldn't fight but he could help to preserve his country's heritage.

A few months later, in January 1942, he began to write a diary, the first volume of which was published in 1975 as *Ancestral Voices: Diaries, 1942–1943*. Most diaries are mere aides-memoires of quotidian tedium, but from the beginning Jim was aware that he was living in 'interesting' times. By nature an observer rather than a participator, he felt that what he saw and recorded in the grandest houses in England could be of interest to a wider, later, audience. He was correct in his surmise. But what is surprising – and delightful – is how much of himself he was prepared to commit to paper. His love life alone demands a separate index.

A diary was the ideal outlet for a person of his volatile and slightly melancholic temperament, someone who was, by his own admission, on top of the world on Monday yet on Tuesday feared he would never be happy again. Unexpectedly, his Wednesday was a day of quiet content which was inexorably followed by a Thursday of seething fury about a perceived snub. And all this before the weekend had even started.

He described himself as a member of the minor aristocracy. But his family had made their money in Lancashire cotton mills and only moved into their Tudor mansion, Wickhambrook in Worcestershire, two years before his birth. Thus he was acutely aware of where he stood on the social scale. Better by far to describe yourself as from the lower ranks of the aristocracy than at the top of the dreaded middle classes. Though his manners were excellent, and he had been brought up to treat all with equal courtesy, at heart he preferred a conversation with a dull upper-class person to that with an intelligent member of the lower classes, and he was prepared to say so. It is not an attitude likely to commend him to younger generations, but he was a man of his time.

Some of my friends are troubled by my devotion to Jim's diaries. What is the appeal, they demand with some truculence, in reading about a vanished social world, peopled with entitled snobs who demand copious footnotes to remotely make sense of their lives and connections?

For me, the appeal is twofold. I am astounded and amused by the honesty with which Jim reveals his own character. Habitually in a gloom about his own worth and eternally envying this man's art and that man's scope, there is no one he subjects to more stringent criticism than himself. Then, too, if you can suspend your prejudices, you will find glorious writing and acutely observed portraits of people trying to cope in impossible times. What underpins the diaries is his awareness of the immense social change taking place in England during those years. There is almost an audible groan of gears as this country finally moves from the settled nineteenth century to the uncertain and uneasy twentieth. Jim himself was a keen appreciator of what he refers to as the Squirearchy – the settled order of privileged families who owned the countryside and had governed England for centuries. Now houses formerly requiring thirty indoor servants were being serviced by a two-hour daily visit from a woman from the village. He is deeply sympathetic to the owners' plight, but he also enjoys their eccentricities. Lord Berwick of Attingham, he discovers, believes ghosts have invaded his vacuum cleaner. Lady Sybil Grant has actually left her home, Pitchford House, which she thinks is haunted, and is currently living in a tree house.

A charming and informed young man, Jim is effective in securing almost every house he visits. Yet his very success, as he reveals in the second volume of diaries, *Prophesying Peace: 1944–1945*, causes him to examine his conscience. 'The lengths to which I have gone, the depths I have plumbed to acquire properties for the National Trust will not all be known by that august and ungrateful body,' he comments ruefully to himself. 'It might be shocked by the zeal of its

servant if it did.' In a typical Jim aside, he adds that these pious reflections came to him in the bath that morning. In his defence, he consoles himself with the knowledge that he makes a point of being appreciative of every house he visits, even the duds, though inwardly groaning at what's been done to the pilasters.

One of the greatest strengths of his wartime diaries is the vivid picture he paints of London during those years. He describes going to a Trust meeting in Bloomsbury and discovering his familiar walk has been transformed into a nightmare landscape of flattened, silent squares, blanketed by heavy snow. He makes us feel, in the City, the absolute carnage that has been inflicted on ancient buildings and medieval churches, and he records his despair that Holland House, a great house where Jim had danced before the war, is now a shell. Ruins like these would present the Trust with a particular set of post-war problems. What was worth restoring? And what were the ethics of producing a twentieth-century copy of an original church or listed building?

Those expecting conventional wartime diaries will be sadly disappointed. There is not a single mention of his ration book, and only two of coupons. The sole domestic detail is when his windows are blown out by a V2 rocket. It entails a lot of sweeping up of broken glass with the help of his kindly housekeeper. (There is always a kindly housekeeper.) He eats out relentlessly and usually quite well though he claims everybody is hungry all the time. He brilliantly conveys day-to-day living in a world of continual anxiety. Even the joyful coming of spring is overlaid with the knowledge that it will mean the return of enemy bombers during the day.

