

recent scholar has gone as deeply as Katrina Dyonne Thompson into the origins of this outwardly improbable connection. Most note the grotesque detail of Thomas Dartmouth Rice's grotesquely parodic blackface dance, and move on.

Thompson argues that there is a profound and lasting connection between African American entertainment and the institution of slavery. She suggests that the first place African Americans were seen not just in entertainment but as entertainment was the slave block. A willingness to sing and dance confirmed physical vitality and cemented a stereotype that preserved the hegemony of the benign slaveowner over his happy workforce. Slaves who danced and sang to order could not be considered a risk, or thought to be discontent. Going back in time before the minstrel show, long thought to be at the root of African American entertainment, Thompson shows that important ritual dances among the peoples of West Africa were denatured and decontextualized by slavers, who would routinely bring their human cargo up from the holds and force their captives to sing and to stamp their "free" feet on the deck.

The process continued once the slaves were in the American South. The slave "coffle" became an indentured troupe, its human chain halted in town squares for the entertainment of the white populace. A grim instruction to dance, often with threats, has become a trope of American westerns, often directed at vulnerable blacks or "Indians" who might be encouraged by pistol shots fired into the dust.

Thompson also shows how African American dance and song "backstage" became a subtly coded language of resistance and rebellion. This has continued, with subversive calypso, "jive" and the complex harmonics and virtuosic articulation of bebop effectively excluding white jazz amateurs. African American entertainers, Thompson contends, are still maintained in roles which reinforce racial stereotyping and the status quo. Thompson has written a powerful study whose implications reach beyond distant American history or the preoccupations of "black studies" to ask urgent questions about African American identity.

BRIAN MORTON

Religion

Christopher P. Jones

BETWEEN PAGAN AND CHRISTIAN
224pp. Harvard University Press. £29.95
(US \$39.95).
978 0 674 72520 1

Standard accounts of the meteoric rise of Christianity after Constantine's conversion in 312 are familiar. Belief in Jesus Christ became the established state religion and a requirement for holders of public office in the Roman Empire. Pagan practices like idol worship and animal sacrifice were outlawed. Christian orthodoxy had no serious spiritual or political competitors.

Distilling a life's scholarship, Christopher Jones unveils a more complex reality in *Between Pagan and Christian*. Not until the Emperor Justinian, two centuries after Constantine, were pagans debarred from public office, with forcible conversion only

then becoming a tool of government. Devotion to the Cross and martyrs' relics was sometimes equated with idolatry. One form of paganism was Neoplatonism, and some of its concepts, such as a single unnamed being superior to other gods, mingled with Christian ideas. Moreover, Constantine's conversion was not unique. Other royal and national conversions occurred in Armenia, Georgia and Ethiopia around the same time. Overall, Christianity made uneven progress, rapidly supplanting paganism in Alexandria, but not in Athens or Corinth. Ordinary people continued to observe pagan festivals and customs, especially in towns with a strong tradition of civic deities and in the villages. (The literal meaning of pagan was "country dweller".)

A few of Jones's points could be disputed. Early Arians were more concerned to promote divine transcendence than to deny Christ's divinity, so an Arian emperor wasn't necessarily a heretic. Animal sacrifice was never fully eliminated, persisting in many Oriental Orthodox Churches even today, notably in the Armenian Church's *madagh* ritual. Nevertheless, Jones powerfully establishes his main argument: that paganism, in a multiplicity of forms, persisted and was tolerated much later than the reign of Constantine.

Ultimately, pagans threatened Christianity differently in East and West. In the East, Neoplatonism offered an intellectual alternative to belief in Christ, and Constantinople stood in the shadow of Persian and then Muslim forces. In the West, however, the missions launched from Rome to combat pre-Christian cults found some success. Yet education in the Classics remains a mark of learning. When naming days and months, we still refer to the pagan pantheon.

DAVID GRUMETT

Drama

Henry Burnell

LANDGARTHA

A tragic-comedy

Edited by Deana Rankin

176pp. Four Courts Press. £29.95.

978 1 84682 339 8

Renaissance drama is dominated by women who embody the "virgin-whore" paradigm, in which women are either portrayed as innocent maidens (such as Desdemona in *Othello*), constantly objectified by men who fetishize their youth, or damnable courtesans (such as Annabella in *'Tis Pity She's a Whore*), condemned by society. Henry Burnell's heroine Landgartha is different. *Landgartha* is the story of an Amazonian warrior and her merry band of all-female fighters, who, due to their infamous martial prowess, are constantly called on to help the King of Denmark. The implicit allegory here is for the tempestuous relationship between England and Ireland in the early seventeenth century. Deanna Rankin's edition has unearthed this play, otherwise critically ignored, which portrays women and female camaraderie in a remarkably proto-feminist way – that is distinctly progressive in comparison to other Renaissance dramatists.

