

Bookshelf

EDITED BY
JUANITA COULSON

THE KING AND QUEEN OF STAGE AND SCREEN

GOD AND THE ANGEL: Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier's Tour de Force of Australia and New Zealand by **Shiroma Perera-Nathan** (Melbourne Books, £46.99)

It would be easy to dismiss so-called coffee-table books as visually pleasing but lacking depth when it comes to information about their subject. This is not the case with Shiroma Perera-Nathan's illustrated record of Sir Laurence Olivier and Vivien Leigh's tour of Australia and New Zealand in 1948. At the height of their fame, with Olivier newly knighted, the two stars of the stage and screen embarked on the nine-month tour to raise funds for the Old Vic, of which Olivier was the co-director.

Their new roles as ambassadors for the British Council saw them behaving like royalty, cutting ribbons and making speeches. Behind the scenes, however, their marriage was falling apart. A young interloper called Peter Finch had piqued Olivier's and Leigh's curiosity, and Leigh would go on to have an affair with him that would lead to the end of his marriage.

With her lifelong interest in the Oliviers and diligent research, Perera-Nathan has left no stone unturned and has scoured various archival materials, such as Olivier's diary and eyewitness accounts of the glory days of the tour. She gives us a real sense of 'Larry and Viv', and skilfully negotiates tricky topics such as Leigh's declining mental health.

Never-before-seen images are a real treat, showing the dual sides of Olivier and Leigh. While they were the undisputed king and queen of the British theatre on stage and in public life, they are also shown relaxing behind the scenes, with colleagues, or swapping intimate, stolen glances. *God and the Angel* is a beautiful book, but also a sensitive account that adds a new dimension to our knowledge of this celebrated couple.

Lyndsy Spence



Vivien Leigh and Laurence Olivier's
Tour De Force of Australia and New Zealand

Shiroma Perera-Nathan



*'Behind the scenes,
their marriage was
falling apart'*



The prolific
historical novelist
loves her dog and
injured owls

MEET THE AUTHOR PHILIPPA GREGORY

When are you at your happiest?

When I'm alone, walking my dog, a mostly well-behaved Irish setter, deep in the English countryside. Writing is also a joy. I'm also lucky enough to live close to my children and grandchildren, which results in many happy moments.

What is your earliest memory?

Reading! My mother was a keen tennis player, so I used to take a stack of library books to read while watching her play from the side of the court. Public libraries are such an important resource for society.

Who has been your greatest influence?

I have been hugely blessed that the women in my life encouraged or funded my study: my mother, Elaine Gregory, and my aunts, Mary Wedd and Winifred Leonard, who graduated at Oxford before women were awarded degrees.

What is your most treasured possession?

My library. I have shelves on every wall in my study, the stairwell and the hall. I do read a Kindle, but prefer hardbacks for study.

Do you have pets?

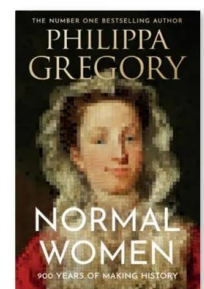
My dog, Butter. And I'm also

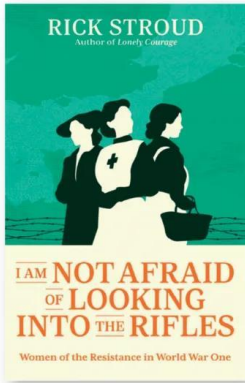
partnered with the local owl and wild bird sanctuary, so there are often visiting patients waiting to be released.

Favourite meal?

I'm not really a foodie, and I'm a terrible cook. I don't think there's much to top a cheese toastie with a glass of red wine.

◆ *Normal Women: 900 Years of Making History* by Philippa Gregory is published by HarperCollins, price £25





WOMEN AT WAR

I AM NOT AFRAID OF LOOKING INTO RIFLES:

Women of the Resistance in World War One

by **Rick Stroud** (Simon & Schuster, £22)

This is a fitting and gripping tribute to eight undeniably courageous women who worked undercover as spies or helped to repatriate Allied soldiers from Belgium and France during the First World War. Their activities came at enormous personal cost: they ended their days in labour camps, prison or in front of a firing squad.

Stroud weaves their precious lives into a thrilling narrative that creates an extraordinary picture of female resistance. I lapped up the personal stories of heroism and felt incredibly moved by what these women from all walks of life were prepared to do to protect their country.

Edith Cavell nursed soldiers from both sides, but also helped 200 Allied soldiers escape from occupied Belgium. She was arrested, and despite an international outcry was executed by firing squad. The British prime minister Herbert Asquith declared that she had 'taught the bravest men among us the supreme lesson of courage'.

The Belgian spy Gabrielle Petit, who worked for British intelligence by reporting on German activity, also faced the firing squad.

The book is full of adventure and intrigue, stealthily mixing fact with historical fiction. Not only do the personal histories stand out, but the book also serves as a valuable reference work. Lest we forget. *EF*

I'm working hard to live a life of sloth

Troubling dreams are frustrating my pursuit of laziness, says *Ivo Darenay*

When people talk about 'living the dream', I shudder. After all, I would hate to live mine. Now in my eighth decade, what I prefer to live is a supremely slothful life, rising as late as the dog will let me, reading *The Times* over coffee and eventually drifting out into the garden to sniff the air at about 11am. A voyage to the shops marks a busy day.

If people at the rare parties I attend ask what I do, I reply with the smugness of the retired: 'I am a gentleman – full-time.' This deliberately annoying response is made worse by my going off on a meandering series of observations about the vulgarity of working, and the moral obligation we oldsters have to make way for the young in the workplace. After all, I point out, it is a novelty for people of a certain social standing to work at all. This innovation only began in the 20th century, before which gentlemen were required only to go to their clubs and, when called upon, to lay down their lives in wars for their country.

All this has been reinforced for me by reading (or having read to me in an audiobook) the diaries of the Anglophile American Sir Henry 'Chips' Channon. He was man of such wealth and languor that apart from occasional visits to the House of Commons (he inherited a seat from his mother-in-law) – his entire life was spent having lunch, going to parties and gossiping.

For me, that sounds like a rather frenetic existence – gossiping



requires acquiring the information in the first place, which entails going to more social events than I could handle. As I write, I am wondering whether I have the energy to go to my club – a trip that requires taking public transport for at least 20 minutes.

Which brings me to my troubling dreams. I have noticed in recent months that almost all my nights are spent tossing and turning with anxiety about arduous tasks. These include completing journalistic assignments to deadlines, moving my family through airports without missing planes, or some other such obstacle course of daily life.

The one characteristic these semi-nightmares share is the pressure to complete an objective while the clock ticks down. Why I have them is a mystery, and tends to make me think there is a jealous God out there who is determined to punish me for the sin of sloth.

Sometimes these deadline anxieties enter my real life. For example right now, since this copy is late. Once I have filed it I think I will need a lie down, so the club will have to wait until tomorrow. But then I may sleep 'perchance to dream...' There's the rub. ■