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Reid's Reader – A Blog of Book Reviews and Comment.

Welcome to REID'S READER, a site renewed weekly and devoted to the appreciation and discussion of books old and new by bibliophile, critic and reviewer Nicholas Reid. Each week REID'S READER offers Something New, Something Old and Something Thoughtful to readers and browsers. REID'S READER will sometimes feature guest reviewers and will sometimes offer general book news, but it does not run publishers' publicity material.

Monday, April 9, 2012

Something New

We feature each week Nicholas Reid's reviews and comments on new and recent books

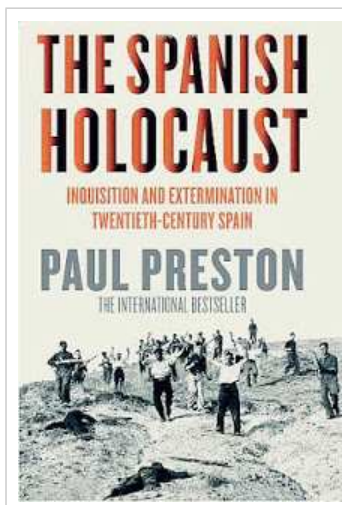
"THE SPANISH HOLOCAUST – Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth Century Spain" by Paul Preston (Harper Collins, \$NZ59:99)

*"I have supped full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me."*

So says Macbeth towards the end of his career as a tyrant. Having committed and caused so many murders, his moral sense is numbed. He is desensitised. He can now hear of an atrocity without turning a hair.

I'm not a mass-murderer like Macbeth; only somebody who has read about mass murder. But Paul Preston's *The Spanish Holocaust* (like Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*; like Martin Meredith's *The State of Africa*; like any book that deals with atrocity on the large scale) is the sort of book that creates that same sense of numbness. By the end of its 528 dense pages of text (before over 100 pages of notes, references and statistics) I felt as if I had been repeatedly struck over the head. The record of barbarity is so unrelenting that we start reading of another massacre, another case of torture or rape, another group execution, without turning a hair. According to a cynic (the phrase is sometimes attributed to Stalin) "*One death is a tragedy. A million deaths is a statistic*". Here we read of hundreds of thousands of deaths. We sup full with horrors. We end up reasoning by statistics.

Paul Preston is now Emeritus Professor of the London School of Economics. *The Spanish Holocaust* is his tenth substantial book on the Spanish Civil War and subsequent Spanish history. He has previously written biographies of General Franco and King Juan Carlos, a general



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Blog Archive

- 2014 (12)
- 2013 (141)
- ▼ 2012 (148)
 - December (9)
 - November (12)
 - October (16)
 - September (12)
 - August (12)
 - July (15)
 - June (12)
 - May (12)
 - ▼ April (15)
 - Something New
 - Something Old
 - Something Thoughtful
 - Something New
 - Something Old
 - Something Thoughtful
 - Something New
 - Something Old
 - Something Thoughtful

account of the causes of the civil war and a general history of the war itself. Some of his books – like this one – have first been published in a Spanish edition before the appearance of their English edition. They have been highly praised in Spain – especially on the Left – for their restoration of a memory that has continued to be suppressed in the 37 years since Franco died and democracy was rebuilt. Until very recently, the theory was that there was no point in recalling – and possibly re-igniting – the passions of the civil war when Spanish democracy was still a fragile thing. In the circumstances, a sensible enough theory. But now that the civil war is over 70 years in the past, and its chief perpetrators of atrocities are all dead, the archives can be scoured, the corpses exhumed (literally in some cases), the horrors reconstructed. Not without some resistance, mind, but that is the general Spanish context now.

In the Spanish Civil War (1936-39), approximately half a million people died. Over half this number were killed in the fighting, bombings and clashes of opposing armies. But behind the lines, on both sides, about 200,000 were killed in “repression” – that is, in massacres of civilians and prisoners, terrorist raids, extra-judicial murders, and as a result of dubiously-conducted “trials”. The repression continued well into the Franco era, and did not really wind down until the mid-1940s.

