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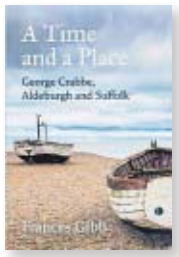
Maria Bengtsson and Allan Clayton in Peter Grimes at the Royal Opera House. Below: George Crabbe

books

How awful Aldeburgh made a tortured poet

The dismal landscape of Suffolk and eerie local folklore inspired George Crabbe's works, says DJ Taylor

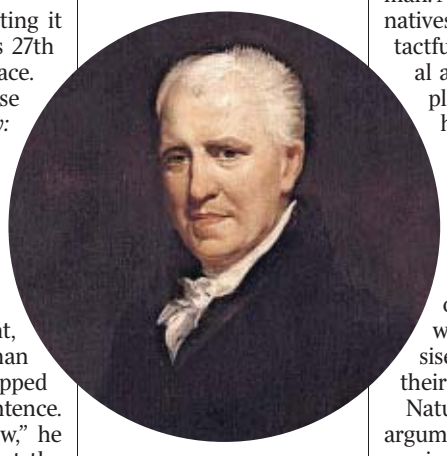


A Time and a Place
George Crabbe, Aldeburgh and Suffolk
by Frances Gibb

Lutterworth, 174pp; £17.50

Most literary careers yield up a pivotal moment when the life in question tilts on its axis and the writer living it finds their prospects dramatically transformed. With the Suffolk poet George Crabbe (1754-1834), the subject of Frances Gibb's brisk and entertaining portrait, it turns up in March 1781 at a time when, to borrow one of the chapter titles so beloved of Victorian novelists, our hero's fortunes have fallen very low.

In fact, "fallen very low" is putting it mildly. Here in the foothills of his 27th year, Crabbe stared penury in the face. A cash-strapped apothecary whose solitary published work (*Inebriety: A Poem in Three Parts*) had been issued anonymously in Ipswich, he informed his long-suffering fiancée — the engagement lasted 11 years — that "it's the vilest thing in the world to have but one coat". Plainly, something had to be done.



Desperate for encouragement, Crabbe petitioned the Whig statesman Edmund Burke in a letter that dripped existential unease from every sentence. "I will call upon You Sir tomorrow," he abjectly concluded. "& if I have not the Happiness to obtain Credit with You, I will submit to my Fate." As for his position in the world, "My Existence is a Pain to me, & everyone near & dear to me are distress'd in my Distresses…"

Remarkably, the stratagem worked. Burke not only offered financial support, he assured his startled protégé that *The Library* and *The Village* were "two poems of a somewhat superior kind" and drummed up subscribers for the former's publication, and roped in Dr Johnson in the role of editorial adviser. A few months later, having learnt of his young friend's "strong partiality" for the church, he pulled strings with the Bishop of Norwich and had him ordained as a clergyman.

There was one impediment to this triumphal progress: the only curacy his friends could procure for him was in Aldeburgh on the Suffolk coast, the town of his birth, where he had once been reduced to hauling tubs of salt up the quay before setting up as a far from successful medical man. None of this went down well with the natives who, as his son George Jr once tactfully put it, "had witnessed his manual awkwardness in the pursuits of the place". There were also rumours that he had been seduced by Methodism.

It is here that Frances Gibb, the former legal editor of this newspaper, gets into her stride. For at its heart *A Time and a Place* is an exercise in psychogeography, a study of Crabbe's poems that not only tethers them to the place in which they were written but emphasises the centrality of the location to their achievement.

Naturally, there is a chicken-and-egg argument here. Was Crabbe's engrained pessimism ("Mid-day it was and as the Sun declined/ The early rapture I no more could find" etc) Aldeburgh's fault, or did the atmosphere of the Suffolk strand simply encourage a lowness of spirits that had been there from the start?

Certainly, Crabbe was an odd fish of obscure provenance (the original patronym may well have been "Crab"), much oppressed by his alcoholic father, kept going by opium and keenly alert to the savagery of the landscape around him. If today's Aldeburgh is a genteel coastal resort, then its late 18th-century equivalent can look like the edge of the world. Crabbe Jr, who wrote his father's biography, remembered hearing him "describe a tremendous spring-tide of, I think, the 1st of January 1779, when eleven houses were at once demolished; and he saw the breakers dash over the roofs, curl round the walls and crush all to ruin".

The murderous fisherman Peter Grimes appears in an 1810 poem by Crabbe

Slaughden, the adjoining village where Crabbe was born, no longer exists: its final remnants were swept away by the sea a century ago. As Gibb points out, the Suffolk landscapes are not merely a backdrop to Crabbe's oddly devitalised brooding, they are integral to his protagonists' mental states. The doomed lover in *Delay has Danger*, watching the swallows and the newly garnered harvest that "slowly blackened in the sickly sun" imagines that "all these were sad in nature, or they took/ Sadness from him, the likeness of his look".

