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Review: Florian Illies, *1913, the Year Before the Storm*

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1913, *THE YEAR BEFORE THE STORM*, by Florian Illies, translated by Shaun Whiteside and Jamie Lee Searle.

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In the rolling hills just south of the little village of Neuville St Vaast, in Northern France, is a War Cemetery. Here, tightly packed, thousands of simple granite crosses stretch as far as the eye can see. Nothing can prepare the visitor for the scale of the place, which is only increased by the realisation that each cross carries two names, one on each branch, and then another two on the other side. In total the small commune of Neuville St Vaast holds the remains of 44,833 German soldiers, four to a grave, as well as 12,210 French, and 1,567 British and Commonwealth soldiers – and that's not counting the thousands whose bodies were never found. Such places are inescapable reminders of the cost of the Great War, the best possible evidence of a tortured age. Like the concentration camps, military cemeteries of the Western Front are among the rare relics of our recent past which seem utterly abhorrent, which beg the question: how did it ever come to this?

As Christopher Clark wrote in last month's LRB, 'the debate over the origins of the First World War is older than the war itself'.<sup>1</sup> It has been estimated that 25,000 books and articles have been written on the subject, in English alone. Three recent additions to the pile are worth mentioning: *The War that Ended Peace* by Margaret MacMillan, *July 1914: Countdown to War* by Sean McMeekin, and Clark's own widely-acclaimed *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe went to War in 1914*, which each achieve the feat of bringing something new to the debate. No doubt more will

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Clark, 'The First Calamity', *London Review of Books*, vol.35, No.16, p.5.

follow next year and in years to come. Yet just as interesting, and currently receiving similar attention, is the period that immediately preceded the war, the last days of the decadent *Belle Epoque*, suffused in literature and the public mind with images of long summer afternoons, garden parties, aristocratic balls.

Perhaps surprisingly, one of the most successful of the works addressing this period is a slim volume by the German ‘man of style’ Florian Illies. Lacking the political angle of Michael Portillo’s Radio 4 series 1913, *The Year Before*, and the global span of Charles Emerson’s 1913, *The World before the Great War, 1913, the Year Before the Storm* is a light-hearted romp through the year’s high cultural scene by the German Art historian, dealer and journalist. Vienna, home to Freud, Klimt, Schiele, Loos, and Kokoschka, is at the heart of the book, with regular forays to Berlin, Munich, Paris, various seaside and spa resorts, and, very occasionally, that backwater of *Hochkultur*, London. Through twelve chapters, one for each month, anecdotes and meetings are told in the present tense, as ironic comments flank diary entries and excerpts from letters. Much space is given to the insecure relationships between Rilke and, among others, Lou Andreas-Salomé; Gottfried Benn and Else Lasker-Schüler; Oskar Kokoschka and Alma Mahler.

The tone is playful throughout, immediately likeable, and rendered with care and ability by the two translators. Early in the first chapter comes the single-sentence paragraph “Speaking of sickly: where is Rilke, by the way?” It embodies the book – well-turned, familiar, spirited, gently mocking of its subject. It is an achievement that amongst all the creative, egotistical voices belonging to his subjects, the author’s still dominates. Among other idiosyncrasies, Illies displays a pleasing obsession with addresses. Thomas Mann buys a plot of land at 1 Poschingerstrasse while his

brother Heinrich lives with his wife at 49 Leopoldstrasse, both in Munich; Dr Sigmund Freud's residence is at 19 Berggasse, in Vienna; Marcel Proust's study, we learn, was at 102 Boulevard Haussmann in Paris. A reader equipped with Google glasses would no doubt find her experience greatly enhanced by calling up street-views as they went along. Indeed, the fact that 1913 is the perfect antidote to British cultural and historical anglo-centrism means that for those of us with a tenuous grasp of early 20th century German and Austro-Hungarian culture, having a reference book or laptop at hand is invaluable when reading. Several characters, unknown to the non-academic reader at the start of the book, will be hardly more familiar by its end. Ernst Ludwig Kirchner anyone? Lovis Corinth? Some paragraphs are as short and, to me, as meaningless as 'On 29 March Karl Kraus delivers a lecture in the Vierjahreszeiten-Saal in Munich. Among the audience is Heinrich Mann. Warm applause.' Others are unforgettable: the first time a 12-year-old Louis Armstrong picked up a trumpet; the fact that ecstasy was developed in January 1913, only to be forgotten. What would the world have been like if 1913 had been the first Summer of Love? Perhaps it wouldn't have changed a thing, but there can be few more entertaining questions in the fruitless field on what-if history.

