

Last chance saloon

The 'casual profundity' of a proper pub

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Laura Thompson
THE LAST LANDLADY
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“Although I am nostalgic for her”, writes Laura Thompson of her grandmother in *The Last Landlady*, “— something she would have liked but not really understood—I have no desire to research her. I simply present her, as she presented herself to me, as I remember her at the pub.” “Simply” is slightly misleading: this memoir is informed by a deep sensitivity. It also captures with extraordinary vividness what “proper” pubs are, and why people who prize them mourn their loss.

Thompson begins her account with an image of her grandmother “seated on a high stool, her stool, in the negligent but alert position of a nightclub singer . . . a woman in late middle age with a brightness, an intensity of being, that still flares in my head”. Violet — “Vi” — was for years the landlady of a very old and picturesque pub in a Home Counties village. She took it over in the early 1950s, when there was no counter, let alone a kitchen or bathroom, and made of it something at once ordinary and plush. It became her stage, “for a pub is a theatre in which people are playing themselves”. In the days of compulsory afternoon closing there were of course “matinée and evening” performances; and as a child Thompson was excited to venture out from the living quarters, “a non-actor shoved into a crowd scene in a semi-lawless urban comedy — Jonsonian perhaps, with a Jacobean edge of threat”. When the pub got busy, she writes,

and the banknotes were waved and waggled by a towering criss-cross of hands (always male hands), nothing mattered except getting people served: rubbish could pile up at one’s feet, cigarettes could shrivel to grey tubes, the sink could block, the very world could end, but old Mick would get his large Bell’s, “When you’re ready, duck . . .”

Thompson records three categories of pub customer. There were the local country people (“ribald, wholesome even in their lusts”); passing trade (“It was a running joke that when anyone unfamiliar walked in, the entire place stopped dead”); and people from the nearby town (“On the whole they were well off, although not idle rich; even the retired among them carried an air of former industry”). Thompson describes the morning regulars with characteristic delicacy — among them three who sat in the public bar “in alliance and yet in solitude”: “a sad little woman with scanty permed hair who drank Double Diamond”; to her left, “a man with a pipe, defiant in his lack of charm”; and to her right, “a man who communed with his pint and his Embassy as if they alone could comprehend his memories of years as a POW”. The woman, writes Thompson, “could wring five minutes’ worth of activity from asking if somebody was ‘all right’”.

Such places have a casual profundity. The proper pub is not just about revelry, Thompson suggests; it “accommodates the miserable, the misfits, those who are in their seats at curtain up, having nothing in their lives to make them late”. And it does so without patronizing them. Vi respected the woman with her Double

Diamond because she showed all the “quodidant valour” she showed herself, but “with none of the scented swagger to help her along”. Likewise Vi robustly defended the butcher who would enter in his apron “at the very moment of opening”, drink three large whiskies in quick succession, and then ask her to fill a small bottle with Teacher’s. “He was an entirely gentlemanly alcoholic”, writes Thompson, “and criticism was therefore entirely out of place.” Neither the pub nor the village is named here, and the omission seems a considerate one. Around midday, we discover, “livelier” people would begin “to gladden the look of the place”: “the exquisite mistress with the high grey chignon, giving out smiles like a film star meeting the England football team; her blazered paramour, offering drinks all round in a pantomime of manly nods and winks . . . Now came the comfortable crunch of wheels on the car park tarmac, the generous swoop of Rovers and Jaguars”. These people were treated with magnanimity too, the chequered histories that accompanied some of them being tactfully overlooked. “It was human nature, after all, lax and imperfect and susceptible.”

Perhaps that’s one reason some people disapprove of pubs. For others it’s an issue of class. In a letter to Evelyn Waugh, Nancy Mitford remarked of Graham Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951): “All that public house life, like poor people”. But they have their literary champions. Thompson declares Patrick Hamilton “the great poet of the pub”, and for her the moment in *The Slaves of Solitude* (1947) when Mr Prest — a former music hall performer who for much of the novel is “shrouded within his beer-drinker persona” — appears on stage, having been given a role in a pantomime, is “one of the most beautiful passages in twentieth-century literature”. Thompson discerns in Hamilton’s novels two sorts of people: “the closed and the open class, or the mimsy and the robust class, or the narrow and the broad-minded class”. Her grandmother and Mr Prest had little to connect them, but they seem to her to embody the open, the robust, the broad-minded. It follows, perhaps, that the pubs they spent so much of their time in “were loved, in a way that is not quite possible with clubs”.

But as we know, the pub is now in decline: in Britain their number has halved in the past hundred years; and between twenty and thirty close each week. Thompson considers the reasons — not only the introduction of the breathalyser in 1967, vigorous anti-drink-driving campaigns, the smoking ban and the availability of cheap alcohol in shops, but also, among other things, a general shift towards more varied leisure activities, many of them



“George and the Dragon” by Ruskin Spear, c.1977

centred on the family; the revolution that “has rendered quaint, at best, the notion of the male drinking arena”; demographic changes; the popularity of coffee chains; and increasing interest in stylish, high-quality food. These are “good things, on the whole. Progressive, civilising improvements”. And there’s the snag:

Pubs still exist, after all, but they have evolved to survive in a different world. An improved world. And anyway, who would prefer to drink in a place of fug and beer mats, dining off peanuts, tracing dot-to-dot cigarette burns in the red velvetene, seeing their reflection swoon in a green-spotted mirror, when they could be in a low-lit interior with bleached beams, surrounded by happy groups eating at scrubbed wooden tables, with a wine list of well-sourced complexity and an olives menu?

Oh, I don’t know. I would.

While Thompson evokes the pub and her grandmother comprehensively, the recurring phrase “even then” demonstrating an early acuity (“Poignant, this was. I knew it even then”), she tells us relatively little about herself. We catch a glimpse of her childhood circle of friends — “privileged little beasts dreaming of dancing Giselle at Covent Garden”; and more than a glimpse of her experience behind the bar, where she dealt with “incomprehensible orders for things like ‘a splash’” and “brain-freezes that prevented me multiplying £1.55 by three”. When she

discusses Vi’s short, unsuccessful marriage (having found a husband and had a daughter, Vi “wanted nothing else to change”), we are struck by its resonance for her: “I have never been the marrying kind”, she writes, “although once or twice I thought that I should try to be; when she told me this story . . . I felt as close to her as it was possible to get”. We also note her discovery, and enjoyment, of establishments that offered “a blessed continuum with the world that [Vi] had created”, including a couple in Newmarket where people would talk — rather as Thompson herself does in this book — “about something other than themselves, something that lit a quick, unexpected flame”.

The quick, unexpected flame is another feature of all good pubs, it seems. In Vi’s it was occasionally lit by music — Dinah Washington, Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee, Bessie Smith. Thompson remembers the frenzy induced by Brenda Lee’s “Lazy River” — “anthemic, adored, the pub’s song” — and the look of ecstasy on her father’s face “as the horns set the scene for the vocal, the glass raised and then the divine plunge . . .”. As Thompson shows quite clearly here, “Alcohol moulds these memories, but it does not make them: it is the pub that makes them”. The memories, the scenes she recounts in *The Last Landlady* are “all about the same thing: the warm flame that surrounded them, that beautified them, that honestly made life worth living”.