



Celebrated travel writer Duncan Smith at Vienna's British Bookshop

Photo: David Reali

In a recent visit to Vienna, Urban Explorer Duncan Smith reveals what it takes to discover the true soul of a city

'The City is My Jungle'

by Gretchen Gatzke

An "urban explorer" is how Duncan J.D. Smith defined himself. After a life-time of foreign adventures and some two decades of travel writing that has included the acclaimed *Only In...* series, Smith was at Vienna's British Bookshop for an evening of slides and stories for an audience of several dozen friends and fans.

"The city is my jungle," Smith told the crowded bookshop on that Thursday evening, dark except for a light that shone on the au-

thor, and the presentation projected onto the screen behind him. He began with stories of his family and tales of childhood travel that had hooked him for life. His father, who as a young man was nearly indistinguishable from the author who stood before us, was especially keen on foreign adventures.

A trip to Morocco had sparked Smith's fascination with far-away lands, but, being a child, he could not just travel at will.

So he made a plan: He fashioned a new

outlook for himself, one that involved both his father, and his immediate surroundings. "I would start to view everything beyond my parents' doorstep as foreign," he said.

He began to write about what was around him. The small town of Sheffield, Yorkshire, turned out to be a good place to start. Smith and his father became "part-time explorers" of Yorkshire, and began writing a column called *Yorkshire Curiosities* for a local newspaper about their findings of the hidden corners of northern England.

The next slide popped up to reveal a pre-pubescent Smith posing in a coffin in a cemetery. Living history. He laughed. "It's no surprise to find me doing something like that, even today."

Smith's first job was in a local bookshop, surrounded by literature that inspired him to travel through the pages of books like Rosita Forbes' *India of the Princes*, Kenneth Gandard-Dower's *Abyssinian Patchwork* and stories from famed British explorer Percy Fawcett, who was known for his ill-fated attempt to find the Lost City of Z. Smith continued to write and produced a number of books about his hometown of Sheffield.

But constant exposure to travel literature only fueled his lust for exploration and soon enough, Smith became sales manager for Lonely Planet Travel Guides. Adventure ensued.

Photograph after photograph of exotic locations appeared on the screen. Smith compared images of Morocco and Damascus, speaking about unusual accommodations; staying in a Bedouin tent in Jordan, for example, or a safari lodge in Kenya. One thing about travel, Smith noted, is that it makes you question your own definition of what "normal" is.

On a trip to Kenya, he came across two Maasai warriors who were clearly taken by his appearance, just as he was by theirs. Upon learning that the Maasai referred to the English as *iloridaa enjekat*, or "those who confine their wind," Smith discovered that they were fascinated by his trousers, which, compared to the more loose-fitting dress of his hosts, didn't allow the spoils of a large meal to disperse naturally into the air.

Which is one way of looking at it...

During a recent routine teeth-cleaning, Smith's dentist asked, "Can you honestly call yourself an explorer when everything around you has been explored?" To which he replied, quoting Nicolas Bouvier:

"Deprived of one's usual setting, the cus-

tomary routine stripped away, the traveler finds himself reduced to more modest proportions – but also more open to curiosity, to intuition."

An explorer, to Smith, is someone who goes to a place for the first time and ventures for the unexplored. This is not to be mistaken with a traveler, who follows the explorer, or a tourist, who follows the traveler. You and I, Smith said, are a combination of the tourist and the traveler; yet we still have the capacity to be an explorer, as long as we are able to open ourselves to new ideas.

It's safe to say Smith has achieved that status. He moved to Vienna, fearful of coming and simply living in a place, despite his love for travel. Gradually he began to relax. "But I couldn't just sit there," he said.

So he began to explore the passageways, unusual buildings, cemeteries and other rarely-sought out aspects of Vienna. He started with a map. "I did lots of reading," he said. "One thousand hours of research." His method, two weeks exploring the city, one week to rest...in total, nine hours per day and about one year to complete the entire project.

Next he submitted the manuscript, a success that transformed into *Only In Vienna*, the first of the series, published by Christian Brandstätter, that now includes over half a dozen guides of little-known and unusual hidden sites of Central European cities.

"I don't give you too many directions, though," he said. "It's not a box-ticking exercise."

Smith tells stories, rather than listing facts and recommends going by foot whenever possible. He explores because it takes him out of his comfort zone and he lets every place he visits leave its mark on him.

Smith ended the evening with a quote from T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, that defines exploration not only for him, he said, but for everyone fueled by a desire to escape from the norm.

"We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

It is only through travel, to stepping outside and looking back, that we will ever really know ourselves.

Only In Vienna: A Guide to Hidden Corners, Little-known Places and Unusual Objects

By Duncan J.D. Smith

Brandstätter, Vienna 2009

Available at Vienna's British Bookshop

Timothy W. Ryback explores the Führer's private library

Hitler's Books

by Joseph D. Rollwagen
& Dardis McNamee

The barbarisms of the Third Reich are common knowledge, running the gambit from genocide to a stranglehold on intellectual and artistic life via censorship and propaganda. Among these cultural atrocities fell the burning of books, as happened on May 10, 1933 at some 30 German and Austrian universities.

