

Salman Rushdie's splendid novel

Edward Ellis reviews 'The Satanic Verses' by Salman Rushdie (Viking Penguin)

Falling 30,000 feet from a terrorist-exploded aeroplane, Saladin Chamcha, TV voice-over specialist, and Gibreel Farishta, star of Indian movies, undergo extraordinary transformations, the first into a beast with horns and cloven hooves, the second into his own archangelic namesake.

Across the centuries (or maybe not), these two foes confront each other in Salman Rushdie's 'Satanic Verses', possibly the most famous book in the world, discounting religious texts.

It is an extraordinary novel, weaving past and present myths into a story dealing with almost innumerable subjects: the identity of the immigrant from the Indian subcontinent in Britain; what life is like here, his confusion confronted with second-generation Asians who don't conform at all to his image of Englishness; Thatcherism, racism, police violence, inner-city chaos; religion: fundamentalism, the 'revolution against history' in which clocks are abolished; the past and the present; the nature of fiction. Really, it covers all that.

Rushdie's writing forms part of the genre known as 'magical realism', associated with South American authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez; or, as Rushdie himself would prefer, just old-fashioned surrealism. Commonplace things assume the proportions of fantastic events, and the bizarre and magical coexist with the starkly realistic. In his 'Midnight's Children' all those born at the moment of India's independence possess extraordinary powers (such as telepathy caused by blocked sinuses). Here the flavour is more nightmarish, gothic...indeed, satanic.

The book is famous, of course, for blasphemy, because it pours scorn on the Muslim religion, renaming Muhammad, sacrilegiously, Mahound, and describing both the Prophet and his followers (not to mention an Imam clearly representative of the exiled Khomeini) in somewhat un-sympathetic language.

There is no question that this is an anti-religious book, and one which, moreover, sees Islam in particular as a kind of symbol of the irrational past. It is not without ambiguity, though: we never entirely dismiss the possibility that Gibreel is the Archangel, and supernatural acts throughout the story seem to dare us to believe in them.

But religion belongs to the

mythologised past. One character says, on a night of 'purifying fire': "Stay with me. The world is real. We have to live in it; we have to live here, to live on."

Possibly rather more offensive to the pious, although less commented upon, is that when God himself appears in the story, his description is obviously of Rushdie (who as author, you see, is God, able to turn people into devils with the head of goats).

That the 'Satanic Verses' could be construed as racist, however, is a travesty. It is not accidental that Douglas Hurd found the book offensive. It is an impassioned and lavish attack on Thatcherite Britain and the position of black people in it. In an Asian disco, youth burn an effigy of Thatcher. "Maggie-Maggie-Maggie," bays the crowd, 'burn-burn-burn...And O how prettily she melts, from the inside out...'

Tories wouldn't like it.

The emphasis on Satan, too, derives from this. Hearing of the existence of a real live devil in London, Asian youth adopt him as their symbol, and devil horns become trendy. A teenage Asian girl says to the behorned Chamcha, "You're a hero. I mean, people can really identify with you. It's an image white society has rejected for so long that we can really take it, you know, occupy it, inhabit it, reclaim it and make it our own."

It is a heavily allegorical book, by no means easy to understand. But Rushdie tells his story (or rather, stories) with such power that after the first few chapters it really is difficult to put down, fully comprehended or not. He is a writer of spectacular ability, if sometimes a little too self-consciously brilliant. One critic complained that this is a book "to study, not to enjoy"; but even at its most bewildering it is, in fact, exciting and entertaining.

What makes it stranger even than its contents, however, is the eerie sense of self-prophecy. The Imam haunts its pages, "grown monstrous, lying in the palace forecourt with his mouth yawning open at the gates; as the people march through the gates he swallows them whole."

And Gibreel, the movie star, embarks on a cinematic 'remake of the (Hindu) Ramayana story in which the heroes and heroines had become corrupt and evil instead of pure and free from sin... 'Gibreel is playing Ravana.' George explained in fascinated horror. 'Looks like he's trying deliberately to set up a final confrontation with religious sectarians, knowing he can't win, that he'll be broken to bits.'

