



**A WEEK
IN BOOKS**

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TONKIN

IF THE POP-HISTORY boom detonated by Schama, Starkey and co has a downside, it lies in the preference of these past masters for polishing up old stories rather than discovering new ones. The agent John Saddler recently struck a £350,000 deal for a young researcher, Kate Williams. One part of it involves a new biography of Emma Hamilton. Now, the old tales don't come much more gripping than the Neapolitan tangle that bound Emma, Sir William and Horatio Nelson. All the same, if you assembled every version published over the past 150 years, the shelf would stretch from here to Cape Trafalgar.

The historical titles shortlisted for this year's Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction (to be decided on Monday) showcase a similar taste for the flamboyant spin on the familiar yarn. They include Roy Jenkins' baroque galleon of a life of Winston Churchill, as well as Margaret Macmillan's pacy account of the Versailles conference, *Peacemakers*. Even the most original work in the frame, Eamon Duffy's *The Voices of Morebath*, deploys fresh evidence to revisit the well-worn dilemmas of the English Reformation.

One bold new story that does figure on the shortlist is Brendan Simms' *Unfinest Hour: Britain and the Destruction of Bosnia*. This is a committed historian's sulphurous assault on British prevarication in the Balkans in the early Nineties, under Major and Hurd. Poised between rough-draft history, investigative reporting and no-insults-barred polemic, Simms' book delivers a compelling case for early and forceful intervention to safeguard human rights.

Since *Unfinest Hour* won many golden opinions from reviewers (ours included) and stands a pretty fair chance, I'd like to be able to recommend a more detached analysis of military actions under the humanitarian flag. To some extent, David Chandler's careful and corrosive study *From Kosovo to Kabul: Human Rights and International Intervention* (Pluto, £14.99) fills this role. Yet I would have to stick a whopping health warning on any endorsement.

True, Chandler deftly unpicks the hypocrisy and double standards behind our "ethical" bombing in the Balkans and Asia. Yet to read this book is to enter a looking-glass world. Here, criminals such as Mladic and Karadzic appear merely as the quarry of strong-arm victors' justice, while any "political process" within the most ruthless, repressive states emerges as legally superior to meddling incursions by NGOs or sanctimonious Western leaders.

For me, a vague unpleasant taste turns nauseous when Chandler alludes to the massacres at Srebrenica in July 1995. He calls these events "the alleged execution and death of thousands of Muslims". Just "alleged"? The Dutch government, condemned in a report this April for its troops' failure to halt the atrocities, deemed the case clear enough to resign *en masse*. I asked Dr Chandler - who is based at Leeds Metropolitan University - to clarify. He replies that "few authoritative commentators give credence to the 7,500-8,000 figure widely cited" and refers me to a sceptical analysis by George Pumphrey, at www.members.tripod.com/kosovo99/srebreni.htm. To which I would respond with the official report by the Netherlands Institute for War Documentation, at www.oorlogsdoc.knaw.nl. I have no wish to minimise the fog of war but, with Srebrenica, there seems no overriding reason to suppose that it's an impenetrable pea-souper.

If Brendan Simms - the very model of the liberal interventionism that David Chandler so detests - wins on Monday, it might be worth seeking out *From Kosovo to Kabul* as a platitude-busting antidote. But do take it in measured doses. In all historical quarrels, old or new, there comes a point where dissidence shades into denial.