

THE LONG AND THE SHORT OF IT is that *Flying Over Ruins* came into being thanks to research I didn't know I was doing at the time

1. When my grandmother died, I inherited a modest, quirky, utterly fascinating archive of material relating to the decade between the Wall Street Crash and the outbreak of the Second World War. This archive must have struck some sort of a chord because I began to read, in a meandering and leisurely fashion, around its edges – first a couple of social histories, then some proper biographies and political histories... and then, inevitably, as must all travellers in this distant land, I arrived at the heart of the matter: the diaries of Harold Nicolson.

2. Around the turn of century, to celebrate 100 years of the *Daily Express*, *Campaign* magazine and United Newspapers agreed to co-produce a supplement to run in Haymarket's marketing titles... and, knowing a thing or two about the 1930s, I happily volunteered to write a piece about the greatest newspaper editor of the 20th century, Arthur Christiansen, and his fascination for the exploits of the heroes (and heroines) of the Golden Age of Aviation.

The article was commissioned. I began my research. I read (or, rather, filleted) maybe a dozen books and spent several days at Colindale perched under the hood of a microfilm reader, devouring the events of the 30s, day by day.

3. And so it came to pass that I became the go-to-guy if a Haymarket magazine wanted a wacky article on what life was like in the olden times. I wrote about 1930s sports science and football for *FourFourTwo*, and for marketing titles I pontificated about the invention of the consumer economy by way of frozen peas, Mars Bars and the discovery of the "planet" Pluto; further afield, for the likes of the *Literary Review* and *Moving Pictures*, I wrote about media history milestones, for instance the epic story of the launch of the BBC's television services, and I reviewed books on pre-war Hollywood and the evolution of Film Noir.

4. One summer afternoon some years back, in the darkest depths of the Weald of Kent, I met up with a couple, old friends who'd resurfaced after years abroad. We ended up at Sissinghurst. It was an idyllic, drowsy-dreamy day and at some point, lying stretched out on the Tower Lawn, staring up at a perfect blue sky, someone wondered why no-one had ever set a novel here. Sissinghurst, with its enigmatic buildings and spectacular gardens, had such a compelling atmosphere; it seemed the perfect setting for, say, a classic English country house murder-mystery.

I said nothing... but resolved there and then to pick up this idea and run with it.

5. I failed. And I not only failed, I fled. Because, soon after starting out, having struggled with technical details (Sissinghurst features a disparate collection of buildings and I reckoned I needed everyone under the one roof) I decided to up sticks and shift the project to Hidcote. By now, I'd fixed on the idea of writing a post-modernist meta-fiction, a hallucinogenic take on an old familiar template (*The Draughtsman's Contract* meets Italo Calvino meets Agatha Christie's *The Hollow*) and featuring real people re-imagined – not the Nicolson's this time but Chips Channon and his circle.

It was a shambles. It turned into a pastiche, something that even Gilbert Adair would have been ashamed of. But in the process I found I'd managed to read even more books about (or by) an ever-widening cast of characters from the era... and I think I'd begun get a real feel for how all their stories interpenetrated.

6. And I was somehow being tugged back imaginatively to Sissinghurst – I think maybe I felt I had to be true to the inspirational effect of that throwaway comment about its evocative powers. So I decided to pick out a few memorable episodes from Harold Nicolson's diaries and try to write short stories or sketches based on them. One entry that came most vividly to mind was Harold's account of afternoon tea taken on the lawn with the Lindberghs as guests – of the argument that broke out and the deep depression Harold fell into when they'd gone. What on earth was going on? I could sense powerful undercurrents here, and much that was being suppressed.

So, to cut a long story short, I bought Anne Lindbergh's diaries and compared her account with Harold's. It was like connecting two poles of a battery to the motor of a fabulous and intricate mechanism... and it burst immediately into life.

It lives still. My task is merely to describe (and of course interpret) this mechanism in all its glories.

ALTHOUGH, AS I'VE INDICATED in earlier essays, I feel quite at home at Colindale, and Hansard online is invaluable too, most of my research is done by reading books, or bits of books. Every time I come across a new title on the era the first thing I do is go to the bibliography and see if there's anything quirky cited there. I find obscure memoirs particularly rewarding – and thanks to ABE books they can be acquired, some of them, for pennies.

I don't read every word of every single one. Many, I fillet – I go to the index, look for, say, "Charles Lindbergh" and read every page (or chapter) mentioning him. There's nothing very systematic about this. Using a soft-leaded pencil, I merely scribble in margins and trust I'll remember stuff I've read when I need to...