It is to be greatly hoped that Rushdie himself is never blown to bits by the religious sectarians he has so implacably offended.



Demonstrators in Tehran

Revising James Connolly

Sean Matgamna reviews 'James Connolly: a political biography' by Austen Morgan (Manchester University Press)

This is commonly agreed to be the age of revisionism in Irish historiography. Or is it the first age of Irish historiography worth speaking about as history?

Austen Morgan's book is a coolly revisionist, deliberately deflating assessment of James Connolly, the socialist and labour activist who was the military leader of the 1916 Rising in Dublin, after which the British Army shot him.

The major previous biography of Connolly was by the Stalinist author Desmond Greaves, who died last year. According to his paper, the *Irish Democrat*, Greaves denounced Morgan almost with his last breath as typical of the new breed of debunkers and historical myth-smashers.

Until perhaps 25 or 30 years ago, heroic tales and myths did service for Irish history. Orange myths and Green myths did ghostly battle with each other in the schoolroom, above an Ireland slumbering (with occasional kicks and twitches) through the quiet decades before Northern Ireland erupted in 1968-9.

When the ancient Green and Orange battle was resumed in real life, that stirred many people to debunk, discredit and bury the myths, and to set about establishing accurate history. The drive to revise received history was in fact already well underway, but events after 1969 boosted it enormously. The

alarmed southern Irish bourgeoisie, having been in power for half a century, felt an increasingly urgent need to cut away its own revolutionary past.

That is hardly surprising. Far more surprising is that they left it so late; surprising too is what the tepid and small-minded rulers of the right-wing and intensely Catholic 26 County state had been saying about themselves and their history.

Until well into the '60s, at least, the southern Irish schools taught a version of Irish history more or less identical to what the Provisional IRA today teaches its recruits. They told the terrible story of the ancient subjugation of the Irish, of the repeated massacres and land-confiscations. They taught us how Ireland's Catholics were outlawed and persecuted in the 18th century under the 'Penal Laws', a system of helotry very like South Africa's apartheid.

They taught history as the struggle of oppressors and oppressed, whose heroes were the revolutionaries. They gloried in the various risings — often exaggerating their scope and importance, seizing on anything that could be construed as evidence of national virility and proof that the Irish never accepted their incorporation into the 'English system'.

Where British school children learned the dates of kings, we learned the dates of risings — 1641, 1689-90, 1798, 1803, 1848, 1867, 1916... Our history was our struggle for liberation; our heroes were not conquerors but rebels and freedom fighters whose glory lay in plotting or leading a rising, and then bearing their martyrdom bravely, defying their enemy with a 'speech from the dock'. They were good speeches, too, some of them, which we were taught to recite.

Of course there was a heavy overlap here with religious ideas of martyrs bearing witness for the faith. Protestants had a parallel tradition, but we didn't hear about that, and for us the national cause and Catholicism were entwined like tendrils of ivy on an ancient wall.

The ideas and symbols were interchangeable. They cast a glow on each other. The cause of Ireland was the cause of the Catholic Church; the cause of the Catholic Church was the cause of Ireland.

To this day we sing 'Faith of our Fathers' at All-Ireland Hurling Finals, as they sign 'You'll never walk alone' at Wembley; 'Faith of our fathers living still, in spite of dungeon, fire and sword'.

The great modern Irish hero was Pádraig Pearse, the President of the Republic proclaimed in 1916, shot by the British after he surrendered — a man with a highly visible Messiah complex, who in his poems and plays more or less openly aspired to play the role of Christ-like redeemer to the suffering Irish nation.

Pearse wove together disparate strands of Catholicism, 19th century Fenian nationalism, 18th

century Republicanism, and the intense and sometimes mystical nationalism that swept over Europe in the early part of this century, into the ideology of the Irish Catholic bourgeoisie's political revolution, through which it won independence from Britain in 1922. (The social revolution, the dismantling of the landlord system in favour of peasant proprietorship, had been made from above by British Tory and Liberal governments at the turn of the century.)

