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Reviews

- Fall of Venice

VENICE
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THE DAILY TELEGRAPH

135, FLEET STREET,
LONDON, E.C.4

ISSUE
DATED

26 FEB 1970

A Fruitful Decadence

By Max Beloff

The Fall of Venice. By Maurice Rowdon. (Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 50s.)

THE decline of great maritime empires is marked by protectionism in economics, the loss of public spirit and the respect for martial virtues where politics are concerned, and permissiveness in private life.

In the 18th century, Venice's imperial decline was halted through the prudent practice of neutrality and the lack of interest of the *ancien régime* in putting an end to the aristocratic Republic. But while it held on to its territories, the substance of its nobility was dissipated in luxury. Tourism replaced industry and commerce as its main source of revenue. No new and productive class arose to replace the dwindling ranks of the nobles; all shared in the corruption and lassitude which dependence upon "invisible exports" entailed.

Nevertheless the Venice of the period, as Maurice Rowdon lovingly recreates it, in an imaginative if occasionally over-written book, not only produced a society of good manners, relative tolerance and enormous attractiveness to outsiders, but also achievements in the fine arts whose full glory perhaps our own age has been the first fully to appreciate.

The century of Canaletto, Guardi and Tiepolo, of Vivaldi and Goldoni is not negligible

and when we call to mind an image of Venice we usually think of the sunlit years of decline rather than the time of the cruelty and majesty of the ascension.

As Mr Rowdon shows, the inside was hollow; when Napoleon chose to call the bluff there was no one to say him nay. The Republic that Wordsworth mourned was imaginary. In the inability of Venetians to combine we can see the origins of its present plight, when its contemporary inhabitants seem as unable to protect its physical existence as their predecessors were its political identity. Soon the illustrations to Mr Rowdon's book and other 18th-century pictures may be all there is to remind us of what Venice was.

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SCARBOROUGH EVENING NEWS

SCARBOROUGH,
YORKSHIRE

ISSUE
DATED

25 FEB 1970

VENICE EFFECTIVELY BROUGHT TO LIFE

Maurice Rowdon sets out to describe the last and glittering but doomed hundred years of the famous independent Republic of Venice. Actually, he uses this peg to write a book that is part history, part literary analysis of a remarkable city-state, and part travelogue, with its setting Venice 200 years ago.

The hundred years 1700-1800 was for the city of Venice its golden age, but golden in the sense of great artistic achievement, for the city's days as a powerful state had passed, and during this century the city was to live on the fat of its reputation, until Napoleon cut away the trappings and the decayed facade to reveal the corruption beneath.

However, this intriguing book is not a serious historical survey. Its attraction lies in Maurice Rowdon's eye for

Maurice Rowdon:
THE FALL OF VENICE
(Weidenfeld and Nicholson 50/-)

visual beauty, his great knowledge of the city, and his skill in setting down his impressions in print.

He ranges far wider than the eighteenth century, starting with an introduction to Venetian history, as a prelude to another chapter on the great age of the Doges of Venice. Then, having arrived at the eighteenth century, he spends some felicitous chapters describing the visual arts of the city, its painters, sculptors, and architects. He writes about the city's literary lions and musicians with the same candour and sympathy, and while he is doing this Mr. Rowdon weaves

In a scenic tour of the city as it was in 1750.

Altogether, this book is an artistic achievement. It is not long, with only 179 pages of text, but it is beautifully illustrated and produced. And throughout Maurice Rowdon's bubbling, colourful style brings Venice effectively to life.

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THE IRISH TIMES

DUBLIN

ISSUE
DATED



Tiepolo, a decorator to an earlier generation, is now one of the most highly appreciated of Venetian and Italian artists. This cartoon is an illustration from "The Fall of Venice" (by Maurice Rowdon, by Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 45s.), a nostalgic book about the eternal and ever-dying city.

Weidenfeld.

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DAILY SKETCH

CARMELITE HOUSE,
LONDON, E.C.4

ISSUE
DATED 26 FEB 1970

QUICK LOOKS

- Isaac Bashevis Singer is an acquired taste, a slightly schmaitzy fiddler on a Jewish roof. "The Seance" (Cape, 30s.) collects 16 of his short stories, and they open up a special world, imbued with myth, both bitter and sweet.

They reveal a way of thinking and feeling we all need to understand.

- "The Fall of Venice" (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 50s.) is the kind of book that makes a package tour superfluous, for Maurice Rowdon, superbly supported by illustrations, opens your eyes and senses to aspects of Venice the speedy tourist misses.

Call me a gondola

I KNOW of no city which exercises such attraction and repulsion on me as Venice. The repulsion is based on a profound dislike of the regime, of the thousand-year-old police State which governed by fear, anonymity and informers and which looted Byzantium, bled the Greek world and disgraced so many of its great men.

The sumptuous worldliness of so much of its art, the poverty of its literature (how can there be literature, suggests Mr Rowdon, when religion and politics are taboo) the narrow philistinism of its rulers, who let Goldoni, Baretta, Vivaldi all slip away, while Tiepolo died in misery; the envy of native pre-eminence reminds one of nineteenth century Dublin or Chicago.

