

The two reviews reproduced here are:

John Barnie, Rev. of *Seven Days: A Pyrenean Adventure* by Nathan Munday, *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 230 (Summer 2018), 85-6

Jamie Harris, Rev. of *I, Eric Ngalle* by Eric Ngalle and *John Jenkins: The Reluctant Revolutionary* by Wyn Thomas, *Planet: The Welsh Internationalist*, 236 (Nov 2019-Feb 2020), 86-8

JOHN BARNIE

reviews

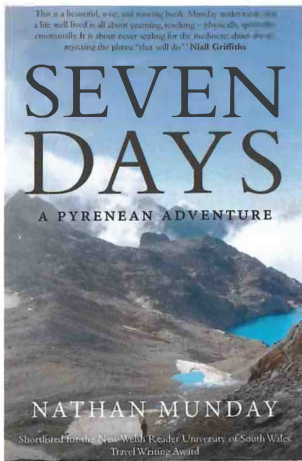
Seven Days: A Pyrenean Adventure

Nathan Munday

Parthian, £8.99

Seven Days is the narrative of a week's hiking tour in the Pyrenees which the author took with his father. Both are keen walkers and climbers – mention is made of expeditions to the Alps and the Grand Canyon, and Munday Sr is a 'Munros' man. More experienced, and perhaps more competitive, it is the father who tends to take the lead, striding out ahead and sometimes leaving Nathan to wait while he scales a peak which the author doesn't dare attempt, or for which he lacks the energy. The book is partly, then, about their relationship and the friendly rivalry that exists between them as they walk long distances across difficult terrain, stopping overnight in mountain refuges where you can get a bunk bed and a meal – the latter often not to be recommended.

It is also about encounters with fellow walkers, including 'Hemingway', so-called by the author because of his superficial likeness to the novelist. 'Hemingway' is from Alsace and has a tragic story to tell of how his daughter died young and his marriage fell apart, as we learn from the Mundays' successive encounters with him at various refuges. (Nathan Munday has a habit of giving literary or mythological nicknames to those he meets. A young Czech



couple are instantly dubbed Freyr and Freya. Later the girl, as she sings, segues into Natasha in a famous scene in *War and Peace*. The reader is not sure why; none of this gives a sense of what the couple are really like.)

The narrative of the seven days is interspersed with digressions, which include retellings of legends and myths connected with the Pyrenees, and these add a depth to our understanding of the people who have lived in the harsh conditions of these mountains for generations.

The book is more ambitious than this, however. As Nathan Munday reminds us, mountains have long been associated with mystical experience and a sense of nearness to God, and there is a subset of digressions which explores this in a Christian context. It is, he explains, 'a book in dialogue with the greatest book ever written – the Holy Bible – as well as a return to the iconic mountains which can be climbed in that book'. It is here that *Seven Days* hits a snag. Nathan Munday retells well-known biblical stories – Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac on Moriah, Jesus on the Mount of Olives, Golgotha, and so on – in his own words. The problem is that he does this in an everyday way, as if chatting over a coffee in Starbucks, and the result can seem flat and mundane, which presumably was not the author's intention.

The author appears to be a practising Christian himself, and perhaps a biblical literalist, unless he is being tongue-in-cheek

when he writes that 'This is a real border after all. People don't decide this one. God did. God decided that a wall of stone would separate two beautiful countries – a fixed wall which people adjusted to rather than re-drew.' Well, no, one wants to respond. The Pyrenees are the result of the random collision of tectonic plates over tens of millions of years, long before our species evolved. Nor is it a 'fixed wall': over geological time, mountain chains are raised up, and ground down, by natural forces. God has nothing to do with it.

Seven Days would, in fact, have benefited from editing, both to iron out lapses in style ('He was the spitting image of Rasputin'; 'The first thing he saw was an eye which nearly shook the living daylights out of him'; 'it creeped me out'), and to tighten the narrative (it would be a more focused book without the biblical digressions). What holds the reader's attention is the seven-day journey itself through rugged, implacable mountains which, despite their remoteness and the sense of ancient human habitation and ways of living, are succumbing to twenty-first-century modernity, with thousands of hikers and climbers clambering over the cols each year, and refuges where Fanta Orange – the Munday's favourite drink while hiking – is always on tap.

The book has numerous photographs which illustrate the mountain landscape traversed by father and son, as well as reproductions of early maps of the Pyrenees. Unfortunately, the paper on which *Seven Days* is printed is of insufficient quality. As a result, many of the photographs are muddy and indistinct, and text on the maps frequently indecipherable. Since the photographs are an integral part of the story Nathan Munday has to tell, it would have been better if the publisher had gathered them in one or two sections on good quality paper.

John Barnie's latest book is a collection of poems, *Departure Lounge*, published by Cinnamon in April.