How come the Southern state was teaching its children the same history that the Provisional IRA now teaches? Both the dominant Southern Irish parties, Fianna Fail and Fine Gael, and the Provisionals, have common roots: they are splinters from one party, the second Sinn Fein of 1917-1922.

Of course, the Southern state had a shortish way with individuals who got the wrong message, who decided that it was not just a matter of ancient heroes from the dim and misty years and that they themselves should carry on the tradition of rebellion that they had been taught to revere. For them the state had the jail, the firing squad, and the concentration camp, in which young men were interned without trial in several periods up to 1957-9.

Yet people did take that tradition of rebellion seriously, and not only Irish people. Irish Catholic missionaries took the message of Ireland's struggles with them all over the world. There are many examples of the influence of Irish nationalism in Africa; Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, for example, came under the influence of Irish missionaries, and one of the first things he did after he won power in 1980 was to go over to Ireland on a sort of political pilgrimage.

In Ireland, the logic of the version of history we were taught could lead not only to the IRA but further. If you generalised that picture of history to the world around you in the '50s and '60s — with the Algerians fighting the French, the Greek Cypriots fighting the British, Africans demanding their freedom and organising 'Mau Mau' in Kenya — then you would arrive at general anti-colonialist and anti-imperialist politics.

And if you went from the Irish countryside or small town to industrial England, and assumed your place in the lower orders of the proletariat, then the step from concern for national freedom to concern for working-class freedom, towards socialism or communism, was a very short one. Many made the transition; that many more didn't is probably to be accounted for by the power of the Catholic strand in the mixture.

No wonder the Southern state began to change its official history. Now a posse of historians is beavering away. They are trying to replace the heroic myths with dry-as-dust

facts and statistics, and to banish, like mist from the morning, all vestiges of the revolutionary outlook on life.

James Connolly has a strange place in all this: a national hero of Catholic Ireland who was also a Marxist! But he was a man full of contradictions: the Marxist who lost his life in a foredoomed nationalist rising, the militant socialist who made his peace at the end with the then very reactionary Catholic Church.

In the pantheon of the 26 County state Connolly was accorded an important place, but one definitely subordinate to Pearse. The Marxist and revolutionary socialist (communist, in later parlance) was reduced to 'the labour leader'. Only the left,



Robert Mugabe — Irish nationalist?

including, naturally, the Republican left, tried to keep a notion of what Connolly really was.

The bourgeoisie and the Church said that Connolly had ceased to be a socialist. It was as late as 1941 that the first collection of his writings was produced — by the Communist Party, concerned to use Connolly's writings during World War I to justify their stand (formally anti-imperialist, actually favourable to Nazi Germany) between the Stalin-Hitler pact in 1939 and Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941.

The CP's Connolly was, of course, truer to the real person than the bloodless figure lined up with the other heroes in the Irish bourgeoisie's shrines.

As the drift, and then stampede, away from idealistic Pearse-centred history got under way, the balance shifted in favour of Connolly. But this was a new Connolly again — Connolly the practical-minded no-nonsense man. Connolly was indeed a 'man for all seasons'. It depends on which bit of him you caught

sight of.

For Austen Morgan, Connolly was a socialist who abandoned socialism to go over to nationalism after World War I broke out. Morgan rejects the idea — even for 1916 — that there could be a socialist struggle by way of the national struggle, within it and coming out of it. He can find no reason to believe that Connolly said what the trade union leader O'Brien said Connolly said before going out on Easter Monday: "*The odds against us are a thousand to one, but in the event of victory hold on to your rifles, as those with whom we are fighting may stop before our goal is reached*".

Whether Connolly said it or not, the words reflect the spirit of Marx's advice to his comrades in 1850: that socialists and bourgeois revolutionaries should strike together in national-democratic revolutions, but march separately. It seems to me impossible to doubt that Connolly acted in that spirit.