The Spanish Holocaust is not a general history of the civil war, but an account of this repression. It was always known that more were killed by the Franco side than by the Republican side. (Preston insists on called the Franco side “rebels” and never uses the term “Nationalists”). But even as recently as Antony Beevor’s general history of the war *The Battle for Spain* (2006), it was thought that the Right had killed “only” about twice as many as the Left. Beevor suggested that between 30,000 and 40,000 were murdered by the Republicans; and between 70,000 and 80,000 by the Francoists. Paul Preston makes it clear that in fact the repression was far worse on both sides. In round numbers, about 50,000 were murdered by the Left, and about 150,000 by the Right. This includes Francoist repression into the 1940s. So the Right committed about three times as many murders as the Left.

Given inevitable gaps in the evidence (documents and incriminating material missing or wilfully destroyed), Preston substantiates this history as fully as he can, concluding the book with a statistical survey of Spain, province by province. It shows that only in Madrid and Catalonia (the Republican heartlands during the civil war) was Republican repression worse than Francoist.

This is invaluable historical documentation and a real contribution to the historiography of a war which has probably been mythologised and romanticised more than any other modern war.

The Spanish Holocaust is, however, also a book written to a number of theses, some of which can be questioned. In Preston’s view, repression on the Francoist side was planned, deliberate, methodical and systematic – a conscious attempt to destroy any social groups that could threaten the type of state Franco intended to build. By contrast, says Preston, repression on the Republican side was spontaneous and intermittent – the response of frightened people who feared the worst as Franco’s armies approached, and who sought to destroy fifth columnists and possible collaborators with Franco, the “enemy within”. Besides, argues Preston, the official government of the remaining Republic sometimes attempted to halt or

[Something New](#)

[Something Old](#)

[Something Thoughtful](#)

[Something New](#)

[Something Old](#)

[Something Thoughtful](#)

► [March \(12\)](#)

► [February \(12\)](#)

► [January \(9\)](#)

► [2011 \(78\)](#)

Labels

["Moral Panic" and other Pretexts \(1\)](#)

[11.22.63 \(1\)](#)

[54 \(1\)](#)

[A BEAUTIFUL BARMAID – Women Behind the Bar in New Zealand 1830-1976 \(1\)](#)

[A CHOICE OF CATASTROPHES \(1\)](#)

[A COMMON STRANGENESS \(1\)](#)

[A CULTURALLY SIGNIFICANT ICON FOR OUR TIMES \(1\)](#)

[A DELUSION OF QUALITY \(1\)](#)

[A DOUBLE IN HISTORY \(1\)](#)

[A FERTILE LACK OF BALANCE \(1\)](#)

[A GRAVE YARD BY THE SEA \(1\)](#)

[A GREAT NEW ZEALAND PRIME MINISTER? \(1\)](#)

[A HISTORY OF SILENCE – A Memoir \(1\)](#)

[A Pretext for the Tight Fist \(1\)](#)

[A RISING TIDE \(1\)](#)

[A SECOND LIFE - APRICA TO SALVATION IN SWITZERLAND 1943 \(1\)](#)

[A Simple Nullity? David V. Williams \(1\)](#)

[A Voyage to Purilia \(1\)](#)

[A WOMAN'S PLACE \(1\)](#)

[A. J. A. Symons \(1\)](#)

[A.G. Bagnall \(1\)](#)

[A.W.Kinglake \(1\)](#)

[ACCIDENTAL WORKS OF ART \(1\)](#)

[Adam Johnson \(1\)](#)

[ADOLPHE \(1\)](#)

[ADVICE FROM A BOOKWORM \(1\)](#)

[AFTER THE LOCKOUT \(1\)](#)

[Agee \(1\)](#)

[Alain-Fournier \(1\)](#)

mitigate left-wing repression of rightists, and to restore the rule of law. No such humane concerns were ever shown by the Francoists. Also, Preston further argues, repression by the Left would never have happened in the first place without the breakdown of law and order that the right-wing uprising caused. So, as he sees it, ultimately the 50,000 murdered by the Left can also be sheeted home to Franco.

Through this lens, then, Preston presents us with long chapters on General Queipo de Llano's Francoist forces marching through southern Spain, and General Mola's Francoist forces marching through central Spain, systematically murdering peasants, trade unionists, left-wing teachers, professionals and intellectuals, regardless of whether or not they had borne arms or shown any resistance. Frequently Preston reminds us that major leaders in this Francoist repression were large land-owners, seeking to punish peasants for daring to support the Republic's land reforms and in effect trying to restore the semi-feudal conditions in which they expected the peasants to live. Later in the war, Francoist repression in the north, and especially in the Basque country, was directed at destroying regional and localist feeling that could lead to separation from the centralised Spanish state Franco intended to create. As Preston tells it, Franco could have taken Madrid and ended the war much earlier than he did, but he was so determined to see his repression carried out thoroughly first, that he sometimes made military strategy a secondary consideration.

