In Search of P. Y. Betts

CHRISTOPHER HAWTREE

At a desk beneath the dome of the British Museum Reading Room, as sombre Ph.D. types on either side of me pored over earnest-looking volumes, I had to restrain myself from yelling for joy at item NN 20963: the catalogue number for *French Polish* by P. Y. Betts. It was her only book, a novel published by Gollancz in 1933. It looked as if nobody had opened it for some while – perhaps for more than fifty years.

It was 1985 and I was at work on an anthology from the rare, weekly magazine *Night and Day* which in 1937 had sought to be an English incarnation of *The New Yorker*. But after six months it had come a cropper, its funds even scarcer in the wake of a libel suit brought by Twentieth-Century Fox against its co-editor Graham Greene for his review of the 9-year-old Shirley Temple's performance in *Wee Willie Winkie*. Many of the magazine's contributors, such as John Betjeman and Alistair Cooke, and indeed Greene himself, were to become very well known. Yet often as interesting were those of whom little, if anything, was later heard, among whom was P. Y. Betts. She wrote entertaining pieces for the magazine on French food, and a Snobs' Guide to Good Form which was twenty years ahead of Nancy Mitford's 'U and Non-U'.

The same spirit was evident in *French Polish*, the story of a group of lascivious girls at a Swiss finishing-school. The plot seems less important than its characters' off-the-wall observations and

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P. Y. Betts, *People Who Say Goodbye: Memories of Childhood* (1989)
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comments. Virginia rebuts Millicent's allegation that she is always thinking about sex: 'I guess if you thought a little more about sex your circulation would be a whole lot better; there's nothing like sex for keeping a girl warm.' Angela asks, 'Have you ever noticed that people who are quite disintegratingly beautiful in the nude are often dreadfully pedestrian in clothes?' – to which Pat makes the logical reply, 'And the ruefulness of it is that those who look dreadfully pedestrian in clothes generally have to remain looking dreadfully pedestrian – in clothes.'

Here was somebody with a distinct take on the world. Even when preoccupied with the legal hurdle of ensuring that Greene's review of Shirley Temple could be reprinted for the first time, I could not get P. Y. Betts out of my mind.

A review of the *Night and Day* anthology in the *Observer* referred to the mysterious disappearance of 'the great P. Y. Betts'. Soon after, the mystery was solved by Lady Eirene White, who revealed that she and Betts had been together at St Paul's Girls School in the 1920s, after which Betts travelled round the world, writing articles as she went. When war broke out she joined the Land Army but, tired of marauding American servicemen in Lincolnshire, she felt an urge for retreat, and moved, alone, to a remote smallholding in the middle of Wales. And she was still there. When reading P. Y. Betts's novel that day in the British Museum, I had never imagined that I would hear her voice on the telephone.

In the spring of 1987 I arrived at the village nearest her in my Citroën 2CV – as much in need of water by this time as I was – and found that though people knew her name no one had actually seen her. Following their directions along lanes between high green hedges of a sort now vanished from much of England, I eventually arrived at a low, thick-walled cottage set in a field containing all manner of animals, including what appeared to be the fiercest goat this side of *Scoop*.

And there, in her late seventies, was an author I had never

expected to meet. Pail in hand, dressed in a green outdoor jacket, straight of back and bright of eye, she began to talk, and it was as if we had known each other a long while, her observations ranging from outlandish events in the seemingly sleepy Welsh hills to her upbringing in Wandsworth during the Great War. It was all as idiosyncratic as her novel. With only a wireless, powered by batteries until electricity was installed in 1971, she was more alert to the world than many an urban dweller. Decades in this fastness had not turned her into a crotchety recluse. Far from it. Here was a woman with a splendidly cool view of the world, and a sense of humour that made great play with the ludicrous but never descended into malice.

I described our meeting in the *Daily Telegraph*, and this caught the eye of Ernest Hecht of Souvenir Press, who now wondered whether P. Y. Betts might like to write another book. Startled, she agreed. Over a winter, working in the evenings, she produced *People Who Say Goodbye* which Hecht published in the autumn of 1989, almost sixty years after her novel. Graham Greene described it as 'the most amusing book of childhood memories I can remember reading'. Word spread, people urged it on one another. One Chelsea bookseller recommended it to Dirk Bogarde, who made it his Book of the Year; Radio 4 broadcast extracts; Lynne Truss wrote a rapturous review in *The Listener*.