The same idea was to be repeated in one of the key documents of revolutionary socialism in the 20th century — the Communist International's 1920 Theses on the National and Colonial Question.

To be sure, the great and immensely tragic weakness of Connolly was that he did not build a revolutionary movement able to lead and shape the nationalist upsurge that followed 1916. Had the post-1916 Irish national movement been shaped by Connolly's class politics, then it might very well have appealed to the Protestant workers of Northern Ireland on a working-class basis, across the sectarian-communal divide.

Connolly did have many of the faults of his generation of Marxist socialists, and some, like his Catholicism, which were peculiar to himself. But he was right to base himself on the just struggle of the great majority of the Irish people against their national oppression. In doing so he made a step forward from the political common stock of his generation of Marxists, who generally had little interest in the revolts of oppressed nations.

That Connolly was, so to speak, politically gobbled up by the bourgeois nationalists after his death and made into one of their plaster-of-Paris saints, proves only that he lost, not that he was wrong to make the attempt.

The early Communist International gave much thought to the problem of dealing with nationalist rebellions, and even its ideas, based on far wider experience and discussion than Connolly ever had access to, could not prevent the Chinese Communist Party making errors similar to Connolly's, and of catastrophic proportions, in the 1920s.

There is an implicit assumption in Austen Morgan's criticism of Connolly that he should have chosen to struggle for the unity of the Irish working class by fighting for socialism within the old United Kingdom and having

no truck with Irish separatism. But that would have meant Connolly turning his back on the democratic demands fought for by the big majority of the Irish people for many, many decades (at least), and trying to get the labour movement to do the same.

No Irish labour movement could have been built with such politics — only (in most of Ireland) sterile Unionist sects. On that road there was no possible solution to the Unionist/Nationalist division — only the self-isolation of the socialists and the strengthening of the bourgeois and petty bourgeois nationalists.

Connolly's understanding of the character and depth of the Catholic/Protestant division in Ireland was inadequate. On the other hand, no-one has ever written with more biting class hatred of Catholic-Nationalist bigotry than did Connolly in his writings against the Ancient Order of Hibernians and the old Home Rule party.

Austen Morgan's book reads to me too 'academic' and a bit too summary, as if it has been cut down too brutally from a much longer draft.

It is a sustained assault on the image of Connolly held today by the revolutionary left; in fact, though from a different viewpoint, Morgan paints a picture of Connolly rather like that of our schools in De Valera's Ireland. For Morgan too, Connolly ceased to be a socialist when he became the rebel hero our teachers lauded and Morgan rather regrets.

Austen Morgan is a socialist, not one of the bourgeois revisionists of Irish history. But his enterprise must be understood in relation to theirs.

They want to destroy the heroic myths of Irish history as a struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor. In many ways the project resembles the evolution of a section of the Russian intelligentsia in the 1890s away from the heroic Narodnik tradition of struggle against Tsarism. They became 'hard-headed' — and reconciled to capitalism.

For a while, strangely, a big section of the bourgeois-oriented intelligentsia used Marxism as a cutting edge against the Narodnik revolutionary tradition. The Russian Marxists had to fight both Narodism and the anti-revolutionary negation of Narodism by the 'Legal Marxists'.

What will replace the now discredited idealist-nationalist version of Irish history? Will the tremendously positive and wise core of that history — the necessity and justice of the struggle of the oppressed against the oppressor — be lost, cut away by the academic scalpels? Or will it be incorporated into an adequate and comprehensive Marxist history of Ireland, as the heroic tradition of Narodism was absorbed into Russian Marxism?

The critical work of the revisionists can help with the creation of a new, revolutionary-oriented but proletarian, account of Irish history. It depends on what the Marxists do with their work.

