



# From Russia, with love



**Diaghilev's Empire: How the Ballets Russes Enthralled the World**  
Rupert Christiansen

(Faber & Faber, £25)

I DEVELOPED an unlikely obsession with Serge Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes at the age of 14. I slept beneath a poster of Vaslav Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose* (a role he came to despise as 'too pretty'), listened to a lot of Stravinsky and, on my first visit to Venice, was photographed looking mournful on the cemetery island of San Michele by the graves of the impresario and the composer, but not the dancer, who is buried in Montmartre.

**‘As Coco Chanel put it: “Diaghilev invented Russia for foreigners”’**

I became something of a balletomane, which is what the Arts critic Rupert Christiansen declares himself to be in the preface to his brilliantly eclectic and imaginatively researched account of Diaghilev's widespread influence. He jumps right in with Powell and Pressburger's 1948 film, *The Red Shoes*, which perpetuated the myth of Diaghilev in the figure of the ballet company director Boris Lermontov, played by a suavely elegant, demonically demanding Anton Walbrook. The outrageously lurid technicolour of the film, flaring onto the screen in glowing contrast to the grey drabness of post-war Europe, had its equivalent in the Paris Saison Russe of 1909, when the designs of Léon Bakst, in particular those for *Schéherazade*, had an immediate



Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky in *Le Spectre de la Rose*

impact on fashion and interior design. As Osbert Lancaster wrote, the prevailing 'pale, pastel shades were replaced by a riot of barbaric hues—jade green, purple, every variety of crimson and scarlet and, above all, orange'.

Who was the man who unleashed all this, and more? Mr Christiansen offers a fascinating portrait of the young Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev, who grew up in remote Perm, in an upper-middle-class family with musical inclinations and precarious finances. He opted to study law (not for long), chiefly as a way of getting himself to St Petersburg. Uncouth and exuberant, impulsive and excitable, his thick black hair shot through with a streak of

white, he cut a provincial figure at first, as brash and bouncy as an un-house-trained Labrador.

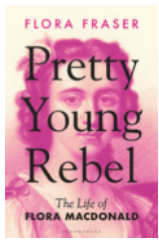
He was determined to make his mark and had a voracious appetite for new experiences, musical, visual and sensual. His first love was music, Wagner in particular, but the group of cultured young men in which he found himself had their eye on ballet as an outmoded artform that was ripe for development; Diaghilev was always swift to spot an opportunity and both a keen eye, and respect, for the acumen of others. These included Alexandre Benois, art historian, illustrator and stage designer, a friend with whom he frequently quarrelled, but whose

approval he craved. It was Benois who came up with what the author identifies as probably the most 'sharply illuminating' summary of Diaghilev's supreme quality: 'He was not a creative genius, he was perhaps rather lacking in creative imagination, but he had one characteristic, one ability, which none of us had and which made of him what he later became: he knew how to *will* a thing, and he knew how to carry his will into practice.'

After an early debacle when Diaghilev's plans to present a new staging of the ballet *Sylvia* collapsed ignominiously, he realised that the future might lie not in bringing refined French work to Russia, but in presenting the exoticism and grandeur of Russia in France. And so it all began, from *Boris Godunov* with the great bass Fyodor Chaliapin in Paris in 1908 to *The Firebird* in 1910, with Stravinsky's music and Bakst's designs, *Petrushka* in 1911, *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 and onwards. As Coco Chanel put it: 'Diaghilev invented Russia for foreigners.'

Mr Christiansen is particularly good at describing the dancers of the Ballets Russes: Tamara Karsavina, warmly human, 'with her darkly expressive beauty, dramatic versatility and poetic imagination'; Nijinsky, with his baffling personality and his extraordinary physique—slender torso, supple feet and the powerful thighs that enabled him to execute astonishing leaps, during which he appeared to pause in mid air; the 'plump, capricious and merry' Lydia Lopokova; and Léonide Massine, 'a dark horse and a control freak' with 'a vivid sense of the ludicrous'. He picks his way through the thickets of later manifestations of the Ballets Russes, and provides a shrewd analysis of Diaghilev's disarmingly 'untroubled and unapologetic homosexuality'. This is a serious, illuminating history studded with irresistible gossip and wry observation.