Like P. Y. Betts's conversation, *People Who Say Goodbye* is full of startling asides – such as the fact that we might indeed never have had a P. Y. Betts. 'My mother said that Fred Dimbleby had been sweet on her once but had expressed the opinion that she would be too much of a handful.' He chose another, producing Richard and a dynasty of broadcasters whose careers would surely have been cut short had they brought Betts's own powers of description to bear upon the passing political scene.

The story begins during the Great War, when Betts is 6, with a family visit to Brattle Place, a house on the way to Dover. Here, in mysterious circumstances, but without any apparent hint of

Betts: a vanishing world

impropriety, Mrs Milton had been set up, in an establishment which doubled as a boarding house, by Betts's maternal grandfather – a grim figure who had risen from a Nottinghamshire mining village, made good, and even saved the Building Society movement from a crisis which could have scuppered it.

> Mrs Milton was really frightful . . . Her usual stance was embattled, with arms akimbo as if ready to fight off complaints as they arose. Her eyes were murky, the colour of muddy blue clay, and her expression one of settled bad temper. She frowned. What was her most ghastly and atrocious feature was an undershot jaw ensuring that her incomplete set of lower teeth were ever on display. The general effect was of a tusked boar – she could have rootled for truffles.

Within a few pages we meet Betts's forthright mother: in the

Brattle Place garden, she and P. Y. encounter a squirrel in a cage. As the two of them looked at one another,

> revolutionary signals flashed between us. Which of us unlatched the cage I do not remember. It was an act of dual control. The squirrel hesitated, did a double take and suddenly was springing away into the trees, free again. Afterwards, though nothing was said as far as I know, there was some background unpleasantness and I think it likely that suspicion fell upon us as early animal liberationists.

The squirrel is emblematic of a book in which people give a last look, and are gone – often for good. Time and again, until the 'painful rejoicing' of the Armistice, a man vanishes from the scene, presumed dead on the battlefield. Children vanish too, like the young Belgian refugee who falls on the fire and dies, or the boy in Bognor who, during the interval of a circus where the mangy lions had palpably depressed Betts,

> came up and held out to me a penny bar of chocolate in its red paper, the kind that came out of machines. He looked straight at me. I took the chocolate. No word was spoken. We looked straight at one another for a moment and then he ran away again, back to his grown-ups. I felt better. It was not just the chocolate. I never knew who he was. I never forgot him.

Later that summer they heard that a small boy – a distant cousin who had been at the circus – had died, and she was sure that it was him: 'To this day I feel a faint desperation that I know nothing about that child who for one everlasting moment was known to me so well, known by heart.'

The Betts home lay between Wandsworth and Clapham commons, and before a dawn hanging at the Prison, a procession of

onlookers would pass the house. When notice of the hanging was posted, 'I was told that . . . a communal collective exhalation would go up from the crowd . . . I thought of this enormous sigh as the last breath of the hanged murderer, all the breath that had ever been in his lungs going out into the world without him.' Though the family's social position in the district was higher than some, any attempt to stand on ceremony was undermined by her father's cheerful irreverence, and by her mother's frank views on such matters as laundries ('She was disgusted at the thought of a whole neighbourhood's dirty linen tossed in together. This revulsion was reinforced by Mrs Allen, then our charwoman, who had once worked in a laundry, and described vividly the vats in which the soiled sheets of strangers heaved and jostled in a vile soup of suds, bleach and body fluids').

Betts's writing somehow combines the wisdom of age and the innocence of childhood, and makes quoting irresistible: 'We had an inkling, admittedly sketchy, of how babies got out, but we were unable to discover how they got in'; 'My brother's interests were simple: mathematics and girls. His mathematics helped him to keep count of the girls'; 'Although Aunt Ethel may have looked like Lord Longford in drag, she had been sought in marriage, though only by a curate . . .'

Her mother took the view that girls' education was largely a matter of superfluous information – Betts attended a local establishment where daily dictation consisted of editorials from the *Daily Mail* – so it is somewhat surprising that she eventually got to St Paul's. How that came about . . . but no, let readers of this marvellous book discover that for themselves. It is the kind that makes one want to yell – really yell – with joy. Even in the British Library.

CHRISTOPHER HAWTREE has edited Graham Greene's letters to the press and other writings (*Yours Etc*) and, for the World's Classics, John Meade Falkner's novel *The Nebuly Coat*. At present he is working on a book about language: *The Fear of Saffron*.