This resentment against Venice (which one doesn't feel against Rome, Florence, or Munich) has a physical counterpart in my dislike of the Piazza. These pigeons! Strutting banality, flying sewers, with the photographers and exhibitionists who surround them; the hordes of Nordic tourists, many lying bibulous on the stones, the undistinguished façades, the bad music. Perhaps it serves as an outlet for everyone who would clog up the circulation if they preferred to be anywhere else.

St. Marks Place is all covered over in a morning with chicken coops, which strike one to death as nobody, I believe, thinks of changing their baskets; and all about the ducal palace is made so very offensive by the resort of human creatures for every purpose most unworthy of so charming a place, that all enjoyment of its beauties is rendered difficult to a person of any delicacy.

wrote Mrs Thrale (1739-1821) while Beckford wrote of St. Marks "the vile stench which exhales from every recess and corner of the edifice and which all the incense of the altars cannot subdue."

So much for the drawbacks: now that the whole archipelago is threatened one clings to the

advantages: the twin virtues of its light and air: the light which makes every building and vista change colour hourly and daily, the air which, when not foggy or parched by the sirocco, has the particular maritime freshness which both charms and stimulates, the air which removes hangovers, as the tide removes rubbish, as the sea wipes out the trivialities, so that, stumbling out of the bars, the tourists find the steamers waiting to transport them to the ocean or Torcello, Chioggia or Corfu.

Mr Rowdon is fortunate, because after reading his enthralling essays one can still return to Venice and see so much that has survived the "Fall". The people are the same, the houses are the same, their water life is the same, the fêtes, the food and drink, the palaces and the museums which preserve some of their contents. What "fell" was political autonomy, independence, the governing class; but by the eighteenth century the city-state was already given over to pleasure, the world's number one tourist attraction.

The Republic fell for the same reason that the *ancien régime* fell everywhere in Europe: no allowance was made in her government for the existence of the middle classes... they were the missing link in the city's crisis... whereas in France there was an energetic, politically-minded middle class to take over government, in Venice the nobles were all the government there was. They were the Republic and so the Republic fell.

They were, incidentally, more frightened of an internal revolution, a "commune" than of Napoleon. When he presented his ultimatum not a shot was fired. He was twenty-eight years old, ignorant and Spartan; those elaborate façades by the waters meant nothing to him.

THE FALL OF VENICE by Maurice Rowdon/Weidenfeld & Nicolson 50s

THE IONIAN ISLANDS by Arthur Foss/Faber 55s

CYRIL CONNOLLY

not for him the nuance of husband, wife and cicisbeo, of Guardi's shimmering Pompeian paintings, Tiepolo's observation, Goldoni's irony, the six months' masquerade. He found the Arsenal shipless, took over some Ionian harbours, and sold the whole country to Austria. It was the Austrian yoke which gave the Venetian aristocracy, or some of it, the chance to redeem itself.

Venice fell but is still standing. So it is with us and there are some interesting parallels between swinging London and the city of the Doges in decline. "They're changing guard at Buckingham Palace" but what about the legions on the Wall?

Corfu was defended on paper by one company of Venetians and two of Albanians but the whole force consisted of a couple of Venetian officers who drew pay for the whole lot. Names on payrolls remained perpetual, irrespective of death... [In the great arsenal] most of the workmen only turned up for pay day... they used the wood for ship building to warm their homes... about seventy thousand faggots had disappeared annually in this way... The ordinary Venetian almost certainly never realised the real state of affairs in his prolonged daydream. "They" would see to it all.

When the French arrived the only firing was a salute to the "Serenissima" from the Croatian mercenaries who were leaving. The people stood outside the noble houses screaming "Assassini di San Marco." Renier swept the streets with artillery. On October 17, 1797, the Treaty of Campo Formio

sold Venice to Austria, the Byzantine horses of St. Mark's looted from the Hippodrome of Constantinople six centuries earlier were removed to Paris: in January 17, 1798, the Austrian garrison took over.

Presumably the caste system held; the reign of pleasure continued; the masquerade was on. Soon Byron would arrive to give it a fillip, Chateaubriand, Brown, Ruskin, Wagner, Proust. Apart from its visual pleasures beloved of writers and artists, Venice has seen some of the most exquisite entertainments of our time, from the Princesse de Polignac's concerts to the Bestegui Ball. The years before and after the 1914 war were a high-water mark of dissipation, in the Venetian sense, for its dissipation was controlled by its healthy climate and consisted largely of making love and music, taking coffee and liberties (behind a mask), gambling and picnicking on the mainland.

The opulence of gondolas and their decoration were very strictly regulated, so were the amount of jewels one could display or courses one might serve, there was even a law against snobbery. You could get six months for boasting about your forebears and be secretly drowned if the offence was repeated. Flirtation was really the be-all and end-all of existence, enriched by the particularly charming and voluptuous quality of Venetian womanhood. They provided the life-enhancement which the Council of Ten and the Inquisition were always threatening to take away. On the other hand the Ten made life easy for the workmen

"on holidays Venice stopped work by law and there were plenty of holidays. And everyone went to church—another reason for the well-being. Nobody thought that life ended with death—an idea more depressant of vigour and serenity than any known to the mind"... Even Casanova believed in God and prayed all his life.

