

The Diary: Charles Saumarez Smith

We were due to spend Christmas on Anglesey, but just at the moment when we were due to set off my brother-in-law rang to say that the track to our cottage was under water and they had been rescued by Land Rover. So, I had to cancel our booking for lunch the next day at the Marram Grass, the restaurant at the local caravan site which has just got in to the *Good Food Guide* (they would have cancelled it anyway), and we returned to London. We would not have got there anyway as both the A55 and A5 were closed. We got messages from friends in Anglesey and the mainland telling us how awful it was, but it was only later that I heard that the wonderful gardens of Plas Cadnant on a hill above Menai Bridge had been destroyed by a tidal wave.

Instead, I spent a quiet and ruminative period between Christmas and the New Year, catching up on my reading. The best of the things I read was Jon Day's *Cyclogeography - Journeys of a London Bicycle Courier*, a short book on bicycling in London by a highly educated bicycle courier which graphically describes the pleasures and tribulations of bicycling round London. I was faintly surprised that a courier could write so lyrically about the history and literature of bicycling, but was less surprised when I discovered that he is now a Lecturer in the English Department at King's College, London. This is a symptom of the new career mobility. Less so than the author of another book I read over Christmas, Joe Kerr, who describes himself as the Head of Critical and Historical Studies at the Royal College of Art and as 'a London bus driver, working out of Tottenham Garage'.

My New Year's resolution has been to write a long delayed entry on the stage designer, Maria Bjornson, for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Everything I know about her is irrelevant to the entry. I remember doing gym classes in a dingy basement in Covent Garden, going on holiday with her in a villa near a racing track north of Florence, travelling on a bus over the hills to Faenza, being persuaded to buy a pair of pink suede boots which I have never worn, her funny sarcasm. All of this must be forgotten whilst I write about operas I never saw.

Over the last month, I have been enjoying the vicarious pleasure of my wife's exhibition *Newfoundland*, held at the Sainsbury Centre in the University of East Anglia. As a friend said, it's an odd experience seeing small, highly ornate works of jewellery in a museum which is large enough to be an aircraft hangar. But it's surprisingly successful, looking at contemporary jewellery alongside classic twentieth-century pots and pre-Columbian artefacts.

At the Royal Academy, we have been busy making preparations for our great Spring exhibition, *Painting the Modern Garden: Monet to Matisse*. I am often asked how we manage to install exhibitions of very complex work, including huge paintings by Ansel Kiefer and, in the autumn, 95 tons of steel rebars by Ai Weiwei. The answer, all too often, is that I don't know, because I don't see the process of installation and am discouraged from interfering. So, this time, I asked if I could spend a morning watching our art handlers engage in the task of receiving, moving, unpacking, checking the condition, and hanging some of the greatest works of the world, which arrive in shipments, sometimes at odd hours of the day and night, from all over the world. It is not made easier by the fact that we are currently involved in creating new art handling space in the undercroft of our grand galleries. All I can say is that it is a pleasure watching people of great skill and experience moving and unpacking crates, looking and surveying the surface of paintings to check for any changes in condition. I also met Robert Carson, the exhibition designer, arranging flower pots.

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