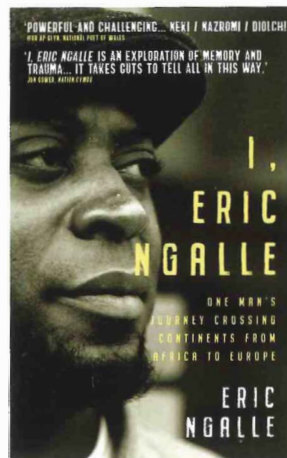
JAMIE HARRIS
reviews

I, Eric Ngalle
Eric Ngalle
Parthian, £9.99

**John Jenkins:
The Reluctant Revolutionary?**
Wyn Thomas
Y Lolfa, £19.99

These two books – one memoir, the other biography – shed light on global and national concerns. In *I, Eric Ngalle*, the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean provides a contemporary lens through which to view Ngalle's journey to Wales at the turn of the last century. Wyn Thomas's *John Jenkins: The Reluctant Revolutionary?* is the study of a mid-twentieth-century Welsh nationalist campaigner radicalised, variously, by the creation of the Tryweryn reservoir and a Cypriot revolutionary group (EOKA). Both narratives draw upon Wales's (and Britain's) relationship with colonisation and Empire, and the way in which its subjects experience colonialism in markedly different ways.

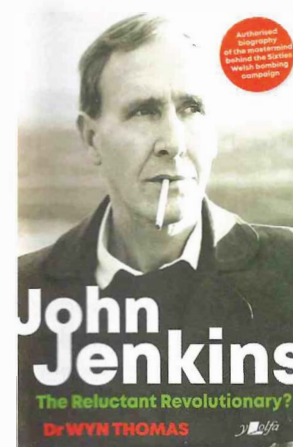
Ngalle's book is a harrowing, graphic account of how he came to be in Wales, from Cameroon. Its complex emotional range is reflected in an equally complex geography, telling the story of a young student who, on his way to study as an undergraduate in Belgium, is duped by people traffickers into going to Russia.



With a lack of any social safety net, Ngalle is forced to make a living in any way he can. There are mandatory HIV tests for African immigrants, and obtaining an exit visa to go back to Cameroon becomes Ngalle's mission – a seemingly impossible task. It is a journey of immense hardship, both suffered and witnessed, but peppered with poignant moments of comfort and self-reflection.

It is also a narrative that deals with personal and cultural mythologies, split between a broad chronology of Ngalle's experiences after leaving Cameroon, and his recollections of childhood. In the latter, he recounts how his mother insists that she was pregnant with him for twelve months, and that he was a 'cursed child'. He writes about a 'witchcraft practitioner', Lorkhorlorkor, who, when he died, 'had his head separated and buried far away from his body', a tale with which anyone with a passing familiarity with the Mabinogi and Bendigeidfran will note, if not an echo, then at least a rhyme.

Scenes of torture and thwarted suicide attempts are interspersed with relationships (some serious, others, such



as a roadside threesome with a woman and her husband, downright strange), and occasionally it reads like a food diary. In one such passage there is a detailed, mouth-watering description of the preparation of *ekwang* ('food for the gods' seems an apt description). In another, Ngalle compares a wedding feast in Armenia to a scene in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, in which the food is 'piled so high that only after it had been consumed did visitors realise that their family members were on the other side of the table'. When he arrives in Wales, Ngalle buys a Twix and a bottle of Fanta, as he wrestles with the act of 'going to the land paved with gold, the land built on the backbone and sweat of my ancestors'. Ngalle's humour is not only a defence mechanism, and the nuance of his writing speaks to the skill of a multi-linguist, with wordplay like 'Peter was well posh and his room well-maintained'.

The publication of a biography of John Jenkins is also timely, and perhaps long-overdue. Emphatically not because Jenkins is some sort of forgotten hero who needs resurrecting (he is not) – even if, at

one point, he (only half-ironically) compares himself to Jesus. Nor (and just as emphatically) because Jenkins's period as head of MAC (Mudiad Amddiffyn Cymru) should be seen as providing any kind of blueprint for today's Welsh independence movement. Rather, this detailed account of Jenkins provides a startling reminder of how far the Welsh independence movement has come in the period following MAC's bombing campaign, and also what it needs to guard against in the imminent future. Thomas is no hagiographer, and maintains for the most part an ambivalent tone when assessing MAC's bombing campaign – commendable given that the author's own father was a police officer who regularly searched the pipelines between Cwm Elan and Birmingham for explosives.

Those fascinated by Jenkins's tactical approach will find much of interest, whether in his development of a cell-like structure (later adopted by the IRA), or his time with the aforementioned Cypriot revolutionaries (as an officer in the British Army). However, the book lays bare the way in which misogyny and toxic masculinity underpinned MAC. Although Jenkins insists that women 'were some of the staunchest supporters' of MAC's bombing campaign, he displays attitudes that seem profoundly out of step with both a modernising post-war Britain and a concurrent Welsh-language movement in Cymdeithas yr Iaith in which women were of central importance: 'a woman's job was to be supportive and to provide her husband with a nice cup of tea when he's

finished [planting a bomb]'. Jenkins's then wife, Thelma, 'felt "uneasy" in his presence, as all her female friends were too.' Even more alarmingly, Thomas cites a proposed strategy that 'that MAC associates carried out serious sexual assaults on Welsh women while wearing British Army uniforms', to advance the nationalist cause (although this wasn't one of Jenkins's ideas).

The importance of this book to any modern independence movement (and there should be no question that it is of importance) is categorically not as a blueprint, but as a reminder that any movement looking to oppose, reform, or dismantle the British state should be vigilant about repurposing the power structures of colonialism. Questions over whether the current independence movement has a racism problem, as well as the continuing online harassment and abuse of prominent Welsh women in politics, should strengthen the resolve to consign such relics to the past.

Jamie Harris is a lecturer, writer, and researcher. He is currently collaborating on a project on nuclear power and literature.