Then there was music. Today one hears some of the worst music from the Piazza and the gondolas: in the eighteenth century the quality was exceptionally high and the cult was ubiquitous. Mr Rowdon writes of Monteverdi, Corelli, Galuppi and Vivaldi with knowledge and affection. There were operas, concerts, serenades and church music to choose from. "Classical" and "pop" were one. Then, as now, the only way to know Venice was to live there, to savour the artisanat, to buy happiness by the shilling on the Vaporetto. Alas the temperatures are not inviting—32, 41, 43, today 37. When it reaches 60 perhaps, before the tourists and the pigeons.

Mr Foss is less lyrical and light-hearted than Mr Rowdon but gives a very good measure of information and enthusiasm in *The Ionian Islands*. His book is more of a partner to Hugh Honour's excellent guide to Venice in the Collins series. He takes the islands from Zakynthos to Corfu with several chapters on the Venetian domination and much information about the British. Lear, Maitland and Guilford figure in his pages as well as Odysseus, Solimos and Capodistria.

This is a book to keep to prepare for the next visit, or to send to friends who have settled there, or to drop from a caique next summer and curse one's luck. Each island is given a compact history with an account of its surviving antiquities and, in the case of Zante, its lost ones. The picture of the Valaoritis house on the islet of Moodra and the different styles of Corfiote architecture

Once great

THE FALL OF VENICE,
by Maurice Rowdon.
Weidenfeld and Nicolson;
50s.

MY one brief stay in Venice was marred by torrential summer rain that seemed to be creating before my eyes the watery stage-set that has existed for centuries.

It is curious that my own disappointment in the city, only in part affected by the weather, has been felt by many more illustrious predecessors. "Abhorrent green, slippery city," wrote D. H. Lawrence, the least appreciative.

Mr. Rowdon has chosen to speak of past glory rather than present show. His *Italian Sketches*, seven years ago, presented an attractive record of a people amongst whom he has long been living; his understanding of the Italian way of life makes him a more effective interpreter of their ancestry.

His lavishly illustrated book shows how Venice grew to be, by the 13th century, "the aristocratic showcase of Europe" and how, when she no longer had to fight for her independence, a decline into ease and luxury contributed to a fall from power and a loss of freedom.

Her painters may ultimately have made a more permanent contribution than her architects whose work is threatened by the encroaching Adriatic. "The whole course of Venetian art can be seen as a blissful attempt to define Venetian light, until with Tiepolo in the 18th century there is only the light left."

Venetians put on the mask of revelry. Even the Church was drawn into the ever-lengthening carnival. Politics degenerated into social and amorous intrigue. Mr. Rowdon explains the function of the *cicisbeo*, the use of *convent parlatorii*, the *conversazione*, the *ridotto*. He writes splendidly of Venice's contribution to music and drama.

The story ends with the Treaty of Campo Formio when Napoleon handed over what remained of the once great Venetian Republic to Austria.

"Men are we, and must grieve when even the shade

Of that which once was great has passed away."

D. P. M. Michael

Weidenfeld

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OXFORD MAIL

OXFORD,
OXFORDSHIRE

ISSUE
DATED

26 FEB 1970

OVER-RIPE CITY

The Fall of Venice. By Maurice Rowdon (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 50s.).

TO SAY that Venice fell — to Napoleon, who promptly sold her to Austria — is true: the once-powerful city was in the end neither taken not pushed, but fell like an over-ripe fruit, a rotten fruit even, which had stayed on its tree for no very substantial reason.

Maurice Rowdon's account of her last century is like an enormous and lively caption

to a Canaletto picture — full of life and colour, almost photographic in its recreation of beauty and self-indulgence, a fascinating portrait of the former Queen of the Adriatic when she had lost her kingdom, but not her gorgeous palace. And if her charms had become more those of a courtesan than a queen they were nonetheless beguiling.

A.W.

FEBRUARY 26, 1970

NEW BOOKS

A SIGH FOR
VENICE

Reviews by GEOFFREY GRIGSON

THREE exceptional books. To begin with Venice, I am rather glad Maurice Rowdon's book is not quite what its title led me to expect.

The Fall of Venice—well, the actual end of Venice as a power, a state, came with a whimper, or something like the slow deflation of a balloon after a party. After a noise or two, Napoleon brought his hand down on the wrinkled balloon, and that was that. The Bucentoro, that marvellous golden allegorical barge from which the Doges "wedded" the Adriatic, was beached and burnt for its gold leaf. The horses of the sun were lowered from St. Mark's and yoked off—a vulgar lot the French were—on a waggon over the Alps to

master of pallid, tragic clowns.

I enjoyed reading Mr. Rowdon on the painters, though I found myself disagreeing with him—slightly—again and again. He seems to find no "meaning"—his word, and a word to be suspicious of, at all times—in Tiepolo, as if his controlled freedom, his light, his floating, his swifts cutting behind clouds, his gestures of perfect shape, of a tawny fulness, a tawny grace, were not "meaning".

Guardi—here is a good sentence: "Buildings, boats, men are of the same element as the water, ruffled, about to break up, only a breath away from the invisible energy that brought them into being; a world without roots, its space and time

THE FALL OF VENICE, By Maurice Rowdon
(Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 50s.)

