**Barbara Holden book reviews for the RAB Project organized A/Z surname of author (2013 11)**

**Addison - Corban Addison ‘A walk across the sun’2012 [Barbara Holden Issue 14, October 2012] -** The cover design first took my eye: ‘A tsunami of steals their family. Men steal their innocence. One man would save them.’ At its simplest this is a novel of two South Indian teenager sisters caught up in two disasters. Firstly there is the December 2004 tsunami which destroys their home and family and then the human disaster of modern slavery. The story progresses with alarming incidents, an increasing sense of dread and an almost unbelievable tenacious thread of love and hope. They face their abandonment with a practical courage and learn quickly to read the signs of their captivity. Their greatest dread is being separated and they to do have to survive this experience. On the other side of the world Thomas Clarke, an American lawyer, despairs at the collapse of his marriage to Indian-born Priya following the death of their first child. He decides on a sabbatical and a position with the Mumbai branch of an international anti-trafficking agency. Without ‘spoiling’ the story it moves between India and Paris, legal teams, police forces, Eastern European sex workers and Priya’s middle-class family. Initially I was unsure about a male American hero figure but I changed my view because the story is supported by facts about the modern abolitionist cause and an invitation to campaign through whatever means. I recommend this book because the story is credible and clear about the large and expanding sex industry.

**Angelou - Maya Angelou ‘Hallelujah! The welcome table - a life time of memories with recipes’ 2005 [Barbara Holden Issue 6 January 2010] -** I had this book as a Christmas present and read it at one sitting. It combines my love of cooking and food with stories about people and places. Almost half of it is from her Southern American childhood but the recipes and stories continue through her life as a writer. Of all the delicious Southern dishes is her grandmother’s ‘caramel cake’ which is a sure-fire prize winner! So there are recognizable moments such as ‘smothered chicken’ prepared for the rising star Oprah Winfrey through to cooking ‘chocolate éclairs’ by the score when she was struggling with writer’s block. She sees food as nourishment, as social oil, as a blessing.

**Bhutto - Benazir Bhutto ‘Reconciliation – her final words on Islam, Democracy and the West’ 2008 [Barbara Holden Issue 5, September 2009] -** This is my third book following the life of Benazir Bhutto a former Prime Minister of Pakistan [see end]. It is an intense poignant text with chapters entitled: the battle with Islam, Islam and democracy; the case of Pakistan and is the clash of civilizations inevitable. Her publisher received the final edits of the manuscript on the morning of her assassination – 27 December 2007. It is part history, part political analysis and part a personal memoir of her time in and out of power. The case of Pakistan chapter argues strongly that the nation created by partition in 1947 is uniquely placed at the centre of any possible diminishing of terrorism. She refutes the ‘clash of civilizations’ idea originally published by Samuel Huntingdon in 1993. She argues that the main challenge, internal to Islam, is about whether or not Muslim people can survive and prosper in the modern era. Her final chapter is a strong plea for considered sustained support for democracies by other democracies. She argues cogently that democracy and Islam are not incompatible. There are no dramatic new revelations in this book, but the benefit of hearing from a woman whose family has for three generations been at the frontline of Muslim-Pakistani politics. It is well worth reading. See also Benazir Bhutto ‘Daughter of the east - autobiography’ [1988] and ‘The trial of Benazir Bhutto - an insight into the status of women in Islam’ [1989]

**Choucair - Saloua Raouda Choucair Tate Modern edited by Jessica Morgan 2013 [Barbara Holden Issue 16, June 2013] - art -** Having seen this gem of an exhibition and come across the video here’s the book! For me fabulous as the exhibition was it was this woman’s life that seriously touched me. She is alive at 95 and has lived and worked through dangerous times in Lebanon. Much of it was without being honoured in Lebanon or, until now, recognized internationally. Her work shows a person who is witty, rooted in observing everyday life, sharp on a woman’s place in all of that and also an artist driven by science and architecture. Her life’s work is an exciting blend of Islamic influences and modernism. She does both painting and sculpture – all wonderfully shown in the book. Her early self-portrait at the beginning of the exhibition and the book introduces you to the vigour and confidence she displays in her life. In the book there is a photo of her studio with hundreds of small sculptures – at the exhibition I so wanted to touch or have one of these small interlocking sculptures. See Tate Modern - <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/saloua-raouda-choucair> plus BBC video - <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22129109>

