One man's poisoner...

Andrew Motion turns away from poets and towards a painter, forger, wastrel - and killer in Wainewright the Poisoner

Wainewright the Poisoner
Andrew Motion

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Having written biographies of Philip Larkin and John Keats, Andrew Motion has chosen as his next subject a nearly unknown and semi-criminal artist, Thomas Griffiths Wainewright, now forgotten to all but specialists of early Australian painting. It is a curious choice. As if burdened by the fame of his previous subjects, Motion must have wanted to write about someone who was more of a tabula rasa. The book is constructed as if it were Wainewright's autobiography, written during his last days as a convict in Tasmania, and then interspersed with lengthy footnotes which give detailed historical material relating to each of the chapters. It is an odd conceit for a biographer, but one which enables Motion to get (literally) into his subject's mind.

Wainewright was the grandson of Ralph Griffiths, the editor of an eighteenth-century periodical, the Monthly Review, who made a fortune from the publication of John Cleland's erotic novel, Fanny Hill. He was educated at school in Greenwich by Fanny Burney's brother and, after a period with the Bedfordshire Regiment of Foot, trained as a painter under Thomas Phillips, perhaps best remembered for his portrait of Byron, a version of which is in the National Portrait Gallery.

During the early 1820s, Wainewright and his wife Eliza rented lodgings in Great Marlborough Street. He did a little bit of painting in a post-Fuseli manner, exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy, dealt in Old Master prints, made friends with a number of his better remembered contemporaries, including William Hazlitt and Charles Lamb, and wrote articles for the London Magazine under the pseudonym 'Janus Weathercock'. His problem was that none of these activities provided sufficient funds for an extravagant life, even when supplemented by the interest from a family trust. To solve the problem, he chose to forge the signature of his trustees in order to obtain access to the capital left to him by the terms of his grandfather's will.

Wainewright thought that he could improve his situation by giving up his lodgings in Great Marlborough Street in order to live with his uncle in a large-ish house in Chiswick. But his uncle died shortly afterwards, leaving him his estate, but also the cost of running the house. At this point, he began to turn desperate and was believed by his contemporaries to have required his sister-in-law to take out substantial life insurance and then to have poisoned her.

Since Motion is writing from the viewpoint of Wainewright, he makes out that the so-called poisoning was food-poisoning, as if his sister-in-law had died from a surfeit of beer and lobster. But the evidence of the multiple insurance claims must be said to count against him. He was forced to leave England for France, but, in time, his deception as far as the forgery was concerned caught up with him and he spent a period in Newgate prison before being transported to Tasmania. He was never tried for murder but pursued for the rest of his life by a widespread assumption that he was a poisoner.

In Tasmania, when eventually released from penitentiary labour, he undertook effective pencil drawings of some of the citizens of Hobart Town, which convey some of the rigours of early settlement life and, given the degree interest in relics of early Australiana, have given Wainewright his posthumous fame.

What obviously attracted Motion to Wainewright is the way in which his life represents the underbelly of the romantic movement. All the romantic poets were interested in extremes of emotion and there were frequent undertones in their writings of sadism and death. But for most of them, these interests were theoretical. Wainewright is the living epitome of the idea of evil.

But the problem of writing the book from Wainewright's perspective is that Motion manages to make Wainewright sound comparatively anodyne, as if poisoning one's sister-in-law and forging signatures were everyday events. This removes some of the drama from Wainewright's life. And while it was presumably an interesting exercise to write the whole book from the mindset of the subject, in the end

one begins to long for more critical detachment and less of the orotundities of early nine teenth-century prose style.

The obvious point of comparison for the book is the work of Peter Ackroyd. Like Ackroyd, Andrew Motion has a brilliant ear for language and a creative feel for the circumstances of early nineteenth-century art, literature and London. In terms of its literary genre, his book is substantially more of a fiction than, for example, Ackroyd's biography of Blake, but less so than his Dan Leno and the Limehouse Golem. But I am not persuaded that Motion, in contrast to Ackroyd, has a novelist's gift for narrative. In the end, his book is clever, but not compelling, a brave attempt to re-invent the life and attitudes of an intriguing historical figure, but a book which falls between the different literary requirements of fiction and of history.

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