Preston emphasises the quasi-racist ideology of the Francoist forces. Franco's most efficient troops were battle-hardened regular soldiers who had fought against Spain's colonial subjects in north Africa, and were used to "punishing" their enemies as an inferior people. They brought the same mentality to the conquered peasants of Spain, seeing them as inferiors to be terrorised into submission. Paradoxically (in a whole lot of ways), they were supported by Moorish troops who were often unleashed upon villages for purposes of mass intimidation by way of massacre, rape and pillage.

In stomach-churning terms, story after story, which I do not have the space to relate here, is told.

Meanwhile, Preston also has to deal with what was going on in what remained of the Republic. The very worst, as he sees it, were the rampages of anarchists through Catalonia, shooting on sight anyone they even suspected of being a rightist, a priest or capable of being plundered for profit. There really was a "red terror" even if its scale was exaggerated for propaganda purposes by the Francoists. Rather reluctantly, too, Preston has to deal with Communist involvement, and spends many pages working out exactly who was responsible for one of the most notorious acts of leftist repression – the massacre of between 2,000 and 3,000 rightist prisoners held in Madrid jails. In the end, he sees the planning of this massacre as being largely a Communist initiative (with some Soviet advice and help). One of the guilty was Carrillo, who resurfaced as the head of the Spanish Communist party in the first years after Franco.

I hope I have made it clear that I regard this as an important book. I do not question or take issue with the facts that Preston presents. But as with all worthwhile books, this is one worth arguing with. There is no such thing as "neutral" history written without a viewpoint, and I dissent from some elements of Preston's "slant" and interpretation of the facts.

I'll list my criticisms in order.

Alan Poletti (1)
 Albert Wendt (1)
 Alberto Moravia (1)
 Aldous Huxley (1)
 Aleksandra Lane (1)
 Alex Calder (1)
 Alexander Masters (1)
 Alexander Pope (1)
 Alice Munro (1)
 Alister McGrath (1)
 ALL THE KING'S MEN (1)
 Allen Curnow (1)
 AM I GREEN ENOUGH? (1)
 Among Secret Beauties (1)
 Amy Brown (1)
 Amy Head (1)
 Amy Wallace (1)
 AN ACCIDENTAL UTOPIA? (1)
 AN ENCOUNTER WITH BLACK PROPAGANDA (1)
 An English Affair (1)
 Andre Schwartz-Bart (1)
 Angela McCarthy (1)
 Angela Wanhalla (2)
 Anna Jackson (1)
 ANNAPURNA (1)
 Anne Salmond (1)
 Antonia Forest (1)
 ARE PRINTED BOOKS A THING OF THE PAST? (1)
 ARE SCHOOLS A WASTE OF TIME? (1)
 ARTHUR RIMBAUD TWICE OVER (1)
 ARTISM? (1)
 AS CHILDREN HEAR IT (1)
 Asclepius (1)
 Ashleigh Young (1)
 Augusten Burroughs (1)
 Aung San Suu Kyi (1)
 AWFUL IN-BETWEENS (1)
 B.S. INDEED (1)
 BACK TO BLOOD (1)
 BALDER DEAD (1)
 BANGS (1)
 BARDS BOUND BY THEIR TIME AND PLACE (1)

First, I think Preston “poisons the well” in preparation for his argument in some of his opening chapters. He wants to argue that systematic extermination was planned by rightists even before the war began. Hence (in the chapter titled “Theorists of Extermination”) he presents us with a selection of writings by the extreme Right (Fascists, Carlists, authoritarian monarchists etc.) in the years between 1931 and 1936. Article after article screeches that Spain should be freed from the “Communist-Masonic-Jewish” conspiracy that has enslaved the liberal republic. Article after article calls for a bloody purge of undesirable elements, and a restoration of imperial, Catholic, traditional Spain. This, concludes Preston, was the very programme of extermination which Franco put into practice. QED.