Gorbachev won't make a revolution

Stan Crooke reviews 'Beyond Perestroika' by Ernest Mandel (Verso)

Ernest Mandel locates the roots of Gorbachev's policies in the prolonged economic crisis and social stagnation which characterise the Soviet Union. Gorbachev's reforms are not the initiative of one individual, but the response of a section of the Soviet bureaucracy to that social and economic crisis.

The government's economic reforms, covered by the general heading of 'perestroika' (re-organisation), seek to regenerate the Soviet economy — at the expense of the Soviet working class. Mandel cites a series of examples of economic reforms, often involving the re-introduction of market mechanisms which have worsened workers' living standards and working conditions.

Hence the policy of 'glasnost' (openness), as a complement to the economic policies. By allowing, and even encouraging, a limited liberalisation, the government hopes to dissipate the working-class unrest provoked by its economic measures. As Mandel puts it, "it is therefore necessary to ensure that the pill (of perestroika) is swallowed through making political changes."

It is here that the regime runs into trouble, given that the working class (and other sectors of society, such as the oppressed nationalities, or the ecological movement) is not prepared to restrict itself to the limited liberalisation sanctioned by the government. The outcome is increased social instability and a further weakening of the regime's standing — the very opposite of the intended goal of the economic and political reforms.

Mandel rules out the possibility of a 'revolution from above'. The Soviet Communist Party, he writes, "is a party of the bureaucracy; it is not a party of the working class." And, whatever the changes which have resulted from 'glasnost', the government remains a "regime of bureaucratic dictatorship". Hence Mandel looks forward to "the triumph of the political revolution (from below), in the Marxist sense of the term".

But Mandel also describes Soviet society as "a combination of the dynamic and the immobile". Nothing in Mandel's book would justify using the term 'dynamic' in relation to the Soviet Union. So why does Mandel describe Soviet society as

a "combination" of these two factors?

The answer is that Mandel continues to apply Trotsky's definition of the 1930s of the USSR — as a "degenerated workers' state" — to the Soviet Union of today. However implausible it may sound, the 'dynamic' element in Soviet society is the workers' bit of it, while the 'immobile' element in it is the degenerated bit.

A related problem crops up when Mandel deals with the nature of the Soviet bureaucracy. In line with Trotsky's writings of half a century ago, Mandel rejects the notion that the bureaucracy is a ruling class. At the same time though he writes that "in the Soviet Union the central state apparatus, that is to say, the bureaucracy, controls the social surplus product."

But Mandel cannot have it both ways. From a Marxist point of view, what defines a class as a ruling class is whether or not it has control over the surplus product. Mandel cannot simultaneously claim that the bureaucracy exercises such control (in fact, it does not; but that is a separate argument) but nonetheless is not a ruling class.

Mandel goes on to rule out the possibility of any capitalist restoration in the Soviet Union. 90% of the bureaucracy would lose more than they would gain under such circumstances, and it would be the equivalent of collective hari-kiri by the bureaucracy, he writes. But, given the extent to which market mechanisms have already been re-introduced, such a possibility surely deserves more discussion than the limited amount it receives in the book.

Mandel also writes that "the bureaucracy has not completely cut its umbilical cord (after over 60 years!) with the working class." Again, such an assertion flows out of the notion of the Soviet Union as a "degenerated workers' state". Given the 'logic' applied to reach such a claim, Mandel would have to argue the same with regard to the bureaucracy in Poland — and even China!

The book concludes with a lengthy quotation from Trotsky, from a work of 1937. Mandel's selectivity in assembling quotes from Trotsky allows him to declare that the current evolution underway in the Soviet Union is a confirmation of Trotsky's analysis of the Soviet Union and of his predictions about its future.

Although there is much of value in Trotsky's writings on the Soviet Union, it should not be forgotten that he did not expect it to survive — still less to expand — in the aftermath of the Second World War. Unfortunately, however, Mandel would appear to prefer backdating his views on the Soviet Union to up-dating Trotsky's analysis.

