Eternal City Essay, Research Paper

Eternal city Trieste and the Meaning of Nowhere Jan Morris 180pp, Faber Trieste was the nexus city of Jan Morris’s most original book, Fifty Years of Europe: An Album, which sneaked out, under-noticed, in 1997; perhaps the title, which sounds like a Brussels-funded pamphlet, dissuaded critics. I loved it. Not without reservations – Morris can be a dotty old bird, overasserting the Welshness and fond of the word jolly – but it was a quietly powerful work of short takes, minutes and centuries cross-cut between places. Through it all you could hear Jan, in rather a good frock, perched on a bollard on a Triestino jetty, connecting back to the young cavalry officer James Morris (the he that she once was) in the same location in dislocated Europe at the end of the second world war. The pair of them, and many interim Morris-selves in transit between sexes and destinations, described in Fifty Years the space-time continuum of the continent of Europe – not just its grand history, but the prawn-eaters of the Grand Cafe in the main square of Oslo; the six reasons why the former residence of Romanian royalty may not be entered (of which only the sixth is that it is closed); an old woman’s gift of a sprig of rosemary in a Portugal long since rendered unreachable by the distance that is time. At the end of Fifty Years, when the Hapsburg and Hitlerian empires had fallen, and the bridge at Mostar in Bosnia was no longer visible through lemon trees because it had fallen too, and Europe had become a circle of subsidised stars on an EU flag, Morris recalled being aboard a boat in the bay of Trieste, drinking cheap sparkling wine, as the captain sang a sad Puccini aria: a remembered stillness after the constant movement that preceded it. Morris returned to Trieste for her new book, not to fix that city as the still point at the centre of a turning world, but to explore the city as a world in itself. She explains that Trieste, at the apex of the Adriatic, had been Illyrian (if Illyrians ever existed), a Roman foundation of sorts and a small fishing port in the hinterland of Venice before it was annexed by successive, though not successful, empires and states. The Hapsburgs of Austro-Hungary paid for the docks and tracked the trains through, so that Europe’s railway steam and brass connected on the quays with Suez canal ships and Mediterranean liners, and the globe’s luggage and package labels bore the routing “via Trieste”.

The Italians thought of the city as theirs, called it unredeemed – irredentist – and agitated in outrage until it exited the imperial territories of Emperor Franz Joseph and entered the realm of the futurists and the fascists. The European Jews enriched and dignified it until they too had to connect by train on the quays with boats for Palestine, and it became the port of Zion. The Nazis commandeered it for long enough to purge undeparted Jews. The Allies sectored it. The Soviet bloc coveted it. The Slavs claimed the city until the Balkans fragmented. It’s true that the limestone plateau above it, the Karst – its name adopted by geologists to describe all such ravishing harshnesses of calcium carbonate – does belong in soul to a Slavic world of partisans and Glagolitic alphabets. And now? The mayor of the city at the second millennium, heading a buoyant euro-economy of yachts and tourism (it will pass), is Signor Riccardo Illy, head of the coffee dynasty – aromatic sacks of the family beans being the last commodity bearing that “via Trieste” lading bill. Trieste is never quite that perfect definition of a happy locality, “the one that has no history”. But it is a very particular nowhere-in-particular, as Morris appreciates, perhaps because so many of her 43 books were about fabulous somewheres. The city’s music is not sublime: Verdi premiered two failures here, and the most emphatic description of Antonio Smareglia, the composer favoured by its Opera House, would be “charming”. The city’s literary figures are tense exiles: Richard Burton penning his masterwork of erotic scholarship, The Arabian Nights (and adding entries to his History of Farting ), and his widow burning his abominations adoringly after his death; James Joyce transposing cultural references – transposition, meaning interchange, being the chief transaction of Trieste, or Triest, or Trst, the choice of language depending on where you are coming from, as of course it does in most of Joyce. The city has few pretensions, and fails to achieve them anyway. Its small pale castle, Miramar, with a park haunted by nightingales, was the fancy of Franz Joseph’s younger brother, Maximilian; from there he and his wife Carlotta sailed to the temporary emperorship of Mexico (he sent home a request for 2,000 caged nightingales). He was shot by a firing squad; she went mad. Diminuendo, decline, retreat: Morris, in all incarnations, has always written gloriously about these, back to his early biography of Venice, the empire once lord of a quarter and a half-quarter of the known globe, but by 1960 settling at a tilt in the lagoon sludge. Morris began what will remain his-and-her enduring masterwork, Pax Britannica, a trilogy about the British empire, not with imperial creation – the volume on that, Heaven’s Command, came later – but at the zenith of the 1897 Diamond Jubilee, when there was nothing for the empire to do but diminish, nowhere to go but into the unknowable future, and no possible mode but the recessional. The trilogy’s last volume, Farewell the Trumpets, shares with its subject what I call – after the ceremony of lowering the flag – a sunset and evening hymn tone. That is the tone of this book, too, though lightly done, since Morris is not here writing about piled ruins, nor even about the lading bills of nationality – via here, via there. “FUK NATIONS” is the graffiti’ed declaration she believes in, on behalf of Mssrs Borgello, Korfic, Slokovich and Blotz, all of whose deaths are war-memorialised in Trieste but whose countries of loyalty, let alone origin, are not specified. This time of writing, which will be her last, is personal; she has arrived in both Trieste and old age – a country where the customs and language are different – aware that there remains only the final frontier crossing. I can remember Morris teasing elderly emigrants to Australia that all they wanted was a few more secure years in the sun, or pointing out that refugees who had reached Canadian safety had drawn “second place in life’s lottery”. She or he was younger then, and still expecting something tremendous to happen any minute. Now Morris appreciates that even Trieste – though not Venice, though hardly Manhattan – is still somewhere: Smareglia’s Istrian Wedding is on yet again at the Opera House and Signor Illy’s superb espresso is served in every cafe. In this melancholy envoi of a book, Morris returns, as she did in Fifty Years, to that evening long ago, gently rocking on the schooner out in the Triestino bay. This time the sparkling wine is named as prosecco – we are all Europeans now, at least in Oddbins – and this time she tells us which Puccini aria the captain sang as the stars came out. It was the last chorus of The Girl of the Golden West, and its refrain goes ” Mai più ritornerai, mai più ” – no more, return no more.