I don't doubt that these hysterical and extremist writings are reported accurately by Preston. I don't doubt that, once war began, many rightists acted as they did because of years of reading this sort of stuff. The trouble is, as I know from reading (many) books on the Spanish Civil War, an equally appalling selection of hysterical, intemperate, paranoid ravings could be compiled from Spanish leftist sources in the same years – anarchists and syndicalists promoting massacre of the bourgeoisie and the clergy, varieties of Marxists calling for class war etc.etc. And, when civil war came, some leftists acted on what they had been taught by *their* reading. All we prove is that Spain was a violently-divided political society, and the “exterminationist” mentality can be detected in anarchists as much as in the Falange.

Second, Preston clearly has difficulty dealing with the element of the “civil war within the civil war” which confounds many left-wing attempts to romanticise the Spanish Civil War. The fact is, there was no firm “united front” against Franco, and much repression and terror in the Republican areas came in the form of anarchists or Socialists or Communists assassinating or shooting one another rather than turning their guns against Franco. The suppression of the (independent Marxist) P.O.U.M. in Barcelona was the prime example of this process. Preston blames the Republican Colonel Casado, in the last stages of the war, for turning against the Communists and fighting a small “war” against them, in the hope of surrendering Madrid to Franco with the minimum of reprisals. Preston says Casado needlessly exposed many people to Franco's wrath. But in the circumstances, and given that Franco's victory by then was just a matter of time, it is hard to condemn the gamble Casado took, even if it did not pay off. (As conqueror of Madrid, Franco proceeded to shoot both Communists and Casado's supporters.)

Third, while I think Preston is fair and accurate in the way he talks about the role of the church, I am surprised that he does not draw any general conclusions about it. Overwhelmingly, the Catholic Church supported Franco and accepted the propaganda line that he was saving Spain from destruction by “Reds”. Thousands of Spanish priests and nearly all Spanish bishops supported the military uprising as a “crusade”. There was even a small minority of priests who took up arms and joined in the fighting – Preston gives details on a few who actually participated in massacres, and he notes how often village priests compiled lists of “undesirables” to smooth the way for Francoist purges and executions. At the same time clergy were persecuted and shot in the Republican zone (especially by anarchists), giving substance to clerical fears; and in the Basque country, priests were more likely to be shot by Francoists than by Republicans because they tended to support Basque nationalism. While recounting all this, Preston

BAREFOOT (1)
 BEAUCHAMP'S CAREER (1)
 BEAUTIES OF THE OCTAGONAL POOL (1)
 BELIEF (1)
 Ben Stubbs (1)
 Benjamin Constant (1)
 Bernadette Hall (1)
 BEYOND SATIRE (1)
 Bianca Zander (1)
 Bibliophile's Lament (1)
 Bird North and Other Stories (1)
 BIRDS OF CLAY (1)
 BLACK DAHLIA AND WHITE ROSE (1)
 BLIGH (1)
 BONE TREASURES (1)
 Bornholdt and O'Brien (1)
 Brad Mercer (1)
 Brad S. Gregory (1)
 BRECHT AND CO. – Sex Politics and the Making of the Modern Drama (1)
 Brenda Maddox (1)
 Breton Dukes (1)
 Brian Flintoff (1)
 Brian Turner (1)
 Brian Wilkins (1)
 Brigid Brophy (1)
 BRING THE JUBILEE (1)
 Bussy D'Ambois (1)
 BUZZ-THOUGHTS ON THE SOCIAL MEDIA (1)
 CANONISED BY THE MOVIES (1)
 Carl Nixon (1)
 Carolyn Mackler (1)
 Chan Koonchung (1)
 CHAOS AND NIGHT (1)
 Charles Dickens (3)
 Charles Frazier (1)
 Charles Nicholl (1)
 Charlotte Grimshaw (1)
 Charlotte Randall (2)
 CHILDHOODS – Growing Up in Aotearoa New Zealand (1)
 CHILDREN OF ROGERNOMICS – A Neoliberal Generation Leaves School (1)

does also tell stories of priests and other clergy who were appalled by Franco's repression, who protested against it, and who (when Republican areas were overrun) tried to put in a good word for Republican supporters who had treated them well. To put it another way, Preston could have noted that while thousands of priests supported Franco, hundreds didn't – and there is the additional fact that many prominent supporters of the Republic (like Luis Companys, president of Catalonia, shot by the Francoists) were also practising Catholics. Catholicism affected Spaniards in a multitude of ways.

