Playing with guns and whores

Glenys Roberts

HIGH CONCEPT:
DON SIMPSON AND THE HOLLYWOOD CULTURE OF EXCESS
by Charles Fleming
Bloomsbury, £16.99, pp. 249

Don Simpson once asked a Hollywood writer what time it was. 'Four o'clock,' came the answer. 'You know what I like to do at four o'clock?' said Simpson. 'I like to pour myself a big drink, lay out a few lines [of cocaine] and abuse a screenwriter.' He proceeded to demonstrate.

Simpson was the Hollywood producer who had a heart attack in his bathroom aged 52 two years ago, his fat little body filled with enough prescription drugs to stock a small hospital — quite apart from the cocaine. Self-abuse is an everyday story among West Coast wannabees, but Simpson wasn't one of them. He was a raging success by local standards. His first cheque from Paramount Studios was for over $2 million. He had it framed to prove it. During the Eighties his films, including *Top Gun* and *Beverley Hills Cop*, made superstars out of Tom Cruise and Eddie Murphy. They were nominated for 14 Academy Awards and won two. And he perfected the 'high concept', the essence of a film expressed in a couple of emotive words. *Alien*, for instance, was *Jaws* in a spaceship.

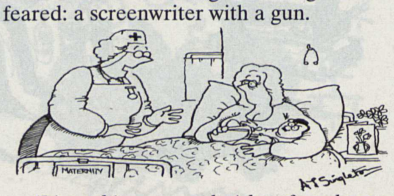
High was a good description of Simpson. 'Don has two speeds, full throttle and crash and burn,' one friend told the author of this book. Brought up in a quiet Alaskan household (hence dubbed the 'Eskimo' by his friend the Hollywood madame, Heidi Fleiss), he reinvented himself to take on the movie industry, boasting a badboy childhood in which he slaughtered caribou with bare hands and walked round with a Bible in one hand and his libido in the other. One minute he invented a jail sentence, the next a degree from UCLA — whatever it took to get a job. His lack of qualifications was a qualification in itself. Old-timers like Sam Goldwyn who invented Hollywood had only their idiosyncrasies to offer, yet they knew what moved men's hearts and filled cinema seats. The town has always been a triumph of ego over intellect. The author, an LA journalist, understands this, though not completely. Why was Simpson's gargantuan fault-line tolerated, he asks, when in no other industry would he have got away with it? He concludes that in Hollywood it wasn't even noticed.

Not quite. In Hollywood faults are actively admired. A gross Jack Nicholson, hair filthy and gut hanging out at a smart party, boasted to me, 'I can behave as badly as I like. They love it.' Simpson's bad behaviour was so excessive you fear you might catch an anti-social disease just reading about it. Bored with his 'boobs and Bulgari' approach to women — he bought any girl he fancied a new pair of breasts followed by a piece of jewellery — by the end he was shoving hookers' heads down toilet bowls.

Hollywood is pioneer territory. That's one reason why Simpson wore cowboy boots and played with guns and whores. He also wanted to get movies made in an era when budgets trebled and testosterone levels surged accordingly. To get his hands on mega-money he had to prove he was invincible. To achieve this he had to do more drugs, drink more, have more toys, more girls, take more risks, stay up later and still be ready for the 7 a.m. meeting. 'Anything that's worth doing is worth overdoing,' was his motto. He ordered 31 Armani suits at a time and wore his jeans only once before he threw them away. He and his business partner drove matching black Ferraris and hired matching twin secretaries. If that's not enough he was the first producer to hire a publicist for himself.

As the pace of life took its toll he tried to stop the clock with money. At the end he was spending £50,000 a month on prescription drugs, £10,000 on rehab clinics and remaking himself with plastic surgery and penile augmentation. He planned to star in his next movie with no clothes on.