Why this obsession with 1913? Our interest in the year is two-fold: firstly the abrupt juxtaposition between perceived peaceful prosperity and total war; secondly the not-so-distant mirror 1913 offers up to our own time. For the latter the geopolitical and economic parallels are well-rehearsed, the social and cultural ones maybe less so, in part precisely because of the distorting effect of hindsight. The main tenet of Portillo's 10-part radio series is that the natural emphasis on the awfulness of the war has hidden from view the reality and complexity of the preceding year, in

particular since the re-evaluation of the war which took place in the 1930s, with the realisation that Germany had only been temporarily subdued, the terror that War might return, the appalling thought that such unfathomable losses may, after all, have been in vain. The natural reaction then is to idealise the world that the War had ended and which would never, it was now clear, return. Portillo argues, mostly successfully, that 1913, far from being a late flowering of the Edwardian Summer, had in actual fact been a time of turbulence and strife, and that the War slowed and held back change, rather than accelerating it.

In comparison, Illies is obviously keen to keep his book an uncomplicated one; he doesn't try to block out hindsight, nor is he a slave to it. His is a snapshot of a time and a place, yet as the English subtitle suggests (the German is 'The Summer of the Century'), everything is considered with one eye on what is to follow - why else include Franz Ferdinand in a *dramatis personae* otherwise filled with artists, poets, playwrights and composers? Hitler and Stalin are also included for misdeeds to come. It has been said, by Philip Oltermann in the *Guardian*, that Illies is keen to let the First World War generation off the hook.<sup>2</sup> It is not clear to me that he is. Like Clark, though his subject is altogether a different one, Illies has no time for the blame game which preoccupies so many historians, but there is a pervading sense of the sickness of the society he describes. The mocking tone may be affectionate, but it is persistent and significant. Franz Kafka in particular is exposed with delicious cruelty as a self-destructive, faltering wreck; Brecht is a sickly teenage fantasist; Rilke flits about Europe at others' expense, feeling uniquely sorry for himself (actually no – Georg Trakl's depression and self-loathing is even greater); Kokoschka's art can only be inspired

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<sup>2</sup> Phillip Oltermann, '1913: The Year Before the Storm by Florian Illies – review', *The Guardian*, 19/07/2013.

by his obsessional, sex-driven love for Alma Mahler, Gustav's beautiful widow; Gottfried Benn cuts up cadavers and breaks hearts; Stefan George uses poetry to establish around himself a circle of sexually submissive youths. Almost alone, Marcel Duchamp endears himself to the reader, holidaying in Herne Bay, avoiding work and playing chess – in short, enjoying himself. Everything else seems mad, out of sorts, nervous and strained. The nihilism and sense of futility, so easily associated with the following four years and their aftermath, are almost overwhelming in this 1913. With little common ground in terms of style or tone, the same might be said of Matthew Hollis' beautiful and sad *Now All Roads Lead to France, The Last Years of Edward Thomas*, in which many English poets seem just as prone to self-pity and egotistical self-destruction as their continental peers. Indeed Hollis describes an episode from November 1913 which Illies would surely have delighted in: Filippo Marinetti's recital for the Poetry Bookshop at 35 Devonshire Street, in Bloomsbury, during which the Italian Futurist loudly impersonated the sound of a machine gun, symbol of Modernity, to an audience which certainly included many sensitive young men who, within a year or two, would hear the real thing.

The genius of 1913 was a tortured one, and it is hard to resist the impression that the Great War was in some measure *of its time*. Illies' October 1913 in particular seems to have come four years too early: a monument to the Battle of the Nations is unveiled (referring to the Napoleonic Wars), German Youth gathers on a mountain-side to swear to no longer bow to militarism and unthinking patriotism, the painter Ludwig Meidmen paints horrific visions of war, entitled 'Apocalyptic Landscape', and 'Vision of the Trenches.' Illies' 1913 is not a carefree summer, for one thing the weather seems to have been execrable in Germany, though it seems well above the

Portillo's era of turbulence. Fittingly for a cultural history, the abiding impression is one of feeling over fact, in this case angst and nervousness: the sensation of a creative age that somehow sensed that it was indeed on the eve of a storm. It is Illies' triumph to have not only conveyed that feeling, but to have done so with such wit and lightness of touch. 1913 is all the more captivating for being a melancholy stroll in a very foreign land.

**J. S. CROCKETT**