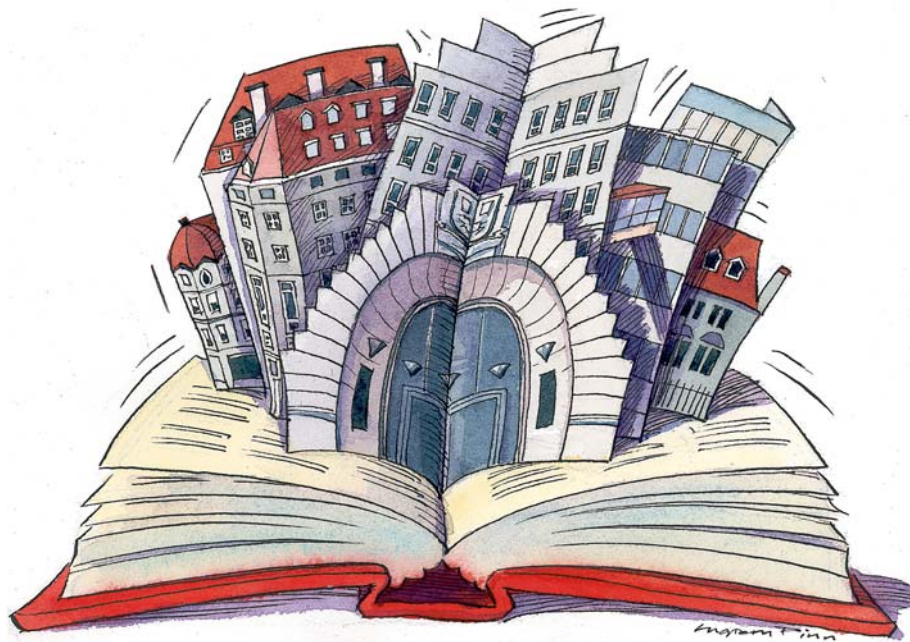


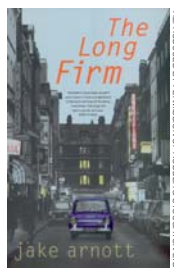
Brought to book

School academics and alumni are prolific authors but what about LSE itself? How has the School been represented in literature? **Edwin Shaw** went searching for literary references.



LSE is not the sort of place readily associated, in the public mind, with the world of creative writing. The popular image of the institution is too hard-nosed, too fact-crunching. Yet, despite this, the School features in plays, spy thrillers and poetry and also regularly crops up in literary biographies, letters and diaries. Houghton Street has even provided the setting for several novels.

This should not, of course, really surprise us. For the appropriate connections, both sacred and profane, have been there from the start. Bernard Shaw, who in a postscript to *Pygmalion* sends Eliza Doolittle to the School to get a 'commercial' education, was heavily involved in LSE's foundation. His Fabian colleague, the unscrupulous womaniser HG Wells, produced a novel, *Ann Veronica*, which was inspired by his seduction of the young Amber Reeves, a sometime LSE student and daughter of one of its early directors, Pember Reeves. The diaries and letters of Beatrice Webb, and the works of a range of LSE scholars, are readable as much for their prose style as for their content. The School once even boasted a professor of literature, Raymond



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Chapman, and has produced celebrated novelists such as Mary Wesley (*Occasional Student* 1935) and Pat Barker (*BSc International History* 1965).

The literary, as opposed to journalistic or popular, representation of LSE that emerges against this background is remarkably consistent. A prominent part of it is based on the impression of a powerful, challenging intelligence. This perception is even encountered in writers whom we would not expect to take the least interest in a social science institution. The cynical traditionalist Evelyn Waugh, for example, was not an easy person to impress in any context, but it is 'the red-headed girl... from the London School of Economics' in his

novel *Put Out More Flags* who asks the sharp questions that those around her are unable to formulate.

Many decades later an even more sceptical conservative, the late UK politician Alan Clark, in his carefully-polished diaries, waspishly acknowledges the intellectual rigour he encountered at an LSE meeting: 'Brainy people on the up and up, with a few heavies to pour cold water.' For some, however, the characteristics which accompany the penchant for pouring 'cold water', are all a bit too much to take. Tim Lott (*BSc Government and History* 1986), author of *White City Blue*, is overawed, as he puts it in his award-winning autobiography *The Scent of Dried Roses*, by the 'knowledge, the self-confidence of the people who seem physically little more than children... It is highly politicised, a training ground for civil servants and cabinet ministers... Everybody seems quite sure of what they think about everything.'

