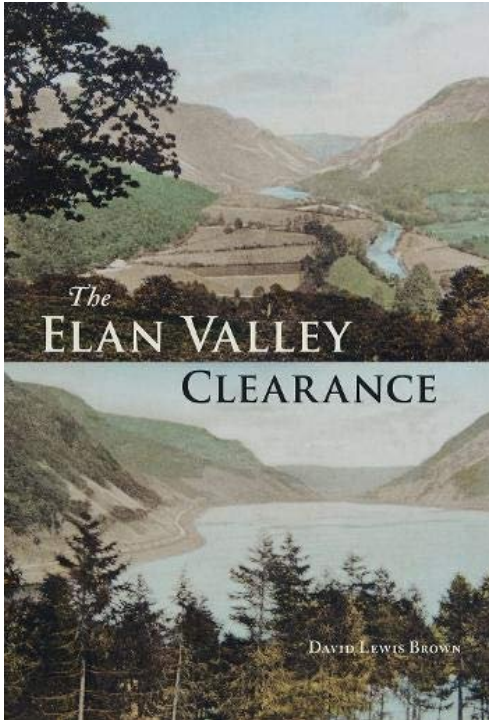


Book Reviews

Book reviews are welcomed from all members, not just those in the Reading Groups. Please email your reviews to Margaret Mason margaret@u3a-llandrindod.org.uk

These following reviews come from Clive Barrett, Karyn Wynne Evans and Margaret Mason.



The Elan Valley Clearance by David Lewis Brown

The author David Lewis Brown has family links with the Elan Valley. His great grandfather brought his family from Oswestry in the 1890's, in order to find work in building the Elan Valley dams. David still has family who settled in the area, and on visiting relatives during his childhood family holidays, he became fascinated in what the valleys would have looked like before the dams were built, and the effects on the people and places of the Elan and Claerwen Valleys during the years 1891 to 1911. In his retirement he has devoted his time to researching the subject, the story culminates in the opening of the dams on July 21st 1904 by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. David's research is based on the original 1892 Scheme to build dams in both valleys, by way of census returns, electoral rolls, parish records, old photographs, documents, newspapers, books and maps. The mixture produced by the author will appeal in equal measure to the local, social and family historian. Chronologically the book starts with an imaginary walk taken in 1891 from Pont-ar-Elan down the valley to the

proposed site for the Caban Coch Dam, back to the junction with the Claerwen Valley, and then following this valley up to Pant-y-Beddu. Reference is made to contemporary photographs, the names of the people, and the occupations of those living in the properties en route. In 1891 these people were about to lose their homes and livelihood.

Part 2 of the book explains why the Elan area was chosen for the scheme to supply water to Birmingham. The book then outlines the passage of the Birmingham Corporation Water Act of 1892 through Parliament, and describes the feelings for and against the scheme.

In Part 3 the author describes briefly the construction of the dams in a chapter called "Building the Dams".

Part 4 is entitled "Preparing for the Clearance". Reports and surveys had to be made to determine who would be eligible for rehousing, and which houses would need to be replaced. Detailed maps show the properties affected, and the extent of the flooding that would affect them.

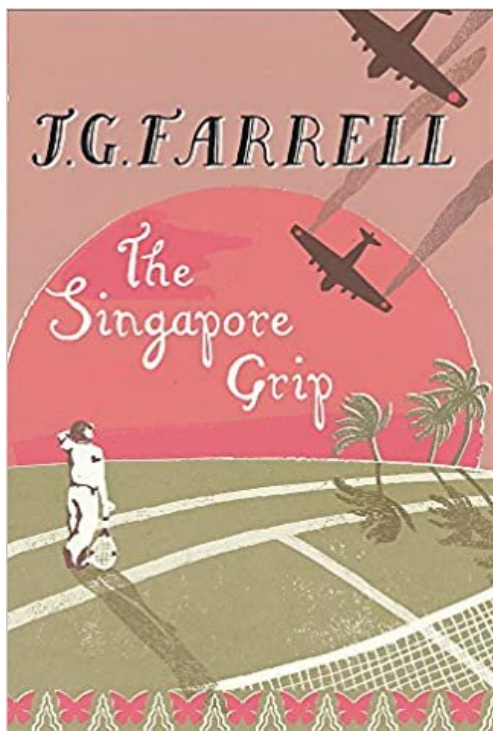
"The Fate of the Valleys" is described in Part 5, this chapter looks in more detail at the effect of the building of the dams on the people and properties of the Elan and Claerwen Valleys between the twenty years previously mentioned at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries.

The concluding Part 6 of the book considers "What can be seen today" and is really a guide for present day visitors to the area, whether travelling by car or on foot. These houses were once the homes of people displaced by the building of the dams in the two valleys.

