

## **'BURIED TREASURE'**

### **'1066 AND ALL THAT' (*Sellar and Yeatman, 1930*)**

The Compulsory Preface tells us the object of this excellent book is 'to console the reader' and it defines History properly, ie 'what you can remember'. It contains '103 Good Things, 5 Bad Kings, and 2 Genuine Dates'. And by gum, if only the Keystage children of today knew half as much, we would not be in such a Pickle. '1066' should be compulsory for anyone who has not been given a Proper Education – which means knowing this book by heart. Immortalised in its five Test Papers is the best advice any A Level student can have: 'Do not on any account attempt to write on both sides of the paper at once'. And let's bring Tony Blair back from his holiday to answer, 'What price Glory?'

If we intend force-feeding immigrants with citizenship, we can well start here. Nobody should be admitted who does not know that *Honi Soie Qui Mal Y Pense* means Honey, your silk stocking's hanging down – and who cannot ruminate fearlessly on why it is funny.

First, this treasure house extols the grand set-pieces that are indispensable for understanding what made Britain whatever Britain is: the Romans being top nation on account of their classical education, Magna Charter which was 'a Good Thing for everyone (except the Common People)', Waves of Pretenders (and don't we have a few of those now...), the cavaliers being Wrong but Wromantic, and valiant attempts to amuse Queen Victoria. Even better, it fills in the gaps, so History doesn't leap from the Romans to the Wives of Henry VIII to Hitler, like on the telly, but has a full sweep including the Egg Kings, Humiliations and Spheres of Interference. Two coming anniversaries will make much more sense if we know that Guy Fawkes organised the best plot in history, and how to distinguish between Nelson and Napoleon despite their similar hats.

Lest you think my offering is just a joke, I leave you with its final, memorable sentence - presciently written in 1930: 'America was clearly top nation, and History came to a.'

This article was originally published in *The Times*, October 2005.