Degrees of separation

How the relationship between HE and FE could turn sour
media and politicians in telling moral panic about the pact of forced migration on our markets, resources and national identity is examined in the detail. Using a range of different sources the authors demonstrate how racism underpins reactions to refugees en masse throughout the Second World War. Tensions between old and new migrant communities, pressure to assimilate and the need to restrict refugee numbers to prevent the rise of fascism, all echo present-day debates around community cohesion and migration.

Chapter on claiming asylum: The UK sets out to the context of the 1951 UN Convention on refugees. Key points of the asylum and Immigration Act 04 are paired with responses in the Refugee Council to challenge the unreasonable nature of the legislation. In this chapter, the authors begin to construct an argument, largely absent from the previous descriptive chapters, locating the ways in which asylum seekers have been unfairly marginalised.

The following chapter on asylum experiences shows how these have replaced protection for forced migrants into ever more desperate, and illegal, means. Stories of detention, torture and social exclusion, the mistreatment of children in the UK by the Home Office, are all problems, but they are not the only problems. The penultimate chapter focuses on the media and public opinion. This chapter brings together data including verbatim oral stories, policy, media reports, survey material and the views of experts to explore the role of media influence on opinion.

The book ends with a discussion of the future, bringing together the links between previous and current experience, arguing that an unqualified acceptance of the views of experts on immigration, and the foreigner mindset against the 5,000 Chinese and German in the 20th century.” Impact of Islamophobia on the future of asylum is also considered before arguments are put forward to replace deterrence with other forms of control, which reimagining of the refugee experience, and a change to a positive approach to human rights while addressing the underlying causes of asylum.

Part polemic, part history, this book will contribute to understanding the story of asylum in Britain for those unfamiliar with asylum law and policy. While it might benefit from a stronger argument linking the descriptive and policy chapters, it enhances understanding around the issue of asylum in a very accessible way. The use of verbatim personal stories, although sometimes at odds within the narrative, serves as a powerful tool to bring the human elements of asylum, so often concealed by numbers and rhetoric, to the fore.

Reluctant Refuge will provide a useful antidote to the hype more commonly associated with forced migration, and would usefully be deployed in high schools and libraries across the UK.

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Eternal Chalice: The Enduring Legend of the Holy Grail
By Juliette Wood
I. B. Tauris, 256pp, £18.99
ISBN 9781845113605
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This is an informative book on a difficult topic. It deals first with the original European sources of the Grail story from Chrétien de Troyes to Malory, discussing the gradual layering of the literary romances and the crystallisation of the object of the Grail into the cup of the Last Supper and/or the chalice in which Joseph of Arimathea received the blood of Christ on the Cross. In a second part, Wood looks at the myth-making surrounding the quest for the Grail, and the Grail theme in the past century and today. Interspersed within this story is a survey of the various artefacts and places identified with the Grail across the centuries, both in the form of relics of chalices and of secret hiding places, such as Rennes-le-Château and Roslyn Chapel.

The analysis of medieval texts provides a necessary and helpful synthesis of the literary material. However, the core of the book lies in the study of the Grail story in modern times. Wood traces it from its association with the Glastonbury tradition of Joseph of Arimathea, which led to the revival of Glastonbury in the 20th century with the rise of the pagan and druidic movements, through Welsh folklore with archaeological undertones, to the enthusiasm for the “Celtic” origins of the Grail as stone talisman and cauldron of plenty.

Accretions have developed: the revival of “Celticism”, occultism, tarot, freemasonry, as well as the linking of the Grail with traditional folklore studies, later turning into a search for the Eternal Feminine as the Earth Goddess of Celtic culture, or the repression of witchcraft allegedly representing feminine popular religion by a hostile, male-dominated Church.

A penetrating examination of theories from the 18th century onwards, in response to Enlightenment rationality and in tune with the Romantic movement, shows to what extent the current infatuation with equally mythical Grail legend is not only itself ancient but revives the same old stories, adapted to the modern-day obsession with conspiracy theories. This involves secret societies (a heady mix of Templars, Cathars, Rosicrucians, Freemasons, the Priory of Sion, the Mafia, the Vatican, the CIA, Opus Dei) and code-cracking heroes fighting the bad, oppressive, established Church, to reveal the world the secret of the marriage of Jesus with Mary Magdalene, their ascension through the Merovingian line and the nature of the Grail as the real bloodline of Christ.

This particular version of an already old myth, famously repackaged for a modern global audience by Michael Baigent, Richard Leigh and Henry Lincoln’s book The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail, and later by Dan Brown’s The Da Vinci Code, is seen by many as the literal truth because it reinforces their conviction that world leaders are concealing major secrets from the ordinary person. Today’s quest for the Grail differs from the medieval quest, finite and successful, and is preoccupied with the fight against “evil” (person or institution) as part of a personal journey of discovery via a thrilling adventure. This is why films such as Indiana Jones and The Last Crusade and The Fisher King, as well as internet games, appeal to modern audiences.

The overall analysis of the way in which modernism has changed the Grail, including fantasy novels, thrillers, film, video and role-playing games, underpins this academically impeccable, accessible and wide-ranging work, and the attempt at putting it into context is especially trenchant and concise in the conclusion.

Wood’s book, in examining the Grail myth in its totality rather than only from a historian’s or a literary critic’s point of view, belongs to the increasingly fruitful area of cultural studies with sociological implications, providing a thought-provoking discussion of a controversial topic.

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