FOLK MUSIC OF BRITAIN AND BEYOND, By Frank Howes
(Methuen, 70s.)

WE, By Yevgeny Zamyatin
(Cape, 35s.)

Paris; and Napoleon had a white statue of himself set up on the Piazzetta. All of that and nothing but that would have made a sigh, but hardly a book.

The sigh here extends backwards for 100 years. If *The Fall of Venice* is in fact the decline rather than the fall, it has the chance of picturing an equilibrium almost, or a last level in the affairs of Venice. Napoleon nabbed this rather tarnished *fore del mar* in 1797 (and then handed it over to Viennese insolence). The years back from 1797 to 1697 include the paintings of Canaletto, Piazzetta, Guardi, and the Tiepolos, father and melancholy son; the music of Marcello and Vivaldi; the comedies of Goldoni. On such things Mr. Rowdon writes with an effect of ease and authority. The swifts scream overhead, the marble balustrades are warm and flushed with reflections from the sky or the canals. Seriousness—Mr. Rowdon's phrase—had certainly collapsed. But there was pleasure, especially the opera, the concerts. "If the soul was locked away, music opened it . . . Music made the Venetian faint with pleasure. It embodied all that religion had once given him; it captured the old peace, the firmness, the sense that all things were composed into their proper shape for a moment."

The Tiepolo ceiling now in the National Gallery—there you have an essence of the moment, the moment caught and held, which was 18th-century Venice before the collapse. And beside Tiepolo, with him rather than against him, in something of a paradox, one has to set Guardi and Gian Domenico Tiepolo, small

illusions." I consider he might have made more, in this "meaning" of Guardi, of life, all life, breaking up, dissolving, decaying, sinking under its lagoon or vanishing in its pink skies (think of Guardi's painting of the Montgolfier balloon, seen within the frame of an arcade opening, small, high, floating away over Venice, as if gaiety would soon be out of sight for ever).

Neglected Artist

Mr. Rowdon's is one of the few Venetian books I have read to make much of Gian Domenico Tiepolo's worrying and haunting images of melancholy clowns in long false noses and long white hats—the sight of them upstairs in the Ca' Rezzonico is unforgettably poignant. He reproduces one Gian Domenico drawing, the execution of blindfolded, bare-headed long-nosed Pulcinello by clown soldiers of a clown army, which serves as the most devastating symbol of decline and fall. Yet it is more than a symbol of a particular process in history at a particular place, in a particular time. "The world is empty. We are on the edge of the romantic" are Mr. Rowdon's last words on this neglected artist. I do not know about being, as we regard him, on the edge of the romantic, but the other sentence will serve. Mr. Rowdon might emphatically have said about Tiepolo, Guardi and Gian Domenico that in their work they do, after all, transcend their situation—the situation and the circumstances of their ageing, dying city.

Once in Venice I went to see Guarana's paintings around the music room of the Ospedaletto. It was a mistake, I think, since the

Spedaletto is no longer an orphanage of girls who gave concerts, and to reach the music room one has to pass through a sad hall of the decrepit. In the end I incline to think it is perverse to observe in Venice, or to search out in Venice, anything but its own perfection (London or New York or Gateshead will do for the imperfections). If it sinks, as they say it will, supposing engineering and a lunatic mankind can do nothing about it, then Guardi at his most decadent (using the word literally) and Gian Domenico at his most poignant, will have had the last word.

Does this suggest that Mr. Rowdon's study of the slow death of the flower of cities and of the sea is perverse? Perhaps it is. As the chapters go by, one sees the once shrewd nobility of Venice inbreeding themselves out of education, sense, competence and courage. At last, just before the French troops floated in and piled arms on the piazza, the nobles accepted Napoleon's final ultimatum by 513 yeas to 30 nays and 5 blanks; and having signed themselves out of existence, says Mr. Rowdon, "they all ran away home."

All the same this decline of Venice, this fall of Venice, can be said to define its unique ascendancy; which is still preserved in its warm marble. In that sense I gratefully recommend *The Fall of Venice* as about the one modern book (other than Giulio Lorenzetti's guide, *Venezia e il suo Estuario*) to read before, and during, and after visiting the city; the one modern book, decline or no, tourists or no, which measures up, in terms of sensibility, and knowledge, to the real thing.

THE RECOVERY OF FOLK SONG

"FOLK-SONG and plainsong are the only survivors, except perhaps Jewish cantillation, into modern Western music of the ancient monodic music of the Mediterranean civilizations." There you are. "The very nature of folk-song as single line melody." Professor Howes has called his book "Folk Music of Britain and Beyond." Really it is as much, or more, folk music of the "Beyond," folk music in general; and for this reviewer, who is not a musician, this is the virtue of the operation. I hate the word "folk": it is now debased, and no one is going to put this particular verbal Humpty Dumpty back on the wall, I am afraid. I go down to Magdalen Bridge on May morning, Morris dancers arrive and begin, the crowd smirks a little, and it can't, no it really can't, be said, as in the 16th- or 17th-century song *Under the Greenwood Tree*, that the dancers are exactly "dancing ripe." All the more need, then, for clear definitions and the clearest understanding, for getting the whereabouts of folk-song in the actual and historical scheme of things located exactly, evaluated exactly. "The Greeks disliked harmony when they accidentally heard it and the preoccupation of the Near East with single-line melody forced all the peoples of the eastern Mediterranean to cultivate subtlety of line for purpose of expression, whether by the differentiation of mode, or of microtones or of ornamentation."

