

Quick reads

A Natural History of Ghosts: 500 Years of Hunting For Proof
Roger Clarke
Particular Books, £20

Journalist and film writer Roger Clarke has been intrigued by ghosts since growing up in a reputedly haunted house, and this intriguing book is in part the fruit of his own frustration at never seeing any of the spectres himself. It takes a pleasingly British approach to the subject - neither tiresomely sceptical nor the work of a swivel-eyed true believer, it does not press an agenda so much as tell a tale. Naturally, at times, that tale leaves the reader feeling a distinct chill. But this is no mere rehash of popular ghost stories. Clarke offers detailed research on famous cases such as the Angels of Mons and the Enfield Poltergeist, looking the natural infidelity of human memory and hearsay. If the manner of the telling occasionally recalls MR James's prickly, donnish narrators, that is surely apt.

Alex Sarll

Bleak Expectations
Mark Evans
Corsair, £14.99

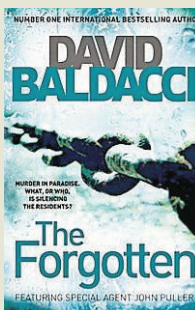
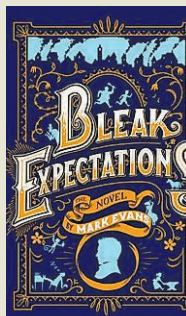
Those who haven't had the pleasure of catching the Radio 4 show will be unfamiliar with the plight of young Pip Bin. Following the popularity of the programme is Mark Evans's new novel, a pastiche of arguably Dickens's most iconic works - Bleak House and Great Expectations. Written as a collection of memoirs from the brilliant but uncelebrated writer and inventor Sir Philip Bin, Bleak Expectations has all the vital ingredients of a good, old-fashioned Victorian adventure. Unlikely inheritance, a jovial sidekick and menacing guardians all make an appearance, with Evans shining a satirical light on Dickens's familiar plotlines. What results is an engaging and highly amusing tale, just the right side of ridiculous.

Lauren Hughes

The Forgotten
David Baldacci
Macmillan, £18.99

David Baldacci's latest thriller brings you back into the world of US military criminal investigator John Puller. Puller's latest case is close to home when he is called to investigate a death in Florida. The victim, his aunt; the motive, unknown. The crime had already been ruled as an accident but Puller finds evidence to the contrary. As he delves deeper into the mystery, he realises the sleepy town of Paradise is a hotbed of secrets and lies. And with more and more of the residents being killed, he faces a race against time to solve the case. Baldacci has proven once again that he can keep you on the edge of your seat with a thrilling, action-packed storyline.

Philip Robinson



Enjoyable variety of lives lived to the full

Thinker, Failure, Soldier, Jailer
An Anthology of Great Lives in 365 Days: The Telegraph
Edited by Harry de Quetteville
Aurum Press, £25

Christopher Smith

In Yorkshire they say there's nowt so queer as folk. The accuracy of the opinion is endorsed hundreds of times in Thinker, Failure, Soldier, Jailer. After a decade as a foreign correspondent in Paris, the Balkans and the Middle East, Harry de Quetteville returned to London and became obituaries editor for the Daily Telegraph.

That might sound like, well, a dead-end job. But in the 1960s Hugh Massingberd had transformed the Telegraph's obituaries column. He was not very interested in solemn records of the exemplary careers of worthy citizens and their blameless spouses.

When people who had figured in the news passed away he recognised a unique opportunity to celebrate human life in all its inexhaustible quiriness. Like the ancient biographer Plutarch he appreciated that one vivid detail could reveal more about a character than any account of a long career. He knew too that humour would attract more readers than solemnity.

So when Harry de Quetteville took over he had a good model to follow, and when he trawled through the files back to 1986, finding material was the least of his troubles. All life is here, described even in the briefest obituary with enough detail to make a lasting impression.

Honour where honour is due. The Telegraph respects courage, and there are stirring accounts of wartime exploits. In what is pithily called an Elizabethan gesture Midshipman Butler nailed the ensign to the flagstaff as a pocket battleship shelled his merchant cruiser. Captain Baker-Cresswell, a old boy of Gresham's, forced a U-boat to surface and seized her code books. Amedeo Guillet is credited with leading the last cavalry charge against the British army.

Sport naturally has its place. Stanley Matthews' contribution to football is assessed, with a touch of nostalgia for old values, while George Best appears in a masterly cameo. Statistics say a lot about Bradman, and Piery Fred said a lot

“Few people will read more than three pages without laughing out loud.”



Jane Russell: Her famous bust was the bed-rock of her career, according to a delightful compilation of obituaries of the rich, the famous, the obscure and the eccentric.

– mostly unprintable – about batsmen. On Lady Heathcoat Amory's death in 1997, it was recalled that 75 years earlier she had been hailed as the world's best woman golfer after taking the Ladies' Championship at Sheringham.

These are just a handful of the people who, so to speak, come back to life in their obituaries. American gossellers flog salvation for dollars. Film stars don't just grace the silver screen. Aristocrats and their ladies enjoy the privilege of

enlivening the press. We meet a giant in the world of model railways as well as one of the creators of Superman, and Jane Russell's bust, we are assured, was the bed-rock of her career.

Watching this cavalcade go by, at a very decent pace, is often instructive, sometimes inspiring and always enormous fun. Few people will read more than three pages without laughing out loud or pausing to share the joke with anyone within shouting distance.

Well-rounded portrait of VC winner

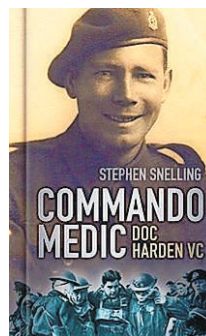
Commando Medic: Doc Harden VC
Stephen Snelling
Spellmount, £14.99

Trevor Heaton

Steve Snelling is no stranger to the pages of the EDP – and Weekend magazine – with his popular, well-researched and always-readable feature articles.

Now Steve, the author of the surely definitive account of the Norwich Baedeker Blitz, has turned his attention to another Second World War story.

The story of Eric 'Doc' Harden, the only British Army medic for be awarded the



VC in the war, has fascinated him ever since he came across it in The Victor comic when he was just six.

Harden, a butcher in the small Kent town of Northfleet, earned the award posthumously for his selfless bravery in rescuing stricken comrades pinned down by murderous enemy fire on the Dutch-German border in January 1945, an action which cost him his own life.

We know so much about Eric's story not just because of the usual military sources and memories of old comrades, but also a treasure trove of letters he wrote home to Maud, who settled in Norfolk in later life. These poignant and sometimes

rawly-honest letters – recently donated to the Imperial War Museum – are a rare and precious resource, and Steve's book makes full use of them, their story underpinning and contrasting with the parallel military narrative.

Those who have enjoyed Steve's work will know what to expect: a gripping story, superbly told and with immaculate research.

He has succeeded in painting Harden as a full-rounded human being. No saint, no gung-ho glory seeker; just a man trying to do his best, moved by his innate sense of decency to an extraordinary act of bravery.