**Dalrymple - William Dalrymple ‘Nine Lives – in search of the sacred in modern India’ 2009 [Barbara Holden Issue 9, February 2011] -** I’m a genuine ‘fan’ of Dalrymple’s work. He is an exceptional travel writer. He looks and listens in a particularly receptive way. His gift is in letting individuals speak for themselves together with using his own experience of India. Some reviewers have likened this book to Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales.’ But to me it is more like the first book of his I read, ‘From the Holy Mountain.’ ‘Nine Lives’ does not set out to be a comprehensive account of religion in India rather it describes his personal encounters with nine individuals. Nonetheless he does understand how historically religions live side by side. There is for example ‘the Dancer of Kannur’ [chapter 2] who uses his spiritual energy as part of his own devotion and as a means of challenging and crossing caste lines. Then there is the Muslim Sufi woman [5] whose story adds to Dalrymple’s acute awareness of the current ascendancy in Islam of fundamentalism. Finally there is ‘the Maker of Idols’ [7] a ‘Stpathy’ who is the 23rd in a long hereditary line of bronze-sculptors from the Chola empire. He is the last of the line because, in a rapidly changing India, his son is becoming an IT man! The stories contrast sharply with much in our Western society. But they add to my experience of spirituality and interfaith dialogue in the face of much that belittles it. They also encourage me to work at my own spiritual belief and practice.

**Hague - Ffion Hague ‘The pain and the privilege – the women in Lloyd George’s life’ 2008 [Barbara Holden Issue 4, May 2009] -** This account takes us from the mid-nineteenth century ferment of Welsh Nonconformity to the door of Number 10 Downing Street and to an international career ending only at his death in 1945. We gradually learn of the way of which Lloyd George’s grandmother, mother, sister, wife, lovers and daughters exerted their influence on him and supported his chosen political career. His life-long ‘womanising’ was well known so it took all the skills of the ‘Welsh wizard’ to ensure his political survival: the detailed storyline lies with three women. Firstly wife Margaret resisted moving from their Criccieth constituency where she reared their family of five. She reluctantly came to national prominence through her own efforts during World War 1 [1914-1918]. She gradually emerged as a clear figurehead in Welsh Liberal politics and was created a Dame in 1919. Frances Stevenson met Lloyd George through a friendship with his daughter Mair. By 1912 she became his Principal Secretary and lover and as such broke the gender barrier operating in the Civil Service. Alongside this she was at the heart of government for nearly thirty years and worked hard through national and international processes. She lived a discreet private life saddened by lack of marital status till 1943. She had a daughter of undeclared paternity born in 1929. The enmity between her and Lloyd George’s family remained a constant and her eventual marriage to him did little to mitigate her sense of isolation. Megan was Lloyd George’s youngest child and a successful politician in her own right. She had opportunity to influence he father from an early age and used his prominence to extend her horizons. Her bitterness towards Frances gradually eroded her relationship with her father and her own private life remained complicated. Ffion Hague uses the interwoven lives of these three women to illustrate the political and social changes of the times: women’s suffrage; the Boer War; the 1914-18 war and its aftermath; the People’s budget of 1909-10; the National Insurance Bill that was the foundation of the Welfare State. She writes as a woman, a native Welsh-speaker, and as wife of a national politician. The book is finely nuanced well researched.

**Huq - Rupa Huq ‘On the edge –the contested cultures of English suburbia’ 2013 [Barbara Holden Issue 16, June 2013] – politics and society -** I read this book because some years ago I moved to a commuter town that is not quite suburbia after decades living in the inner city. The author is senior lecturer in Sociology at Kingston University and begins by describing the riots of August 2011 especially as they impacted on Ealing where she was born and raised. Her research covers changes in political allegiance, issues of citizenship, extreme political groups and faith practice. The final chapter looks at the ongoing development of suburbia – a mix of changing opportunities and diversity. There are key references to Margaret Thatcher’s programmes of radical change especially home ownership and monetary policies which continue to impact on our current lives. Huq’s style is journalistic and refreshing. She has a sparky postscript covering the changing views of suburbia with its ‘green lawns’ as exemplified in films and art on both sides of the Atlantic. This is a popular and particular account of the place of suburbia in the twenty-first century.

**Ismailov - Hamid Ismailov ‘The Railway’ 2006 [Barbara Holden Issue 8, September 2010] -** Here he is on Sufism: “Sufism [is] everything that is un-prescribed, un-preconditioned, unprecedented, un-prejudged. Sufism is an attempt to attain a ‘naked’ connection with reality. That may be the aim of all religion. But as soon as religion becomes a form, a ritual, a tradition, it becomes just another iron road, just another railway. And that is no longer Sufism. The way is thinner than a hair – that is what I call Sufism.” It is a mind-expanding and satisfying story in which ideas, characters and events make the journey.