By the early 1800s Crabbe had left Suffolk for good, but its myths and legends continued to burn in his mind. Peter Grimes, a particularly eerie piece of local folklore in which a sadistic fisherman takes his apprentices out into the estuary to murder them, features in the 1810 poem *The Borough* as well Benjamin Britten's 1945 opera. Britten, Gibb tells us, became fascinated by the psychology of Crabbe's characters and the way in which, as his friend EM Forster puts it, the poet "subtly … links the scene with the soul of the observer".

Gibb is probably right not to make too many claims for Crabbe's verse. Forster's opinion of *The Borough* stresses its evocative force over technical flair: "Not great poetry, by any means, but it convinces me that Crabbe and Peter Grimes and myself do stop beside an opening sluice and that we are looking at actual English tideway and not at some vague vast imaginary waterfall, which crashes from nowhere to nowhere." As this account of a place-haunted poetic realist demonstrates in spades, you can have enough of Romanticism.

The rise of the octogenarian novelist

As Penelope Lively retires at a youthful 89, Susie Goldsbrough salutes the old masters who show that age is no bar to fine writing

The British novelist Penelope Lively told BBC Radio 4 this week that she's hanging up her pen at the age of 89. She does not want to "flog a dead horse". Fair enough. The Booker prizewinning author has produced more than 50 novels, short story collections and children's books over the course of her 52-year career. Her most recent work, *Metamorphosis*, a blissful, witty collection of her short stories old and new, was published last year. The remarkable bit is that she has gone on this long.

On the subject of age, Kazuo Ishiguro once told an interviewer that as he gets older he has been haunted by the belief that great novels are the preserve of writers under the age of 40. Lively isn't the only one putting paid to such flimsy fears. Some of the best writers are still producing fine work well into their eighties.

Sixteen years after the publication of **Cormac McCarthy**'s *The Road*, the celebrated novelist's chilling, Pulitzer-winning vision of a father and son travelling across a post-apocalyptic, ash-dusted America, the announcement came in that two new McCarthy novels, *The Passenger* and *Stella Maris*, will arrive this autumn. Not too shabby for an 88-year-old.

John Le Carré, Britain's finest spy writer, brought out his final book aged 88, a year before his death in 2020 (*Silverview* was published posthumously, in 2021). *Agent Running in the Field*, his 25th novel, had all the reassuring ingredients of a classic Le Carré — jaded, decent spy versus slimy establishment boss — but it was the novel he wrote before that, *A Legacy of Spies*, published when Le Carré was a mere 86, that proved to be his late masterpiece. In the last of the George Smiley saga, old faithful Peter Guillam is tugged from placid retirement in Brittany to defend his role in an old case to some rather nasty pen-pushers in the new MI6. It's a face-off for the ages: desiccated Cold War romantics meet stone-hearted young pretenders.

When a press release says "the best writer in the world" and "the greatest novelist writing in English", it is natural to raise an eyebrow before checking to see if the quotes were provided by the author's mum. Yet when the subject is **Anne Tyler**, 80, there's no need. She's beloved of readers and critics, and her 24th novel, *French Braid*, which was published in March, is a fine example. It's about the Garretts, a Baltimore family with a hardware store and a whole heap of secrets, which spiral down the generations from the Fifties all the way to the coronavirus pandemic.

GRIPPING Edna O'Brien wrote Girl aged 88

The Irish novelist **Edna O'Brien** was 88 and had been producing fiction for 60 years when she wrote *Girl*, about the 276 Nigerian schoolgirls abducted by the Islamist terror group Boko Haram in 2014. As a feat of imaginative empathy, it's extraordinary. "I was a girl once," says Maryam, the narrator of O'Brien's 19th work of fiction, "but not any more." It is an arresting opening to a novel that is hard to read and hard to put down. Hard to read because the events it describes are horrific; hard to put down because there's a mesmerising quality to the prose and storytelling that makes it utterly gripping.

Margaret Atwood, the queen of feminist dystopia, won (jointly, with Bernardine Evaristo's *Girl, Woman, Other*) the Booker prize in 2019 at the age of 79 for the long-awaited follow-up to her hugely influential 1985 masterpiece *The Handmaid's Tale*. The world of *The Testaments* is familiar and strange: the story begins 15 years after the end of the original, when the heroine Offred is led into a black van and driven away to an unknown future, then introduces us to two new tough-as-boots teenagers facing off against the awful state machinery of Gilead, as well as darting back in time to the early days of the foul regime. It's not a patch on the original, but it's still impressive.