Fourth, without going into the details, I think that – as in some of his other writings – Preston performs something of a character assassination upon the prominent pre-civil war Catholic centre-right politician Gil Robles, whom he describes as “wily” and “hypocritical” and who (by very selective quotation of Gil Robles' speeches) he presents as a fascist in the making. This, I believe, is part of Preston's programme of pretending that there was no centre-right in Spain with legitimate grievances against the Republic – indeed it is part of pretending that Spain was not fairly evenly divided politically before the civil war (as the results of pre-civil war general elections prove). Despite all the evidence that he himself presents and knows about, at least part of Paul Preston is the old Popular Front romanticist who wants to believe that the Spanish Civil War was a simple set-to between democrats and “fascists”.

Finally, I dissent from the title and sub-title Preston has chosen, *The Spanish Holocaust – Inquisition and Extermination in Twentieth-Century Spain*. Killing 150,000 people is a huge crime against humanity and must be taken into account whenever Franco and his regime are considered. But it takes a big leap of imagination to pretend (a.) that it was on the same scale as the Nazis' industrialised attempted genocide of Jews, which is what is now generally understood by “Holocaust”; (b.) that there was any formal Catholic Church judicial system involved, which is what is meant by “Inquisition”; and (c.) that it was really a war of “extermination”. While murdering his perceived enemies, Franco did not “exterminate” a class or a people. He wanted to make peasants and the working class obedient – not to wipe them out.

Nothing is added to this story by overstatement.

Remember, I do not raise any of these criticisms to either mitigate or excuse the repression. I am also aware that in this particular book, Preston is concentrating on terror, and not writing a full history of the civil war. Some of the lacunae in *The Spanish Holocaust* are covered in Preston's other books.

In a review that has already rambled on far too long, I conclude by noting that these matters are still live political issues and can still arouse passions. All earlier reviews of *The Spanish Holocaust* that I have read rightly praise the book as a work of documentation. But if you go on-line you will find positive reactions to the book inflected by political feelings. For example, the reviewer for the (conservative) English *Daily Telegraph* notes that fear of Stalinism was not irrational and that therefore not all things said by the Spanish Right before the civil war are to be condemned. By contrast, I have read one review by an anarchist group which gets very upset at what it sees as Preston's “slander” of anarchists.

CHILD'S EYE VIEW (1)
Chris Trotter (1)
Christ in Concrete (1)
Christmas Books (1)
Christopher Isherwood (1)
CHRISTOPHER REID (1)
CLARA (1)
Clive Prince (1)
Clyde Griffen (1)
COLLECTED POEMS 1956-2011 (1)
COLONEL JACK (1)
CONFESSIONS OF AN ENGLISH OPIUM EATER (1)
CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE NOVEL (1)
CONSPIRACY THEORIES (1)
CONVICTS – New Zealand's Hidden Criminal Past (1)
Craig Simons (1)
Critics Get It Wrong Too (1)
D H Lawrence (1)
DANGEROUS MUSE – A Life of Caroline Blackwood (1)
Daniel Defoe (1)
Danyl McLauchlan (1)
Darran McCann (1)
David Anderson (1)
David Ballantyne (1)
David Eggleton (1)
David Hastings (1)
David Lodge (1)
David Nasaw (1)
David Veart (1)
DE MORTUIS NIL NISI BONUM (1)
DEAR DEAD DAYS (1)
DEAR HEART – 150 New Zealand Love Poems (1)
Death of Jean Moulin (1)
DECONSTRUCT (1)
DEL SENTIMIENTO TRAGICO DE LA VIDA (1)
DELICIOUS CATASTROPHE (1)
DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE AND HEALTH (1)
DEPARTMENT OF GREAT MINDS THINK ALIKE (1)
DESTINY – THE LIFE AND TIMES OF A SELF-MADE APOSTLE (1)

You will find an even greater array of ideological positions than this in reactions to *The Spanish Holocaust*. My own viewpoint doubtless infects the review you have just read.

None of this alters the fact that *The Spanish Holocaust* is now essential reading on the Spanish Civil War.

Posted by [Nicholas Reid](#) at 9:02 AM 

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Paul Preston [April 9, 2012 at 11:35 PM](#)

Paul Preston here. Thank you for your very thoughtful and interesting review which I have linked to my facebook page where you will see my comments that the only thing with which I would take real issue is the idea that I compare what happened in Spain to what the Nazis and their allies did in ALL of occupied Europe. I explicitly do not do that. That aside, a very nutritious review.