In Hollywood nothing succeeds like excess. This book is a cautionary tale for today's graduate studio executives who will pore over its detailed film histories in a fruitless attempt to find out how to make a winning film. It can only be done by instinct. But everyone can enjoy the local gossip. Did you know Demi Moore is so greedy she is known as Gimme Moore or that the Disney studio is so unpopular to work in it is called Mauschwitz? But my favourite story is about the writer who got his own back on Simpson by grabbing his favourite laser-sighted Uzi submachine-gun in a script meeting. Simpson backed off in horror. He was seeing the thing he most feared: a screenwriter with a gun.



'It's nothing unusual. A lot of newborn babies look like Winston Churchill !'

Penguin Man in hard covers

Alfred Sherman

DARK CONTINENT
by Mark Mazower
Allen Lane/Penguin, £20, pp. 496

The historian's job is to dispel myths, but he is not immune to capture by them. Mark Mazower's bold attempt to write the history of 20th-century Europe begins by implicitly dispelling current myths, but ends in thrall to others. The most dangerous are those which are not made fully explicit (or 'explicated', as the Americans say). Europe and democracy go together automatically, like fish and chips; remove the constraints of Nazism, fascism or communism, the myth runs, and European civilisation will come into its own, guided by its own internal logic. Mazower is at his best when he describes the economic, political and national chaos that was interwar Europe.

President Truman said, 'The only new data are the history you don't know.' It is worth reminding us that the seeds of the second world war were sown before the ink was dry on the treaties which wound up the first. Unviable multinational states were created; the economic disruption caused by the Great War was perpetuated by the very measures chosen to overcome it. Economic theories derived from free trade and the gold standard clashed with and cancelled out 'national-economy' and autarkic measures beloved of the traditional Right and State-socialist measures beloved of the Left.

Few statesmen or politicians, churchmen and media were willing to face the realities and implications of German *revanchisme.* Mazower's strictures on Chamberlain and his associates are valid but spare Labour pacifism and support for appeasement. The author draws a veil over Rapallo, by which Stalin ensured that the German armed forces would escape their Versailles curbs and be ready to challenge the Entente by the mid-Thirties, and over Stalin's role in helping Hitler electorally in 1928 and 1933. He is unable to confront the Nazi-Soviet pact, which was not an aberration but a continuation of Rapallo, i.e. collaboration with the Germans in dismantling Versailles.

In spite of shortcomings, this part of the book is valuable for newcomers to the scene; but as it moves to the present and to the author's prescriptions it becomes less so. In the first place, Penguin man cannot

be satisfied to tell the story, but must emote, preach and prescribe.

I am sorry to be so critical; one would like to see the best in a work. But to write a 20th-century history of Europe, no less, would require near genius, which includes infinite capacity for taking pains, and would take a lifetime. Mazower rushes to judgment. He depends exclusively on secondary and tertiary English-language sources, eschewing primary and foreign ones. He quotes copiously from socialists and Keynesians, while excluding contrary views from all those he considers right-wing, and hence irredeemably evil.

For example, he launches into ferocious denunciations of Thatcher and her works, but gives us no inkling of her views either by direct quotation or objective summary, or those of Keith Joseph, Sir Alan Walters, or even of your reviewer, who was involved at that time, and also of the IEA, which advocated in a systematic way the views he denounces in caricature. The only Tory he cites (and frequently) is Lord Gilmour, a committed adversary of Thatcher and everything she stood for.

One example will have to suffice. Mazower writes that

> in 1979, monetary policy was elevated into dogma and became a new creed: monetarism. The State's ambitions were to be curtailed, its role confined to balancing the books and monitoring the supply of money — the revival of economic liberalism after 50 years in the wilderness.