The technicalities in this book are not too difficult or exhausting,

and one is left with an admiration for artistic tenacity, for the way in which change, fashion, evolution, polite consensus, can be resisted. One gets on to England or the British Isles in the second half of the book. In England persistence and recovery appear all the more remarkable, and Professor Howes sympathetically pictures the chief moles who were after the fine gold of folk song, or early music. It is amusing to read, for instance, about William Chappell and his *Popular Music of the Olden Time*—to read of a double motive in his exploration. He couldn't bear Dr. Burney's Italianate history of music; and in his office (he belonged to the piano-making firm) he had an irritating Scottish nationalist who "goaded Chappell to disproving his taunts that England had no national music." The Scots had been briskly collecting their folk music 60 or 70 years before in the 18th century: "He would show the conceited Scot with his boasts about his native Caledonian melody how far back English melody went—to "Sumer is icumen in" and beyond."

Occasionally I find Professor Howes making statements—outside his discipline—which look odd. When he talks of the Northumbrian small-pipe and Northumbrian songs and music, I was surprised to find him explaining things by a Norwegian racial strain setting Northumberland apart from other English regions. A clanger, surely?—Northumberland having been Anglian in people (as in place-names), the Norwegian element belonging to the north-west; not the north-east.

But one ends this book informed and exhilarated, and thinking better of human appetites; also realising that the recovery of folk-song is due to an extraordinary campaign of sense, sensibility, sentimentality, musical exploration and musical archaeology.

TYRANNY OF THE MANY

YEVGENY ZAMYATIN'S *We*, written in 1920, 11 years before Stalin allowed Zamyatin to leave Russia, is the classic embodiment by a great artist of the theme later used in *Brave New World* by Huxley, whose writing never matched his enviable intellect, and in 1984 by Orwell, who wrote, for all his virtues, like a rough and tumble journalist. In his diary—"diary" hardly suggests the impact, the economical imagination of *We*—the space ship mathematician D-503 unfolds his involvement with E-330, a female number regrettably unabsorbed by the "divinely rational and regular" system of the One State, by which each separate "I" becomes a molecule of the total "We." The rebels against unanimity, against the life of "numbers" inside the constant visibility of glass (individual blinds lowered, by ticket, only on Sexual Days) do not succeed, though they breach the Green Wall separating the city from the wild plains and the old savagery of freedom. D-503 recants (and undergoes the Grand Operation of fantasiectomy), the female number is due for extinction. Tomorrow she will mount the steps to the Machine of the Benefactor—"for rationality must conquer." A wonderful book. Could not we now have a translation of *The Islanders*, which Zamyatin wrote after building ice-breakers (he began as a naval architect) on Tyneside?

Carnival years

THE STATUE of "Il Gran Goldoni," Carlo Goldoni, the Venetian playwright, in the tiny Campo di San Bartolomeo, is surely a speaking likeness, one of the most human and humorous of all memorial figures.

This is one of the illustrations in *The Fall of Venice*, by Maurice Rowdon (Weidenfeld and Nicolson 50s).

Built among the shallow lagoons as a refuge from the barbarians overrunning the Italian mainland in the fifth century ("sixty churches fell down before they got it right"), Venice was to survive all enemy threats for 1,000 years.

But not only to survive: in establishing and fighting for her security, she became a great trading city, wealthy as well as independent, and a sea power with an empire of 2m. subjects.

By the eighteenth century Venice was safe and relaxed at last, the aristocratic showcase of Europe, free to follow the historic pattern of luxurious strength that forgoes its vigilance and slides into decadence and eclipse.

This is the story Mr. Rowdon tells: of the carnival years of self-indulgence, gambling and love intrigues, creating that other— and now the better remembered—legend of florid and faintly sinister and unhealthy Venetian gaiety, of regattas and masked balls and a dagger in the dark.

Napoleon abruptly closed the carnival in 1797.

Mr. Rowdon captures the atmosphere in a detailed portrait of bygone everyday life in a city which today, because of its unique nature, more vividly than any other in the world conjures up its own past.

It is a study not only for readers of colourful history, but to deepen a tourist's appreciation of Venice. The illustrations are as evocative as only Canaletto or Guardi canvases can be: though their colour is sadly missed.

R.T.



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THE OBSERVER

160, QUEEN VICTORIA STREET,
LONDON, E.C.4

ISSUE DATED 22 FEB 1970

Swinging Venice

THE FALL OF VENICE by
Maurice Rowdon
(Weidenfeld and Nicolson 50s)

NOT present-day Venice, crumbling into the sea under the impact of old age and modern technology, but the fall of the Venetian Republic in 1797 and the century of decadence preceding it is the subject of Mr Rowdon's beautifully illustrated book. Secure and stable in her island state, Venice had been

for centuries the greatest sea power in the Mediterranean and a far-flung empire of enormous strength and influence. The discovery of new trade routes, the emergence of other maritime Powers and a series of military reverses had sapped not so much her accumulated wealth but her ambitions and energies: and by the end of the seventeenth century the proud capital of a dynamic empire was fast becoming just swinging Venice—gambling paradise, tourist attraction, city of eternal carnivals and centre of fashion and the arts.