Henrietta Bredin →



**Pretty Young Rebel; The Life of Flora Macdonald**  
**Flora Fraser**  
 (Bloomsbury, £25)

ONE little-known aspect of Flora Macdonald's much-romanticised life is how increasingly oppressed her circle of Highland gentry was in the later 18th century. It comes across in this new biography and explains why so many resorted to voluntary emigration decades before the Clearances. Flora's travails after her marriage in 1750 and move to America in 1774 were exacerbated by the fecklessness of her husband, a strapping, but imperious Skye tacksman, who would prove a hopeless military leader.

For all her glamour as a Jacobite heroine, Flora's life remained tough and she spent her later years back in the Hebrides in poor health. Fortunately, thanks

to her romantic image as rebel-turned-loyalist, she became the darling of Edinburgh and London society and used 'quiet determination to take advantage of her fame'. She sold memorabilia, was financed by admirers and even received a pension from the Prince of Wales.

## 'Flora Macdonald remains brave and resourceful to the end'

Central to the book's first half is Bonnie Prince Charlie's escape from the Outer Hebrides in 1746 and the crucial role played by the young Flora. It's a gripping drama that never pales in the retelling, even when peppered with annoying inaccuracies and nomenclature. As the Redcoats



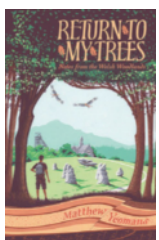
Flora Macdonald painted in 1749

tighten the noose around the fugitive, Flora's stepfather comes up with a last-ditch ploy. The Prince is disguised as Flora's Irish maid and they are rowed from Benbecula over the sea to Skye, where the close shaves continue. You can't help but admire the staunch loyalty of the chain of supporters. Despite splits of allegiance and a 30,000-guinea reward, they never betray him and

nearly all but the Prince are caught. Flora's captors are beguiled by her charms, however, and she is treated remarkably leniently.

The book is written in an odd, often muddling style and would have benefitted from a more nuanced portrayal of Flora's interconnected social world and its historic context, as well as some atmospheric feel for the landscapes in which the extraordinary events take place.

Nonetheless, it tells an absorbing story once the family gets to North Carolina, where the Eden of their new life is short lived. The colony is already in political turmoil and the Highlanders come out in support of the Hanoverian Crown, with disastrous results. Flora remains brave and resourceful to the end. Yet, for all the contemporary quotes, the portraits, allegories and adventures, the real Flora Macdonald is never really fleshed out and she remains an unfathomable figure.  
*Mary Miers*



**Return to my Trees: Notes from the Welsh Woodlands**  
**Matthew Yeomans**  
 (Calon, £18.99)

MATTHEW YEOMANS has written a rather interesting book, although perhaps not of the sort he intended. It's his account of walking, in fits and starts, from the bottom of Wales to the top, via existing forest or potential sites for re-wooding under the Principality's £15 million National Forest for Wales Plan.

A post-Covid convert to trees, the author is a passionate advocate of the arboreal, praising trees' ability to mitigate climate change and improve mental health ('forest-bathing'). By his own endearing admission, he is 'green' about lumber, failing to identify an oak. There is no nuance about the human relationship with trees; it's all mystically enchanted, which makes one wonder about the



**Letters of the lore: The Ash Dragon in Penmachno, Snowdonia National Park**

desperate phrase 'we're not out of the woods yet'. At the end of his 300-mile pilgrimage, Mr Yeomans is physically and spiritually revived and 'in love with nature'.

I expected, even wanted, an immersive experience—the Welsh

rainforests are among the most atmospheric, eco-rich habitats on the planet. This did not happen, but other things did. A travel and business writer, Mr Yeomans has a brisk, lean pen and his book is full of fascinating bits and bobs about

Cymru, all relayed casually as he tramps the beautiful land of his fathers. It drops attractive leaves of lore, culture and history, whether it's the multitude of native words for rain (you have to love *sgrympian*, 'a short sharp shower') or the tale of Twm Siôn Cati, the Welsh Robin Hood.

Wales is hugely undervalued as a tourist destination, but 'twas not always thus: during the Romantic era, it was a tour of choice for aesthetes—Coleridge's *Xanadu* may have been inspired by the secluded Hafod estate near Aberstwyth. However, the later-Victorian exploitation of the southern coalfields, the satanic mines and grotesque slag heaps blighted Wales's reputation. This book is accidental, a redemptive advert. Of course, coal is petrified forest, so re-treating the old industrial valleys has a certain appropriate logic: living trees healing the scars on the landscape caused by the excavation of dead trees—trees doing their curing thing.  
*John Lewis-Stempel*