

# The Good Book Guide

'BAD OLD DAYS': THE MYTH OF THE 1950S  
by Alan J. Levine, Transaction Publishers  
(USA), 2008. vi + 179pp. £23.95 hbk.

Professor Alan Levine is the kind of American academic writer who leaves the reader in little doubt as to where he stands. 'From 1961-74 the United States was led by a set of three egomaniacs, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, all of whom were corrupt, and convinced that the normal rules did not apply to them.' 'John F. Kennedy was not quite popular enough to win the [1960] election, but he was able to steal it.' These remarks are in no way untypical of his style.

Levine is convinced that the 1945-60 era in United States history, the age of Truman and Eisenhower, has had an undeserved bad press for far too long, and sets out to (as he would probably put it) put the record straight. Casting his net wide, he gives evidence from politics, international relations, race, gender issues, the economy, serious and popular culture and other areas, to justify his assertion that the myth-laden '60s were in fact a decline from the heights attained in the preceding decade and a half. His case is generally convincing, except in his examination of McCarthyism, where perhaps 'he doth protest too much' in playing down its importance. But this is a stimulating read, and brief enough not to be off-putting to the hard-pressed student.

John Garland

GORBACHEV: MAN OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY? by Mark Sandle, Hodder Education, 2008. viii + 366pp, £16.99 pbk.

This book is not a biography in the conventional sense. Rather it is an attempt to explain and evaluate the enigmatic figure who presided over the collapse of Communism and the Soviet Union between 1985 and 1991. Chapters, rather than chronologically describing his life and work, examine Gorbachev's origins



*Atomic weapons, and the history of USSR and US relations, increased Gorbachev's importance and background, his rise through the Soviet system, his relationship with the western media (which lionised him), comparing this with the very different perceptions emanating from Soviet observers and commentators. Then, post-1991 opinions are considered, including Gorbachev's own assessment of his work through his own writings. Finally there is an attempt to place the man and his *perestroika* policy within the overall context of twentieth-century world history.*

The material is vast in scope, the analysis balanced and fair. But A Level students will rejoice that each chapter ends with a helpful summary of what has gone before, thus enabling the hard-pressed to cut some corners. At the end, Gorbachev remains something of an enigma. In some ways he resembles Louis Napoleon of France: a humane man convinced of his destiny to rule and

make changes, confident in his ability to succeed, yet discovering the central ground on which he stood shrinking by the minute, leading ultimately to downfall and failure. This book will not be the last word on this fascinating character, but it goes quite a long way in helping us understand him.

John Garland

WRITING CONTEMPORARY HISTORY. Edited by Robert Gildea and Anne Simonim. Hodder Education - Writing History series, 2008. xxx + 254pp. Index. £16.99 pbk

This volume derives from a conference hosted by the Maison Française, Oxford, in 2006. The eight core chapters address, by two opposed scholars, questions the community of historians discuss in our time. The themes, for example the place of economic, cultural, gender, colonial and social history, are well chosen and the approach engaging but beyond all but brilliant A Level students and very enthusiastic teachers these chapters are too dense, demanding and specialised. The conclusion, that articulates differences, influences and convergences between British and French developments in History and History writing in the last and present century, is even more remote in relevance.

This does not mean the book has no use at secondary level. The 14-page introduction by Robert Gildea is a concise but not reductionist summary of the trends, debates and schools of historians active during the last 30 years. It is clear, unstuffy and thought-provoking and provides perspective and understanding for readers of History and it is an antidote to the tedium of tranches of post-2000 classroom advanced History. In short, for the introduction, it should have a place on the teacher's shelf or in the History Department.

Tom Wells

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*Illustrated London News*, page 10; Sempringham, page 21.  
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