With his intimate knowledge and sympathetic understanding of Venice and the Venetians, her art, literature and music, Mr Rowdon gives a vivid and illuminating picture of the splendour and the atmosphere of lightness and abandon to the pleasures of life. There was a lot of corruption at the top and some misery at the bottom, but the Venetian age of decadence—'climax of kindly manners'—was in many ways more attractive than the harsher, more ruthless days of the Republic's glorious past. The rich, of course, had a very good time, but the masses enjoyed contentment and well-being ('the Government saw to it that the working people never worked too hard and that no child was employed beyond its powers'). The Venetians, it has been said, turned their decline into a fine art—perhaps not the worst response to the loss of power.

William Guttman

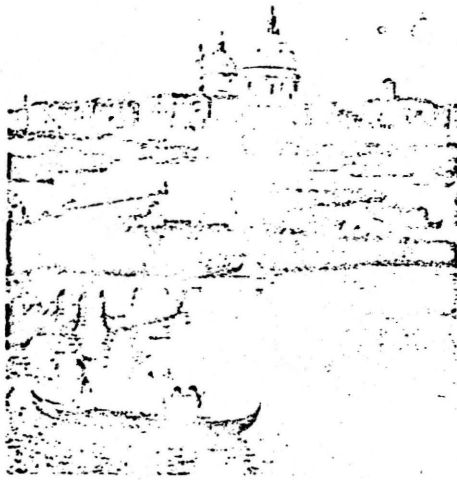
Showcase of Europe

The Fall of Venice. by Maurice Rowdon. Weidenfeld and Nicolson. 50s.

THIS IS ONE OF THOSE GOOD BOOKS WHICH might so easily have been much better. Mr Rowdon is master of his subject, and the earlier chapters, dealing with the background of the Serenissima and the outlook of its citizens, are excellent, as also is his analysis of its decay. Then he seems to lose sight of the general in the particular, and a mere ten pages are devoted to the actual fall of Venice which is supposed to be the main theme of the book. The impression created is that Mr Rowdon was late in delivering his copy, and, with the publishers pressing, he dashed off the last chapter as quickly as he could. There are also one or two historical errors which might have been corrected in proof: there was no War of the Spanish Succession in the 1730s (though there was one of the Polish), while surely it is hardly true to say of Venice that "between 1700 and 1797 she lost hardly a yard of territory", when by the Treaty of Passarowitz in 1718 she had to cede the Morea to the Turks.

The Serenissima was in complete decay throughout the eighteenth century, and those who made any attempts at reform soon found themselves incarcerated in a fortress. The city had become primarily a resort for visitors, a place where people thought only of amusing themselves, where the carnival lasted nearly half the year, where the use of masks was permitted, and where every encouragement was given to gambling.

Discontent, of which Napoleon was



Canaletto's painting of Santa Maria della Salute, from San Giorgio.

not slow to take advantage when the time came, was increasing in the provinces on the mainland, which were still without political rights in the capital. This discontent was due to the increasing burden of taxation, the administrative inefficiency and abuses, the confused multiplicity of the ordinances which maintained the feudal exactions, and the vexations caused by the rural *consorteria*. As fighting forces the army and navy can hardly be said to have existed, though they remained as a considerable debit in the national accounts.

At the same time Mr Rowdon makes out a good case for the average eighteenth century Venetian as the most law-abiding of Italians. "Nothing was easier," we are told, "than quieting a Venetian mob", which was certainly not the case in Naples. Just before the fall of the Republic the appearance of a single policeman was

enough to stop any disorder, while on the occasion of the visit of the Grand Duke Paul Petrovitch of Russia only three policemen were found necessary during celebrations which went on night and day. The number of murders in any one year never exceeded 20, and was generally nearer three or four, which contrasted very favourably with Rome's annual average of 1,000. This is not to say that the Venetians were naturally even-tempered. "Gondoliers always shouted and cursed, they raised their oars against each other and yelled elaborate insults until their voices could no longer be heard, but there was hardly ever fighting."

As portrayed by Mr Rowdon life in eighteenth century Venice may be defined as a permissive society in a police state, and the sumptuary laws were almost unbelievably strict. They affected all classes, and when the wife of the Doge was given a piece of jewellery by the Duke of Savoy on the occasion of the visit of Henri III of France she was only allowed to wear it on certain specified occasions. Yet if one knew the ropes there seems to have been no limit as to what could be done, and a middle-class woman put her daughter's honour in a lottery, and sold the tickets at a sequin apiece, without apparently incurring any reproach from authority.

The rise and decline of empires is a fascinating study, and is worthy of more attention in modern England than it always receives. The author maintains that in Venice until the seventeenth century the people had been hardy and self-denying, "then softening—and sensualizing—influences worked on the people as on the nobles". Yet there was no pessimism or excessive introspection, religion maintained its hold, for nobody thought that life ended with death, which Mr Rowdon rightly denounces as "an idea more depressant of vigour and serenity than any known to the mind".