Therefore, it is surprising to learn in Timothy W. Ryback's *Hitler's Private Library* that Adolf Hitler had a sizeable collection of around 16,000 books himself. These were on everything from culture, politics, architecture and much more. One of Hitler's favorite past times, reading did a great deal to influence his ideology and even fed his passions from existentialist philosophy to popular fiction.

With Hitler having an overpowering public persona, it is easy to forget that he was just a man behind closed doors. His passions rested in things such as architecture (as pointed out in the first chapter with Berlin), art, and ideas. The oddest, and thus arguably the most intriguing interest of Hitler's was in the fantasy "westerns" of Karl May and the then popular characters Winnetou and Old Shatterhand. Even though May had never been to the Western United States, and thus was writing from imagination rather than reality, the novels fascinated Hitler. Instead of a villain sitting at his fireside plotting world domination, we have a man retreating into a private world and curling up with a good book. Ryback has a fine ability to show the love Hitler had for literature in general and especially

the oddity and eerie normality of this larger than life villain.

Ryback is a good story teller. The book starts out with a young Hitler serving on the front lines during the First World War, and we see the 26-year-old Hitler in service as a mail-runner. Here we encounter Max Osborne's *Berlin*, a well thumbed, dog-eared architectural critique and overview of Germany's capital, that Hitler carried with him in his pack, leaving finger smudges, food stains and even a hair from his moustache between the pages. Along with art, architecture fascinated Hitler throughout his life. But more importantly, we see the general life of a soldier in Hitler's position, and while there are no day-to-day accounts of what Hitler personally went through, Ryback found among Hitler's books, an account of the unit he was in and how, by the autumn of 1915, he was the only one still living from the original eight. It's hard to avoid the irony: During all the years that Hitler was in power, repeated attempts were made on his life, all to no avail. Ryback thus shows a dark, humorous, vignette that shows Hitler had a knack for escaping demise long before he was the Führer.

Hitler's literary tastes might be eye-catching to some, considering the politics of this man. At the top of his list were works of Shakespeare, Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Daniel Defoe with *Robinson Crusoe*. Other work touched upon in Hitler's Private Library were his own *Mein Kampf*, works of Nietzsche and volumes on military strategy, as well as an entire chapter devoted to a translation *Peer Gynt* by his mentor, Dietrich Eckart.

Dietrich Eckart, born 1868 in Neumarkt, Germany, was Hitler's mentor, starting with his racially driven adaptation of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* for the German stage. Aside from this, Eckart was the

editor of the anti-Semitic print *Auf gut Deutsch*. Throughout his later life, he was a strong critic of the Treaty of Versailles and used Social Democrats and Jews as the scapegoat for German defeat in the First World War. Eckart helped start the German Workers' Party (Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, later on the National Socialist German Workers' Party), and met Hitler in 1919 at a speech he was giving in Munich. Within Eckart's inner circle, it was commonly believed a "messiah" with a "will to power" would come back and liberate Germany from the Jewish agenda. After meeting Hitler for the first time, Eckart felt this prophecy had come true.

"This Hitler is the future of Germany."

Through Eckart, Hitler was able to meet the German intellectual Alfred Rosenberg, who was hanged after the trials at Nürnberg. Eckart is widely considered responsible for creating some of the core tenants of Nazi ideology along side Hitler, Rosenberg and others. The second volume of *Mein Kampf* was dedicated to Eckart (fitting since he had "taught Hitler to write" and published his first essays, as Ryback says). After the failed Beer Hall Putsch (1923) he was put in prison and died of a heart attack shortly after his release.

What is important in terms of Hitler's political development is to be found in the events of the early years after the First World War. When Hitler was offered a copy of Anton Drexler's *My Political Awakening*, he recorded that he saw "[his] own development come to life before my eyes." Many people regarded Hitler as anti-intellectual, but his reading tastes reflected an interest in thinkers such as Schopenhauer, Fichte and Nietzsche, who had several connections and influences upon Nazism and Fascism in Europe.

The rise of right-wing ideology in Germany was often credited to Nietzsche, and soldiers on

the German front in the First World War were given copies of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, which gave a description of the transition from the apes to the Übermensch, where a master race was to run the world because of superior qualities. Thus German soldiers, as a moral compass, were fed with the notion that they were a superior race and, therefore, justified in the butcher of an inferior enemy. In Nietzsche's paradigm, God was dead: Religion had failed and mankind thus had the responsibility to take matters into its own hands. From this, Hitler cherry-picked the ideologies that suited and skewed them to fit his prejudice against Jews and others he did not care for.

For example, Hitler pondered why the German enlightenment produced *Nathan the Wise*, while it was left up to Shakespeare to bring readers *Shylock* in *The Merchant of Venice*. Ryback contends that Hitler's selective understanding of texts molded him into the leader he ended up being.

It is, in the end, an imperfect inquiry. Although he did leave margin notes and underlinings, Hitler left no journals, no narrative to guide us through his collection.

"Like footprints in the sand, these markings allow us to trace the course of the journey but not necessarily the intent," Ryback writes. Still, through his rich description of the surrounding context of time and place, drawing heavily from related histories, biographies, memoirs and other writings, he has been able to make some very interesting guesses, so that, in the end we discover "where attention caught and lingered, where it rushed forward and where it ultimately ended."

Hitler's Private Library: The Books that Shaped his Life

By Timothy W. Ryback

Vintage Books, London 2010

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