This is illiterate nonsense. 'Monetarism' is an epithet which for a couple of decades was brandished against all who questioned neo-Keynesian theory and practice in the light of experience. The idea that state intervention had become excessive and counter-productive was adduced by all Tory governments and oppositions since 1950, though like Mrs Thatcher they failed to translate this into policy. Now Labour reflects this view in part. In office in 1979, Thatcher continued Labour's IMF-enjoined, neo-Keynesian squeeze with renewed vigour and Friedmanite rhetoric, though she had expressly warned against this in her foreword to Keith Joseph's seminal *Monetarism is not Enough*. Dennis Healey cleverly denounced this disastrous application of his policies as 'Thatcher monetarism', and the phrase stuck. Mazower fails to look behind it.

That exemplifies much of his book, a Penguin tract. It verges on student union politics when it simultaneously demands that Europe in general and Britain in particular engage in costly schemes to expand employment, yet simultaneously permit mass immigration to meet putative labour shortages. Characteristically, its compulsive topicality betrays it; its adulation of the 'Asian tigers', all the rage when he handed in the manuscript, is there to haunt him. It demonstrates that putting a Penguin paperback between hard covers does not give it solidity.

Keeping the show on the road

D. J. Taylor

COAST TO COAST
by Frederic Raphael
Orion, £16.99, pp. 231

Some years ago I published a book about English fiction of the post-1945 era called — unremarkably, it seemed to me — *After the War*. Barely had the first copy hit the shelves at Hatchard's than the post brought an immensely cross and triumphantly sarcastic letter from Frederic Raphael, accusing me of plagiarising the title of a novel of his. There was no address, so I couldn't write back. Enquiry revealed that Raphael is a famously stroppy correspondent, liable to take offence at the slightest provocation, or in this case, as there must have been half-a-dozen books called *After the War* in print at the time, no provocation at all. No doubt what follows will bring another icy missive whistling in from cyberspace, but never mind.

Coast to Coast takes in a journey across America undertaken by a middle-aged couple named Pierce, whose male half, Barnaby, is a successful writer of television comedy shows. Predictably, this calling has given him an ironic, if not mordant, outlook on life. His other half, Marion, rather thinks she wants a divorce. At any rate the novel opens with them selling their New England house before heading west with their sights set ultimately on Seattle and the marriage of their son, Benjamin. The car, a vintage Jaguar, is booked as a wedding present.

The Pierces' route from the north-eastern corner to the north-western extremity of this great nation of theirs is circuitous. A series of stop-overs finds them billeted on a succession of friends, relatives and ancient connections: Marion's sister and her farmer husband; an old college tutor; Barnie's former writing partner Stanley. As you might imagine, each re-encounter yields up a fresh perspective on their past life and their present uncertainties, from the college tutor's house where they first made love, to a steely interrogation courtesy of their daughter Stace.

Curiously, despite the relentless progress west, this is not a road novel. Scenic description barely figures, the action largely proceeds through dialogue — that trademark, buffed-up Raphael chatter in which the protagonists simply chip away at one another's frailties — and there is a general sense of someone (the author, possibly) trying very hard. No-nonsense demands ('Did you ever masturbate?') are slyly brought forth, old adulteries refought, and the effect of the 200-odd pages of wise-cracking is oddly exclusive. This is a private party, you feel, where the reader stays on sufferance.

Countless reviewers over the years have complained about Raphael's paralysing cleverness and his characters' habit of degenerating — in fact they start out that way — into intensely sophisticated puppets, and I am not about to add to their number. No offence, but these are mostly shallow affairs, and the shallowness lies in Raphael's inability to let his creations escape from the chains imposed on them by his ultra-smart dialogue, a sense that the style will always crowd out the feeling it is meant to convey. Never was there a writer so keen on letting form elbow content out of the way.

That said, *Coast to Coast* contains the usual abundant evidence of Raphael's skill: a confrontation with a disturbed teenage boy, the Pierces' adoptive nephew, who wants to come with them; a tremendous scene in which Stanley puts on an impromptu vaudeville performance and then drops down dead; a sombre but finely wrought finale at the wedding. On each of these occasions, Barnie and Marion stop playing at conversational one-upmanship