**Moltmann-Wendel - Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel ‘The Women around Jesus – reflections on authentic personhood’ 1982 translated John Bowden [Barbara Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – religion -** I have good memories of my involvement with the East London Christian Feminist Group in the 80’s. Much has changed but the need for equal rights for women and reducing violence against women persist. So when a friend lent me this study by Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel I felt to be returning to some basic teaching – 1982! Given the problems of interpreting any cultural setting it isn’t surprising that the history of the Christian Church has put down many layers. And yet when you read the texts and examine these particular texts about the women around Jesus – you are struck by the sheer straightforwardness of the fact that he did value the women. Of course it is useful to read back into the cultural setting but it is also important to accept the full-force of his positive regard and respect.

**Mortenson - Greg Mortenson [and David Oliver Relin] ‘Three Cups of Tea’ 2007 [Barbara Holden Issue 1, May 2008] -** The sub title is ‘one man’s extraordinary journey to promote peace – one school at a time.’ The relationship between America and Pakistan and Afghanistan is major news. This true story, set between 1993 and 2006, records a small focussed piece of social action set within international military madness. It is an alternative description of life in the remote regions of Pakistan and Afghanistan and it moves between American, Pakistan, climbing fraternities, military personnel, the media and the Taliban! Greg Mortenson is a climber who failed to ascend K2, just survived and stumbled into Korphe in Baltistan where he receives care and hospitality from Haji Ali the elderly village chief. As he recovers he gets drawn into the life of the village its language, poverty, danger, practised hospitality and its Shia Muslim faith. He especially comes to understand the very limited educational opportunities, not least for girls. So, he returns to America so as to fundraise for the requested school: but he does so in the face of increased American militancy. However this man has sources of belief and self understanding that come from his childhood experiences in Tanzania with medical missionary parents. So he returns, as promised, and builds not one school but many! He sets up the Central Asia Institute and by 2006 it is bringing education to some 24,000 children.

**Solomon - Norman Solomon ‘Judaism - a very short introduction’ reissued 2000 [Barbara Holden Issue 5, September 2009] -** I am on this year’s ‘Faiths Together’ course at Heythrop College London <http://www.heythrop.ac.uk/> . It is a part-time course alternating group work and visits and runs September to December and January to April. It is about religious dialogue and the approach uses input and stresses relational and experiential learning. For example one session on Jewish texts emphasized the importance of not misusing your own sacred texts. In preparation I re-read Norman Solomon. I don’t know if you know the ‘a very short introduction’ series from Oxford UP. But this, though only 138 pages, is very lively, direct and comprehensive. It is well set out with some good illustrations. I’d recommend it both as a starter and for revision!

**Stewart - Rory Stewart ‘The places in between’ 2004 [Barbara Holden Issue 10, June 2011] -** Rory Stewart is now a Conservative MP. For some time he undertook a walk through Iran, Pakistan, India and Nepal. This book describes his walk through the Afghan winter of 2002 from Herat eastward to Kabul accompanied by a dog. So this small wiry Scot has a deep need to walk the earth, the physical effort shapes his spiritual response to the landscape and its people. The journey follows one made by the Fifteen Century Moghul Emperor Babur the Great and there are many quotes from Babur’s account. Stewart displays his knowledge of Islamic history and culture in every situation. His language skills keep him safe, aware of changes and expectation, and allow him to explain his actions and ask polite testing questions of the many individuals who give him hospitality. His route takes him through the remote region that was once the heart of the Ghorid Empire. He examines the remains of the Ghorian city called the Turquoise Mountain burnt by Genghis Khan. The locals talk about selling archaeological artefacts as a source of income. His nightly conversations with the men who give him food and shelter reveal the changes in traditional hospitality and the complex relations between Afghanistan’s main tribal groups and the hostility between Sunni and Shia. The gap between Afghan’s daily pressure to survive and the International plans for reconstruction lead to some very sharp observations. This is a very timely and thoughtful read.

**Tóibín - Colm Tóibín ‘The Testament of Mary’ 2012 [Barbara Holden Issue 17, October 2013] – novels set beyond Europe -** I’ve often wondered what it must be like to read the Jesus-story for the first time. I do know how interpretations have changed – not least in terms of women in the story. Quite recently I read Elizabeth Moltmann-Wendel ‘The Women around Jesus’ [1982] where this academic sought to reposition some women in the Jesus-story. When someone lent me the Tóibín I had no idea that I would be visiting Mary’s house in Ephesus – but I did and it was seriously moving especially for the Muslim and Christian women who have been pilgrims over many years. So Tóibín is a ‘famous’ novelist, short-story writer, essayist, playwright, journalist, critic, poet and academic. In his ‘Testament of Mary’ there is one voice – Mary’s - and an imagined account of what happened to Mary after Jesus, her son’s, death. It is quite an achievement and he gets deeply into imagining Mary’s strength and fragility – at the level of her very being. Mary says of the disciples explanation of Jesus as the salvation for the world: “For the first time I felt the enormity of their ambition and the innocence of their belief [page 101].”