But such points are secondary to the fact that, whatever Mandel's asides about the logic of the 'dynamic' of the process in the Soviet Union, his book brings out the nature of the economic

and social crisis in the Soviet Union and successfully challenges the idea that Gorbachev is attempting to establish democratic socialism in the Soviet Union.



The other Marx

Does the right have all the best jokes?

Belinda Weaver reviews 'Holidays in Hell', by P.J. O'Rourke (Picador) and 'Joe Bob goes to the Drive In', by Joe Bob Briggs (Penguin)

Sad to say, right-wing humour is alive and well, and perhaps worse, it's funny too. I admit it. I laughed reading both these books. A lot.

O'Rourke is a former student radical turned Republican who now runs the International Affairs Desk at Rolling Stones magazine. He's carved out a kind of cynical, bad boy identity for himself, denying the 'folly' of his liberal, protest years, and claiming he's now a definite conservative. The left have made a mess of it in Russia and Eastern Europe, he says, and anyway, they don't know how to party. *Holidays in Hell* is P.J.'s search for the global good time.

But the cynical mask slips now and again. It takes a lot of booze and a lot of drugs for him to close his eyes to the world's troubles. Right-wing or not, he wants to the world to be better; he has just convinced himself it's impossible, so he might as well have fun.

The man can write. Some of the jokes seem familiar, but they're still funny, and he's a master of the throw away line. "They [Shiite women] wear ankle length chadors in the water, which may explain the lack of a world-class Shiite women's swimming team."

P.J. visits Lebanon, Korea (where he names the different

Kim candidates Kim, Kim: The Sequel, and Kim: The Early Years), Panama, Nicaragua, Disneyland, Poland, the Mexican border, and even Australia for the America's Cup, wisecracking all the while, clutching as many drinks and cigarettes as he can get his hands on, and trying but failing to convince himself he's just a good ole boy who loves truth, justice and the American Way. I predict a serious liberal reversion for P.J. fairly soon.

In a different key, but also well to the political right, is Joe Bob Briggs, the world's first drive-in movie critic.

Joe Bob was the invention of John Bloom, a film reviewer on the Dallas newspaper, the *Times Herald*. Supposedly a thrice-married, nineteen year old Texas redneck who had seen more than 6,000 drive-in movies, Joe Bob became a cult by reviewing the kind of movies other reviewers wouldn't touch — exploitation movies, the blood, beast and breast flicks. Joe Bob's plot summaries became famous:

"Two heads roll. Maggots in the throat. Great slime glopola lizard-face genetic-DNA attack. An eighty-two on the vomit meter. Twelve gallons blood. One beast. Two breasts...Joe Bob says check it out."

Most film reviewers ignore films like 'Mad Monkey Kung Fu', 'I Dismember Mama', and 'Bloodsucking Freaks', but Joe Bob only liked that kind. If we have a rash of horror/Gothic/gore films in the mainstream cinema circuit now ('Nightmare on Elm Street', 'Friday the 13th' in the multiple sequels) it's partly because Joe Bob rescued this kind of drive-in flick from obscurity and made it news. He also made people laugh.

But he offended people too. Joe Bob's views were openly sexist, racist and homophobic. Of course it was all done tongue-in-cheek, but that was partly the problem.

Opponents of Joe Bob found him hard to tackle, since he had a way of getting the last word. When Dallas feminist Charlotte Taft complained about his column, he challenged her to a nude mud wrestling match as a way of settling their differences. (When Taft later ran into trouble funding her abortion clinic, she wondered whether she had been right to turn him down. She might have struck it rich on sponsorship.)

Joe Bob made his critics look like spoilsports who couldn't take a joke. After all, the column was supposedly satire, not to be taken seriously.

But was Joe Bob's column a satire of ignorance and prejudice, or was it actually pandering to prejudice? Hard to say. Many people found the column offensive, and the protests of the black community in Dallas finally killed it. Joe Bob was dropped by the *Times Herald*.

We need to keep an eye on what the right are up to, so, as Joe Bob would say, "Check these suckers out."