"The Elan Valley Clearance" is a very good book ... extremely well presented and obviously researched in great detail. As a local history student I enjoyed reading a book about my favourite location, written from a different angle than normal. Possibly the book's ultimate line of approval is that any political historian will learn (if he or she didn't previously know) how the Birmingham

Corporation Water Act of 1892 was implemented in a remote albeit very picturesque area of Wales with very little representation from the Principality.

CB



The Singapore Grip by J G Farrell

I decided to read this book prior to it coming on the tv this Autumn.

The story is set in Singapore in the late 1930's, just before the fall of Singapore to the Japanese in 1942 .

Walter Blackett is the head of Blackett and Webb, a very successful trading company dealing in rubber, exploiting both the native people and the market.

Webb is much older than Blackett and dies, leaving his share of the business to his son Matthew who was born and brought up in England. After Oxford he works for a charity attached to the League of Nations. He had never been to Singapore prior to his father's death.

On arrival on the island this naive young man is horrified by the decadent life style of the British and their exploitation of the 'native masses ' .

Walter Blackett has three children:-

Joan - intelligent, unpleasant and manipulative

Monty - a drunkard, idle and vulgar

Kate - a pleasant young teenager.

Walter decides it would be good for business if Joan married Matthew. Joan is willing but Matthew eventually has the courage to refuse.

Enter Vera Chiang - an Eurasian. Hmm!

As all this is happening the Japanese are slowly advancing on bicycles and tanks on Singapore, helped by the gross incompetence of the British Generals and the belief that Singapore would never fall.

Singapore fell in 1942.

The book is hailed as an anti-empire satire, however, Kate Blackett's husband reads from The Times of 10 Dec 1976 'Plantation workers paid less than one dollar a day ' I.e. nothing very much has changed despite great upheavals and independence in many countries.

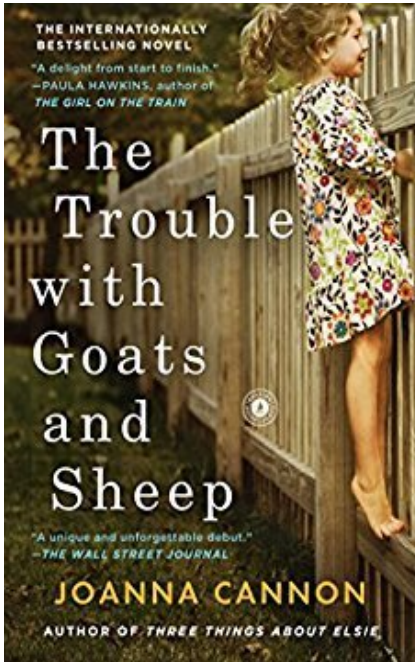
There was a quote earlier in the book about King William after the Battle of the Boyne. He was asked by the boatman rowing him across the river who had won and answered 'What is it to you? You will still be a boatman '

I really enjoyed the first part of the book. It was very, very, funny, the satire was sharp, it reminded me of 'Black Adder Goes Forth' in its treatment of a very serious event.

Unfortunately it became very bogged down with the battles and was far too long - 600+ pages. However I'm glad I finished it if only for the last chapter.

I was looking forward to the tv series but unfortunately it's terrible. The dialogue is poor, the acting not much better, there is no satire and it is not even very funny. I can only hope it improves!!

KWE



The Trouble with Goats and Sheep by Joanna Cannon

It is the hot summer of 1976. As the gardens wilt and die, and the air shimmers with heat, Mrs Margaret Creasy goes missing.

Ten year old Grace Bennett and her best friend Tilly are determined to solve the mystery. Grace asks the vicar how to keep people safe, and is told to bring them to Jesus, that God will help, and God is everywhere. So Grace and Tilly go looking for Jesus, and Mrs Creasy, amongst their neighbours in The Avenue. But as the bubbles break the surface on the melting tarmac, so do the secrets of these seemingly ordinary people rise into the open. In the end the girls may be said to have found both Jesus and Mrs Creasy, but probably not in the way we expected.

I love this book for many reasons. It is both a coming of age tale and a murder mystery. I think it is more successful as the former (simply because I find many people do not agree with me that a crime has been committed). Above all it is a tale about the basic human need to fit in, to belong.

“But I don’t understand,” whispered Tilly. “How does God know which people are goats, and which people are sheep?” ... ”I think that’s the trouble,” I said. “it’s not always that easy to tell the difference.”

The novel is very funny, with much of the humour coming from the dissonance between the child’s view of life and that of the adult, eg “ My mother said I was at an awkward age. I didn’t feel especially awkward, so I presumed she meant it was awkward for them.” There is a freshness in the writing that really appeals – “ Dorothy Forbes, dressed in alternating layers of taupe and concern.” Joanna Cannon is a qualified psychiatrist, and this comes over in the characterisation, which is delicately observed. “Whenever Tilly was there, [my father] became a cartoon parent, a surrogate father. He swooped down to fill a gap in Tilly’s life that she never realised existed, until he highlighted it so exquisitely.”

MM