Peace brings relief and privation in equal measure. In his diaries for 1946–7, *Caves of Ice*, and *Midway on the Waves* (1948–9), there is still rationing, and it is always cold. But there's also a gratifying sense of his wartime work coming to fruition. Great houses like Montacute have been donated and have now to be prepared for their public opening.

Jim is still working flat out while, as usual, wrestling with matters of the heart. He has reached the age of 40 and his architectural publications have given him some recognition. But he still requires a more settled, better-funded existence and what in modern parlance is known as a 'breakthrough' book. And he is to be fortunate in both. The next decades will bring marriage to a titled, wealthy wife and the publication of a bestselling memoir, *Another Self*.

Max Hastings, writing in 2009, described James Lees-Milne, correctly, as the 'man who saved England'. Only a man of the strongest aesthetic convictions and unbridled energy, he says, could have achieved what he did. Jim was offered, and declined, a CBE in 1993. He thought he should have been given a knighthood. He was right. He had fully earned it.

FRANCES DONNELLY has moved from Suffolk after thirty-five years and has started a new life and a happy eighth decade in south London.

No Accidental Dramatist

ISABEL LLOYD

In a side road behind a suburban railway station, where Surrey begins its slow elision into the western fringes of London, is a large circular depression. It sits at the bottom of a once grand garden, surrounded by banks topped with mouldering rhododendrons, a natural if secretive arena. On a damp day in November 2025, all it contains is a distinctly unremarkable block of 1930s flats. But just over a century ago, this was the site of a tiny, private playhouse called the Gables, where one of British theatre's most unjustly forgotten writers leapt from the blocks.

Today, ask someone if they know who Robert Cedric Sherriff was and you'll likely be on the receiving end of a blank stare. Which is a shame. From 1928, when *Journey's End*, his slice-of-life play evoking the dugouts of the First World War, first opened, to the mid-1950s, when he wrote the script of the film *The Dam Busters*, R. C. Sherriff was one of the most hard-working and highly rated scriptwriters in the business. He had a hand in any number of memorable films, including James Whale's *The Invisible Man*, *Goodbye Mr Chips*, *The Four Feathers*, *Mrs Miniver* and *That Hamilton Woman*; he wrote seventeen stage plays, including a drama about Napoleon on St Helena; and he published a small library's worth of novels, including one, *The Fortnight in September*, that became an enduring bestseller.

Of all this endeavour, only *Journey's End* is likely now to ring a bell. A set text in British schools for the past quarter-century, it remains an undyingly popular choice for school plays, while the emotional impact of its story of loyalty, bravery and loss earns it at least one West End or Broadway production a decade. Don't want to

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Coming attractions

JIM RING is captivated by *Missee Lee* • HELENA DRYSDALE finds freedom on two wheels • PATRICK WELLAND meets Alexander the Great • OLIVIA POTTS shares Arabella Boxer's kitchen • JAMES RUNCIE calls at the vicarage with Barbara Pym • URSULA BUCHAN remembers an unassuming war hero • STEPHEN BAYLEY enjoys the memoir of a most unusual collector • MARTIN LATHAM falls for Tallulah Bankhead • KATE HUBBARD is intrigued by Roger Ackerley's secret life

Slightly Foxed

‘The great joy of *Slightly Foxed* is that it’s a reader’s journal, not a place of summaries or of-the-minute reviews. It glows with depth, wit and passion.’
Bart van Es

In this issue

Guy Stagg meets some imperfect priests · **Kathryn Hughes** does a ward round with Monica Dickens · **C. J. Schüler** visits Nazi Germany *After Midnight* · **Raffaella Barker** is spellbound by *The Transylvanian Trilogy* · **David Profumo** goes fishing with Negley Farson · **Frances Donnelly** meets ‘the man who saved England’ · **Richard Smyth** listens to the birds of Victorian London · **Vesna Goldsworthy** rereads Turgenev · **Michael Barber** pumps iron in the American South · **Maggie Fergusson** pays tribute to SOE’s lost agents

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