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DIPLOMATIC LADIES – NEW ZEALAND'S UNSUNG ENVOYS (1)

DJANGO IS GOD (1)

DO WE REALLY TEACH LITERATURE? (1)

Donald Rumbelow (1)

Doris and David Jonas (1)

Dr. Peter Simpson (1)

DRAYNEFLETE REVEALED (1)

E.T.A.Hoffmann (1)

EARLY NEW ZEALAND PHOTOGRAPHY (1)

ECHOES FROM A DISTANT LAND (1)

EDGY (1)

Edmund Gosse (1)

EFFI BRIEST (1)

EL ALAMEIN AND THE STRUGGLE FOR NORTH AFRICA: International Perspectives from the Twenty-First Century (1)

ELEMENTAL – Central Otago Poems (1)

Elizabeth Nannestad (1)

Elmer Rice (1)

Emile Zola (2)

Enough (1)

EOTHEN (1)

Erik Olssen (1)

Erika Wolf (1)

ERNEST DOWSON'S POEM FOR THE UNATTAINABLE (1)

Ernst Junger (1)

ESSAY ON MAN (1)

EVEREST – THE FIRST ASCENT (1)

EXTRA EXTRA – How People Made the News (1)

Fabio Geda (1)

FACEBOOK HYSTERIA (1)

FAMILY SONGBOOK (1)

FAR FROM 'HOME' - The English in New Zealand (1)

FATHER AND SON – A Study of Two Temperaments (1)

Felicity Barnes (1)

Fiona Farrell (1)

Fiona Kidman (1)

FONTAMARA (1)

FOOTNOTE ON NEW ZEALAND
FOREBEARS (1)

FOR RENATO CURCIO (1)

Frances Donaldson (1)

Frank Coates (1)

Frank Jones (1)

Franz Kafka (1)

Freeman (1)

From Bard To Worse (1)

FROM MANOA TO A PONSONBY
GARDEN (1)

FROM THE RIDICULOUS TO THE
SUBLIME (1)

FUHRER-EX: Memoirs of a Former
Neo-Nazi (1)

G.C.Petersen (1)

G.K.Chesterton (1)

George Chapman (1)

George du Maurier (1)

George Gissing (2)

George Meredith (2)

George Moore (2)

George Orwell (1)

George's Ghosts (1)

Geraldine Brooks (1)

GIVE YOUR THOUGHTS LIFE (1)

Glyn Harper (1)

GOAT SONGS (1)

Good Faith (1)

GOOD NEWS IS NO NEWS (1)

GOODBYE SOLDIER (1)

GRAFT (1)

GREAT MOVIE MOMENTS (1)

Gregory O'Brien (1)

H.G.Wells (1)

Hamish Clayton (1)

Hannah Rothschild (1)

Hanns and Rodolf (1)

Hans Fallada (1)

Harriet Tuckey (1)

Harry Ricketts (2)

Harvey Pitcher (1)

Helen Heath (1)

Henry David Thoreau (1)

Henry de Montherlant (1)

Henry Fielding (3)

Henry James (1)

HERE'S TO THE COMMON READER
(1)

Higgins (1)

HISTORICAL IGNORANCE IS BLISS
(1)

HISTORIES OF THE HANGED (1)

HOKITIKA TOWN (1)

HONE TUWHARE (1)

Honore de Balzac (2)

HOUSE OF EARTH – A NOVEL (1)

HOW OFTEN DOES THIS HAVE TO
BE SAID? (1)

Howard Jacobson (1)

HUEY LONG (1)

Hugh Kingsmill (1)

Hugh Major (2)

I SHALL BEAR WITNESS (1)

I'm Working on a Building (1)

IAIN SHARP (1)

Ian McBryde (1)

Ian McEwan (1)

Ian St George (2)

Ian Wedde (2)

IF IT'S FOLK IT MUST BE
AUTHENTIC (1)

Ignazio Silone (1)

Images of War (1)

IN SEARCH OF THE BLUES (1)

In The Sea There Are Crocodiles (1)

Ingo Hasselbach (1)

Irene Nemirovsky (1)

IRON HOUSE (1)

IRONIC AND IRONY (1)

IS DEMOCRACY ALWAYS RIGHT?
(1)

