

brain” while running rings around her intellectually’. Lady Hayter assumes that this sort of misogynistic triumphalism would play well with the voters. Maybe she’s right. She records with relish that during the 1987 campaign, ‘a junior party official’ named Peter Mandelson was dismissed by Healey for ‘inept attempts to plant stories in the media’.

Healey wins a thumping majority, spurns President Reagan and embraces eastern Europe. After the Berlin Wall collapses, he prevents a bungling Helmut Kohl from making elementary blunders in the newly freed East. And he helps stabilise Germany by proposing ‘a Euro-German body’ to encourage inward investment with ‘guaranteed UK assistance’. Yes, well. The idea that Britain in 1990, on the brink of a recession, might have propped up the German powerhouse is a trifle fanciful. But then trifles and fancies are what this venture is all about.

Most of the writers are of a leftist tendency and they share a morbid nostalgia for the moral purity of Old Labour. If that’s your bag, this is your book.

Carrying on regardless

Zenga Longmore

Habits of the House

by Fay Weldon

Head of Zeus, £16.99, pp. 314,
ISBN 9781908800046

As a devotee of Fay Weldon I was amazed but nonetheless delighted by the change of her usual style. Set in 1899, her latest novel charts the lives and loves not of She Devils but Lord Dilburne’s household, both above and below stairs. The trademark Weldon wit is very much in evidence, only this time her characters are fetchingly clad in Liberty’s lace with leg-o’-mutton sleeves. England is tottering on the brink of huge change. The Boer War is being fought. Aristocracy and empire are breathing their last. New snobberies are overtaking the old.

The story opens with filmic suspense. It is seven in the morning. Mr Baum, a Jewish lawyer, races up the steps of Lord Dilburne’s house in Belgrave Square to deliver catastrophic news. The servants take their time to open the door. He’s too flashily dressed and ‘foreign-looking’ to merit their attention.

When Baum is finally admitted, he reveals that the South African gold mine where all the Dilburne money is invested has been sabotaged and looted by Boers. The entire Dilburne fortune is lost. The family’s response is to smile politely and ring for a servant to show Baum out. He is furious — his main worry being that the snooty Dilburnes will not invite his socially

ambitious wife Naomi to any of their glittering soirées in the future.

Lord Dilburne, in desperation, thinks fleetingly of finding a job in government to reduce his debts. (I was reminded of Hilaire Belloc’s poem about Peter Goole, the aristocratic spendthrift: ‘And even now at twenty five/He has to WORK to keep alive!’). In the face of financial ruin, Lady Dilburne serenely plans a sumptuous dinner party for the Prince of Wales — which will cost five times the annual wage of Lily, the parlourmaid.

The lives of her unmarried children, Rosina and Arthur, are also seemingly unchanged by the news. Arthur continues to lavish money on his mistress and run up vast tailor’s bills. Rosina, a New Woman, carries

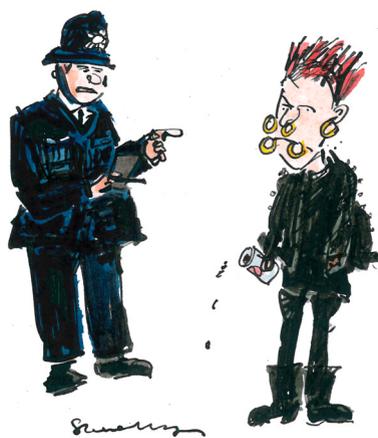
Aristocracy and empire are breathing their last. New snobberies are overtaking the old

on airing fashionably progressive views at literary house parties. Downstairs, the servants busily plot and spy, steaming open letters and repeating conversations.

Everyone, it seems, is heading for disaster until Minnie, an American heiress, arrives in London with her unspeakably awful mother. Would it be deemed too vulgar for Arthur Dilburne to marry into trade?

Briskly written with an ever-present ironic twinkle, this is Fay Weldon at her most spellbinding. The minute observations of 19th-century social and sexual mores are served up as lightly as a Victoria sponge. Period detail is included without the clumsy gratuitousness evident in so many faux-Victorian novels. Pea-soupers, growlers and Fabians are seamlessly woven into the storyline.

This is the first of a trilogy and I cannot wait to see how the Dilburne affairs will pan out. I believe I have unearthed a disturbing plot twist concerning Minnie and her maid Grace, but I promise not to breathe a word.



‘Five rings is an Olympic logo. I’m arresting you for copyright infringement.’

BOOKENDS

Deftly orchestrated chaos



The headings set the scene: ‘Last Tango in Balham, in which I meet Marlon Brando on the dance floor of Surbiton Assembly Rooms but thankfully do not have to do anything with packet of country life.’

The essential premise in Melissa Kite’s breezy new collection *Real Life: One Woman’s Guide to Love, Men and Other Disasters* (Constable, £7.99) is: single girl (of advancing years) desperately seeks man and invariably ends up with the wrong one. Plus a great deal more of mundane affronts to do with TV remote controls that won’t work, Lambeth Council’s wheelie-bin regulations, and the challenge of filling in a passport application form. Real life. Possibly.

The fun lies in the enjoyable unreality, the deftly orchestrated scenarios of chaos. The holiday (with the wrong man, of course) that becomes so unbearable that expensive escape is the only option, the escalating plumbing emergency, the riding holiday with girlfriends, ‘as daft as brushes and ditsy and flaky and useless’.

The narrator lives in a two bedroom flat in Balham (keeping a horse at country livery — unusual among Balham residents, I imagine), has an intermittent relationship with a married man but adores gay Simon (‘I’m made for gay men’), considers adopting a child but is turned down by Lambeth Council (they may have a point).

She is addicted to crisis and disaster, with an inability to see either coming, and a talent for a nice turn of phrase that can make a good story out of tangoing in Balham or cancelling her own wedding.

— Penelope Lively