

BOOKS

5 DECEMBER 2018

The life of England's last great pub landlady

Through the story of her grandmother's rural Home Counties pub, Laura Thompson offers us a lyrical portrait of a fast-vanishing way of life.

BY [MELISSA BENN](#)



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A few decades from now, this book could well find its way on to the reading lists of those who wish to understand the nuances of a particular kind of Englishness of the mid-to-late 20th century. Through the story of her grandmother's rural Home Counties pub (its exact location never specified), Laura Thompson offers us a lyrical portrait of a fast-vanishing way of life and why it cannot be sustained in a world of Instagram, iPhones and gluten-free certainties.

Thompson does not so much chronicle as savour – just as one might savour the first drink after a hard day at work – the many delights of English pub life, continuously teasing out the shifting

meanings of these sawdust-trodden, wooden-panelled rooms, where strangers can gather as not-quite-strangers. “A proper pub is where one lives in the present tense... a place in which drink is central but not all.” In another passage, she describes pubs as “home but not quite home... as dear and familiar to people as home, but they were also the place where people escaped from home”.



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Presiding over these scenes of “authorised pleasure” is Violet, Thompson’s grandmother, the eponymous last landlady of the title, “casual empress” of all she surveys. Thompson insists on Violet’s beauty and charisma – her lips always painted, her hair carefully styled and sprayed: a woman who has “learned to phrase her personality, as a singer phrases a lyric; she knew the power of withholding, and of brief conspiratorial bursts of charm”. When customers buy her a drink Violet accepts with brio, only to chuck most of the liquid on to the carpet surrounding her high stool.

Being a landlady requires stamina, and courage. While Violet’s pub was not overrun by menacingly smiling gangsters, as an east London establishment could be, it had its own dramas, such as the time that a homely barmaid threw herself on to the car bonnet of one of the departing customers. Unbeknown to any of the regulars or Violet and her sister Irene, who kept the pub under close and constant surveillance, the barmaid and the married customer had been having an affair. And Thompson herself, having worked shifts in the bar as a student, later witnesses that fabled scenario: the chucking of car keys into an ashtray, as six of the pub regulars indulge in a bit of wife-swapping.

Thompson is a terrific writer, and her detailed evocation of the day in the life of the pub – from shadowy morning emptiness to the “arrhythmic clicks” of the door latch as the evening crowd begins to trickle in – has all the visual richness and emotional power of a Terence Davies film. She deploys her social history with parallel ease, tracing the way in which different elements in the history of institutionalised conviviality, from the travellers’ inn to the political hubbub of the London coffee house to the counters of 19th-century gin palaces, played their part in the development of the modern public house. Today’s pub culture has been undermined by everything from the wine bar to franchised food outlets. In 2016, there were 52,000 pubs in Britain, but around

20 close every week.

Only towards the end does Thompson touch directly on the most sensitive nerve of all: social class. She is unsettled by snobbish caricatures of landladies in literature, film and television, the idea that Violet might be looked down upon by the kind of “nice” English people “who write to the newspapers complaining about a change of broadcast time to *The Archers*”. Drawing on a character in Patrick Hamilton’s wartime novel *The Slaves of Solitude* (Thompson loves Hamilton, the true “poet of the pub”), she declares that there are really only two classes of people: “open” and “closed”. When all those “nice” (ie middle-class) people actually met Violet they could see past the leopard-skin coat and the ankle bracelet, grasp the “breadth of being” inherent in her and understand that she was “simply impossible to categorise”.

The Last Landlady is any number of love letters to any number of things – to the lost physical world of the old-style pub, to the various pleasures of alcohol itself, and to the splendid Violet – but it is, more than any of these, a celebration of a singular kind of female independence: the kind that operates entirely within the codes and limits of accepted femininity while at the same time defying and overreaching those boundaries. Violet is the first woman to be given a licence in her own name after she is refused the chance to take over her father’s London pub. She adores men, but keeps herself at emotional arm’s length from their potential power to wound or diminish.

Above all, she possesses “personality”, which Thompson defines as a rare kind of authentic confidence. Individuals such as Violet are a million miles from anything we might recognise, or label, as feminist – yet these women, the charming, steely rulers of their own domestic or professional empires, are as ubiquitous an English phenomenon as the pub itself, and worthy of similar ambivalent celebration.



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Melissa Benn is the author of “Life Lessons: The Case for a National Education Service” (Verso)

The Last Landlady: An English Memoir

Laura Thompson

Unbound, 304pp, £16.99

Melissa Benn writes for the *Guardian* and other publications on social issues, particularly education. She is the author of several books of non-fiction and two novels, including *One of Us* (2008), and reviews books for the *New Statesman*.



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This article first appeared in the 05 December 2018 issue of the *New Statesman*, *Christmas special*

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