IS YOUR FOOTNOTE REALLY
NECESSARY? (1)

Isaac Asimov (1)

Isabel Allende (1)

Ismail Kadare (1)

IT'S THE WRITING (1)

J.E.Crawford Flitch (1)

J.P.Davidson (1)

Jack London (1)

Jacob Edmond (1)

Jad Adams (1)

James Courage (1)
James Fergusson (1)
James Hayward (1)
James Hogg (1)
James Joyce (1)
James K Baxter (1)
James McNeish (1)
James Morier (1)
James Nice (1)
James Thurber (1)
James Watson (1)
Jane Bowron (1)
Jane Higgins (1)
Jane Smiley (1)
Jane Stafford (2)
Janice Galloway (1)
Jarrod Gilbert (1)
Jay Asher (1)
Jeffrey Paparoa Holman (1)
Jennifer Compton (1)
Jesper Bengtsson (1)
Jill Edwards (1)
Joanna Woods (1)
Joanne Drayton (1)
John Banville (1)
John Buchan (1)
John Caselberg (1)
John Fuegi (1)
John Hart (1)
John Newton (1)
John Russell Taylor (1)
JOSEPH ANDREWS (1)
JOSEPH ANTON - A Memoir (1)
Joseph Conrad (1)
Joseph Shearing (1)
Joyce Carol Oates (2)
Judith Sligo (1)
Jules Verne (1)
JUST THEN (1)
Karen Nairn (1)
Kate Martin (1)
Kay Redfield Jamison (1)
KEEP THE ASPIDISTRA FLYING (1)
Kirsten McDougall (1)

KONSTANTIN (1)

KURA KOIWI (1)

LA CONQUETE DE PLASSANS (1)

Lachy Paterson (1)

LANDFALL 224 (1)

LANDSCAPE AND MEMORY (1)

Lars Kepler (1)

Last Poems (1)

Laurence Fearnley (1)

Laurence Simmons (1)

Le Chaos et la Nuit (1)

LE COUSIN PONS (1)

LE GRAND MEAULNES (1)

LE VENTRE DE PARIS (1)

LEAVE IT UNSHOT (1)

LECTIO SINE STYLUM SOMNIUM (1)

LENIN STALIN AND HITLER – THE AGE OF SOCIAL CATASTROPHE (1)

LET US BE GAY (1)

LETTERS OF FRANK SARGESON (1)

LET'S GO SLUMMING TAKE ME SLUMMING (1)

Liam O'Flaherty (1)

Life & Customs (1)

LIFE'S X FACTOR – The Missing Link in Materialism's Science of Living Things (1)

LISTEN WHILE YOU READ (1)

LITERATURE DOES NOT TELL YOU HOW TO VOTE (1)

LITTLE MAN WHAT NOW? (1)

Lloyd Jones (1)

LONG HAUL OR SHORT STRETCH? (1)

Louis-Rene des Forets (1)

Louise Wallace (1)

Luther Blissett (1)

Lyndon Fraser (1)

Lynn Picknett (1)

Maajid Nawaz (1)

MAD ON RADIUM – New Zealand in the Atomic Age (1)

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Shamubeel Eaquad (1)

Sherwood Anderson (1)

SHIFT (1)

SHOULD NATURAL THINGS BE
COPYRIGHTED? (1)

Shroud (1)

Simon Schama (1)

Simon Sebag Montefiore (1)

Sir Walter Scott (1)

SMALL HOLES IN THE SILENCE (1)

SO AWKWARD TO BE ORDINARY (1)

SOME CORNER OF A FOREIGN
FIELD (1)

SOMEBODY ELSE – Arthur Rimbaud
in Africa 1880-1891 (1)

Something New (127)

Something Old (121)

Something Thjoughtful (1)

Something Thoughtful (125)

SONIA (1)

SOON (1)

Sore Winners (1)

Stella Rimington (1)

Stephanie Johnson (3)

Stephen Hawking (1)

Stephen King (1)

Stephen McKenna (1)

Stephen Prior (1)

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THOSE WHO CAN (1)

THY NAME IS NOVEL (1)

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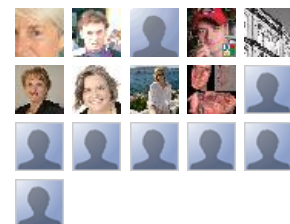
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