It is true that gradually the Venetian lost the will to empire, but in the last resort, whatever might be the case of the *terra firma*, he was ready to put up a fight for his independence. It was the aristocracy which, for its own purposes, handed the Serenissima over to the French on a platter; for an oligarchy is always the most selfish form of government, and the ordinary citizen was fully justified in standing outside the noble houses screaming, "Murderers of St Mark". As for Napoleon, after "some stuff about liberty, equality, and fraternity", he transferred Venice to the Austrians lock, stock, and barrel.

In the period covered by this book Venice, as we have seen, had become a tourist attraction, and that had no inconsiderable influence upon her citizens' outlook on life. She was what the author well describes as "the aristocratic showcase of Europe where revolution was thought an impossibility". She was so old and had survived so much that no one seriously believed she could ever die.

When the news of alarming events taking place in the outside world, a world in which he was no longer interested, reached the ears of the average Venetian his reaction was, "It couldn't happen here." So long as the stream of foreign visitors continued unabated, and the money they brought in was undiminished, all was well—it was even possible to enjoy the illusion that the Serenissima still counted. There are indeed many lessons to be learnt from her fall.

SEA QUEEN'S DECAY

By NIGEL DENNIS

The Fall of Venice BY MAURICE ROWDON. Weidenfeld, 50s.

READERS of Maurice Rowdon's "Italian Sketches" will expect much from his new study, *The Fall of Venice*. They will get even more than they hoped for. The new book is a bold and vigorous one, and though true to its title is written with such enthusiasm that one cannot help concluding that to fall is happier than to rise.

Certainly, it was happier for Venice. Mr. Rowdon sketches Venice in her ascendancy and prime—an imperial sea-power, enriched with the spoils of Byzantium, haughty, despotic, austere, puritanical. She does not make a pretty picture, over-run with government spies and informers, capable of being "stupendously cruel" and disgustingly treacherous. None suffered more from her suspicious, revengeful nature than her own great heroes, who were savagely punished for their victories.

Mr. Rowdon almost persuades us that the victims enjoyed this treatment. It increased their "awed worship" of the State, their devotion to law and order. Anarchy and chaos were the main terrors of Italian states, but they were never known to Venice.

Everybody dressed according to a book of rules. Everybody ate, married, and worked by the book. Any noble overheard

boasting about his ancestry got six months in jug. In fact, everybody, from top to bottom, was so ruthlessly treated that they all felt like members of "one family." To demand equal rights would have been absurd in a democracy of such painfully fair shares.

This awful grandeur lasted until the end of the 17th century. Venice had had about 500 years of it by then. The strain began to tell. Tourists began to visit the world's most beautiful city—and, as we know, once tourists start coming, the end has come, too. A feeling of security began to seep into the governing class. That this spelt decadence is shown by "the famous story that the poison used by the Inquisitors was found to have congealed, and the recipe for it lost." Such carelessness makes one wince.

The old social unity remained: it was a habit now. Most of the rules remained, too. So did the spies. But nobody quite knew what the rules or the spies were for any longer. They were just traditions. Or as Mr. Rowdon puts it, what had been real before became a play now.

Take religion, for instance. Mr. Rowdon takes a serious view of a people's regard for their religion, and so did the Venetians in the early days. But as early as 1573, "real" religion was on the way out.

That was the year the Holy Office summoned Paolo Veronese "to investigate his motives in painting as part of a 'Last Supper' a jester with a parrot, St. Peter carrying a roast, drunken Germans, a dwarf and a servant with a nose-bleed." The painter's excuse was that "the canvas was a very big one . . . and he had to fill it somehow."

Even Titian, Mr. Rowdon thinks, was "nearly incapable of a sacred subject." His "Christ bearing the Cross" does not depict the Passion so much as "a moment snatched from a busy life full of brilliant talk." Later Venetian painters made painting simply "a quest for bliss, and too often the bliss was found in the act of painting itself."

Mr. Rowdon's main point here is not that the later Venetians

were a bad people, but simply that they were a happy people who disliked being upset by too much gravity. They went to church—to hear concerti. They took their many convents pretty seriously—because they picked their wives there, much in the way the tourist picks his fish from a tankful in a Continental restaurant. When two nuns fought a duel in a convent over a priest, they were scandalised—not by the duel but by the ladies' lack of etiquette in using consecrated ground.

"Good nature is the key to 18th-century Venice." That is why Goldoni was their only writer. Mr. Rowdon cites very cleverly the Goldoni play in which the sword of a Venetian nobleman is whipped out in a rage, but proves to be only a hilt with no blade. Its noble owner urges cautious use of it. "That hilt cost money," he says.

The whole Venetian scene is made entrancing by Mr. Rowdon. He catches perfectly the residue of pride that remained—in the nobleman who carelessly threw all his gold plate out of the window after a banquet. He catches the abiding shrewdness—in the same nobleman's supposed stationing of a row of servants to catch the plate before it hit the canal.

How can one really describe a society where carnival lasted for six months, and the remaining six were spent looking forward to the next one? What can one say of a population that "fluctuated between 100,000 and 150,000" but included 11,654 courtesans (all listed in a book, with their addresses)? What of a Christian community in which the Gospel was taboo for girls because it was too full of "subversive sincerity"?