As Rankin notes, *Landgartha* has only been performed once, in Dublin in 1641,

which perhaps explains why it has been undeservedly overlooked. Throughout this, the first scholarly edition of the play, Rankin attempts to overcome the fact that so little is known about the playwright himself by continually aligning him with Ben Jonson and Edmund Spenser, and suggesting that *Landgartha* is a "celebration of English-Irish legitimacy" as well as a riposte to the demonization of Ireland in sixteenth-century English literature. This alignment is not wholly convincing, however, and the reader is forced to wonder how, if, as Rankin suggests, *Landgartha* was of such great importance to its original audience, it could have been dismissed as lacking merit by the few critics who bothered to acknowledge it at all.

Although Rankin's introduction repeats itself a little as it explores Burnell's likely mythic sources and influences, it does give the reader the historical context, and successfully establishes *Landgartha* as a play which challenges the accepted canon of Renaissance drama.

ANNA-MARIA SSEMUYABA

Eastern European Fiction

Vladimir Lorchenkov

THE GOOD LIFE ELSEWHERE

Translated by Ross Ufberg

204pp. New Vessel Press. Paperback, \$14.99.

978 1 939931 01 6

Moldova is the poorest country in Europe, and almost 25 per cent of the population (one million people out of 4.4 million) works abroad, legally or otherwise. Starting from this sad economic reality, Vladimir Lorchenkov's *The Good Life Elsewhere* spins a picaresque comedy around the attempts, increasingly desperate and bizarre, made by the inhabitants of the northern village of Larga to escape to Italy, a land that "flows with milk and honey".

The novel begins with a group of fifty Largans, with forged documents to prove them members of the Moldovan curling team, paying €4,000 each to be trafficked to the West. It ends with the Moldovan President declaring war on Larga for its separatist ideas. In between, Lorchenkov concocts a narrative of flying tractors, homemade submarines, political corruption and two holy crusades to Italy.

The Good Life Elsewhere is far more than just a series of comic vignettes: it manages to walk a fine line between tragedy and farce, giving a picture of a country in which the driving motor for people's actions, even their most ridiculous ones, is anger and despair. The first escape attempt ends in fiasco – the conmen take the Largans to the capital Chisinau and abandon them there, telling them it is Rome – and one of their victims, having lost all her money and sold her husband's tractor, threatens to hang herself. Her husband calls her bluff and then uses the swinging corpse as a rack to dry garlic. The novel's original title, *Vsyë tam budem* (loosely, "That's where we'll all end up"), suggests that the only possible better life is the afterlife.

Ross Ufberg's translation is solid, although the book could have done with better proof-reading: dogs have "flees" and cars have "breaks". Lorchenkov, a Moldovan who writes in Russian, manages an impressive array of voices and styles, skilfully ventrilo-

quizing his large cast, from party functionaries to foolish peasants. He even provides us with a well-structured *faux*-medieval chronicle of the Moldovan Crusades, an inspired religious movement aiming to get Italian residency permits for its thousands of followers. Heretics who deny the existence of Italy are dealt with mercilessly.

JAMES WOMACK

Biography

Robert Wainwright

SHEILA

The Australian ingenue who bewitched

British society

424pp. Allen and Unwin. £14.99.

978 1 74331 682 5

Sheila Chisholm's trajectory from a grazing property named "Wollogorang", in the hills beyond Goulburn in New South Wales, to the centre of London society in the years following the First World War is an enticing basis for a biography. Sheila had three husbands: the tragically dissolute Lord Loughborough, son of the "Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo"; the "Boxing Baronet", Sir John Milbanke; and Prince Dmitri Alexandrovich, nephew of Russia's last tsar. Her many suitors included Rudolph Valentino; the American philanthropist Vincent Astor; and the future George VI, with whom she formed one half of a quartet that styled itself the "4 Dos", the other half comprising Freda Dudley Ward and the Prince of Wales. As well as beauty, charisma and resilience, Sheila had a capacity for forging and maintaining friendships, a reputation for good works (she was chairman of the annual Derby Ball in aid of the Royal Northern Hospital), and some business acumen (she once assumed the management of the nightclub *Ciro's* for a bet and later established her own successful travel agency). And like other quintessentially 1920s personalities, such as her friend Noël Coward, she had a talent for reinvention. Yet, despite these attributes, she was still bound by the conventions of her class and time and not quite the pioneering Australian free spirit and even proto-feminist Robert Wainwright claims.

Wainwright has conscientiously mined the available sources, but *Sheila* is something of a missed opportunity. It could have been a fascinating social history with Sheila as its dazzling conduit. Instead, it often reads like an extended article in the *Tatler*. Wainwright is too reliant on the gossip columns of the day and on superficial first-hand observations. We spend too long immersed in the minutiae of one fashionable gathering after another or in the wearisome company of childish princes, petite Lady Bountifuls and the irredeemably damaged progeny of scapegrace parents. He gives us the facts, but fails to furnish what Virginia Woolf calls "the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders". Sheila herself remains elusive, though Wainwright quotes extensively from her unpublished memoir "Waltzing Matilda". Only in his closing vignette of a vanishing world do we sense something of Sheila's bewitching presence: in her hospital ward surrounded by "ageing friends and compatriots from the early days all laughing and making merry".

KATHLEEN RILEY