This perception of the School as a place that can, in the words of Dahrendorf's superb history of LSE, disturb 'the peace of mind', sometimes mutates into crude caricature. The stereotype of the leftist LSE radical is deployed by a range of practitioners, from thriller writers like Ted Alibeu to mainstream American novelists such as

Robert Stone. In contrast, the School's strong conservative and new right tradition is apparently unknown to creative writers. Hayek, Oakeshott, Popper and like-minded LSE spirits might just as well not have existed for all the difference they make to how novelists and dramatists view the School. Even the poet Philip Larkin, referring to the student troubles of the 1960s, is quoted in *The Great Betrayal*, the memoirs of educationalist Brian Cox, saying: 'When the Russian tanks roll westward, what defence for you and me?... The Light Horse of LSE?'



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Similar stereotyping informs what is arguably the worst, and most unintentionally humorous, fiction ever penned about the School. This is *News from Nowhere*, by David Cauter, which, inevitably, is set in Houghton Street in the 1960s. The novel turpidly recounts the revolutionary adventures of various students and academics. The reader is compensated by some splendidly camp and over-heated passages. At one point the heroine, Elizabeth Halliday, revisits the teacher, the curiously sinister Miss Tavistock, who persuaded her to go to LSE in the first place. 'I was entirely irresponsible...' the teacher tells her former pupil, 'when I sent a girl of your background into such a jungle.'

Few depictions of the School are quite as lurid as those found within Cauter's pages. Even Gilberto, LSE alumnus and minor character in *Stainless*, Todd Grimson's outrageous 'Gothic Slacker' novel, is somehow less disturbing in his implications, despite his habit of having people's fingers broken, than the claustrophobic staleness which pervades *News from Nowhere*. A more stylish take on the radical stereotype, and a useful corrective to Cauter's jaundiced view of the School, is provided by 'Lenny', the 'hip' young LSE graduate and criminologist who is one of the central characters

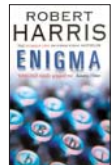
in Jake Arnott's recent crime novel *The Long Firm* (set in 1960s London).

It is worth emphasising, however, in case all this seems too compromised, that there is a powerful strand in the literary representation of the School that is unambiguously positive. One example of this is provided by *The Devil You Don't*, an anti-nuclear thriller by alumnus and actor Ron Moody, which depicts LSE in affectionate and even idealistic tones. Its hero, LSE anthropologist Dr Hugo Brill, is a dynamic and likeable figure who willingly takes risks for the sake of his principles. Principles, and LSE, also take a big part in Tom Stoppard's drama of journalism and African politics, *Night and Day*. One of its key figures is the fictional President Mageeba who ruminates, as his conflict-ridden country collapses around him, on his student days, long before, off the Aldwych. He delivers a tremendous one-liner: 'I learned everything about economic theory. It has proved a great handicap.' But, more importantly he utters a phrase that for many would capture the essence of the School: '...freedom with responsibility, that was the elusive formula we pondered all those years ago at the LSE.'

Intellectual potency, radicalism, a singular institution that simultaneously pours 'cold water' and inspires high ideals: these, then, are the basic elements in the representation of the School which emerges from the pens, and now the laptops, of the literati. As images go it's a bit of a mixture but not a bad one, and one that, despite inevitable distortions, tells us a lot about how LSE is seen by some influential opinion-formers. Those charged with investigating perceptions of the School in the outside world might well, at some point, regard this, the literature of LSE, as being worthy of further scrutiny than has been possible here. If so they will certainly find it more fun than the task of poring over spreadsheets and opinion poll returns. ■

WHAT THEY SAID...

'...I think Bernard means,' said Sir Humphrey helpfully, 'that he'll know how to behave if he was at an English University. Even if it was the LSE.' I never know whether or not Humphrey is insulting me intentionally....
The Complete Yes Minister, Chapter 2



ARROW BOOKS

'...Baxter had a cigarette in his mouth and didn't bother to remove it, so he bobbed as he spoke and sprayed ash down the front of his pullover. Before the war he had been a lecturer at the London School of Economics....
Enigma, Chapter 4

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IF YOU KNOW OF ANY OTHER REFERENCES TO LSE IN LITERATURE.



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