It all came slowly to an end, but happy to the last. There was too much writing of "elegies on the death of pet poodles" and "impromptu odes on bottles of maraschino." The wives' lovers, the *cicisbei*, became too decadent to do their real job, which was "to feed [the wife] on praise"—a job which, as Mr. Rowdon says, no husband could be expected to do himself. If the women of Venice are beautiful to this very day, it is because "the worship of women always produces beauty in them," and centuries of worship are still in their bones.

When Napoleon marched in and broke it all up, everyone was wearing tricolour cockades. They happened to be the fashion that year. This could only have happened in a country where one of the Senate had "banished a milliner . . . because her work had failed to come up to his wife's expectations."

Mr. Rowdon's pudding is fairly stuffed with such plums, but it is an admirable and thoughtful work, well illustrated and well printed. There is now no better writer on Italian themes.



Society at play: a sketch by G. D. Tiepolo, from "The Fall of Venice."

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ISSUE
DATED

20 FEB 1950

Catherine, the great crusader

WHEN LITTLE Catherine Mumford was two, she looked down on the waxen face of her dead baby brother. She never forgot "the feeling of awe and solemnity with which the sight of death impressed my baby mind."

Psychologists, no doubt, would make something of that.

Catherine could read when she was three. She learned by reading the Bible which, before she was twelve, she had gone through from cover to cover, eight times.

Her mother was a saintly sort of martinet who unceasingly taught sin and the estrangement of man from God. Conscience and an emotional passion for truth appeared in Catherine's character—elements which modern reductionist psychology would say were mere reflexes, deliberately conditioned.

FRAIL

The little girl had a lapsed Methodist for a father who at one stage took to the bottle. In her teens she was frail and sick.

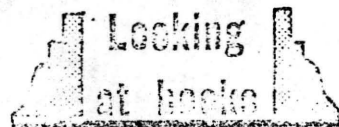
All of which would add up to a pretty desperate prognosis in modern psychological terms. Doctors Freud and Spock would almost certainly predict an inhibited, aberrated adult; in permissive terms less than a Whole Person.

Catherine, for some reason, didn't quite conform. She became a forceful if gentle extrovert, a crusader extraordinary and something not far short of a force in Western history.

She married William Booth and became a mother, alike to a doting family and to that social and religious *enfant terrible*, the Salvation Army.

Catherine's life—and significance—are reconstructed by her granddaughter Catherine Bramwell Booth in *Catherine Booth* (Hodder and Stoughton, 50s.).

The book offers a meticulous picture of an extraordinary woman. The simple fact is that Catherine felt, as a total and ever present reality, the love of God. The conviction turned a frail woman into a giant; a repressed girl into an



enchanted lover; a helpless female into a force in a man's world.

Did all this come from some genius-spark that not even her upbringing could suppress? Or was it produced by her upbringing; true spirituality forged by the blunt instrument of Wesleyan Methodism?

If the Freuds and the Spocks are right, Catherine just couldn't happen. As she clearly did happen, there would seem to be something desperately wrong with reductionist psychology and the whole Permissive premise. Catherine Booth was no distorted personality but a splendid and luminous human being.

HOW DID the Western world happen? Did we inherit and expand a legacy from Greece? Do we owe our world to the aggression of Rome? Or to the annealing influence of Christianity?

History is made up of facts (or reported facts) but how we see the ebb and flow that pushes the facts to the surface remains always a matter of personal interpretation.

CONFLICT

For Henry Bamford Parkes, our world is a synthesis forced during the centuries of conflict between the Roman Empire and the insurgent Germanic tribes. In *The Divine Order* (Gollancz, 80s.) he sees this conflict as the crucible in which two main culture streams—Mediterranean and Northern—were fused to produce a wholly new kind of life: religious, political, social and artistic.

From this came the Medieval World, the Renaissance and finally the modern West.

Mr. Parkes, who has held lectureships at Athens and

several American universities, makes a plausible and convincing case and his style as a historian, reminiscent of Friedrich Heer, is suavely persuasive.

He notes the Mohameddan influence on the medieval world but seems to decide that Islamic thinking was too mystical—insufficiently conceptual—to be more than minimally effective as a history-forming force.

Perhaps a theory of history just as plausible could be built on the idea that the modern world was sired by three forces: Christianity and the confluence of Jewish and Greco-Arab traditions that entered and apparently transformed—Europe through Sicily and Granada.

One feels that if he had happened to light on this or some other combination, Mr. Parkes would be no less persuasive in expounding it.

BARBARIANS

IN *The Fall of Venice* (Weidenfeld, 30s.) Barbara Steward also looks at European history but at a single scintillating facet of the whole tapestry—the independent Republic of Venice.

Settled in the fifth century by Italians fleeing from the invading barbarians, Venice at her peak had a two-million population and a reputation for brilliance and decadence unique in history.

The literary and artistic capital of the world, she was also at one stage the capital of sophisticated vice, contriving the all but impossible task of maintaining a Permissive Society with the web of the Inquisition.

Mr. Rowden's account of the Republic's last century of life, her Yob culture, her casinos and convent love-ins, her unsex and her orgies strikes a death-knell note that resonates chillingly with our own warfare world.

The paintings of Canaletto and Guardi bring to vivid life the glory—and the tragedy—of this astonishing city of brilliance and failure.—E.C.