

overseas perception of Scotland, and inching it away from British moorings, than most politicians on display here.

Yet politics in Scotland has been more than Marx's "*faux frais* of production": the necessary contribution that lubricated "getting on" in business, Empire or, these days, in European wheeling and dealing. When Ian Lang appointed the country's representatives on Maas-tricht's Committee of the Regions, he ended up with two Labour, one Independent, one Liberal and one Nationalist, all home rulers but for the Independent and a selection that certainly wouldn't have been produced by the party machines.

Unlike Andrew Marr's *The Battle for Scotland* and Arnold Kemp's *The Hollow Drum*, *Restless Nation* has lots of photographs, but these could have added more to the book. They are even part of the problem, as they seem arbitrarily selected rather than documents on their own account. Arthur Marwick's strictures on picture analysis in *Britain In Our Century* haven't been followed, and his book has one beauty neglected here: the late John Mackintosh about to thump someone during an anti-Suez demonstration at Edinburgh University in 1956. Mackintosh, who picked up devolution long before anyone else on the left and ran with it, doesn't get a mention. The fact that the leading authority on the British cabinet never sat in one, and became instead a proto-nationalist, shows why the Scots have a lot to be restless about. *Christopher Harvie is professor of British and Irish studies at Tübingen University*

GUY MANNES-ABBOTT

Angel of history

WALTER BENJAMIN: A BIOGRAPHY

Momme Brodersen (translated by Malcolm R Green and Ingrida Ligers) Verso, £25

The single image of Walter Benjamin that resonates most for me is his claim to "gather flowers on the brink". Gershom Scholem mentions it in his essay about Benjamin's fascination with Paul Klee's painting *Angelus Novus*, while describing the wretchedness of Benjamin's years of exile. Benjamin added the phrase "of subsistence" to this self-conscious image. It remains a symbol for the way in which his thinking embraces difficulty in the revolutionary essays on culture and politics that brought him global fame, long after his suicide in 1940 while fleeing the Nazis. Benjamin's

essays are recovered flowers, compact fragments of hope, and necessarily incomplete commentaries on "truth".

Arriving at a single image of Walter Benjamin is the daunting task facing any biographer. Benjamin, as a romantic "Marxist Hölderlin" or as prophet of the New Left, is an author who resists summary. Among the constellation of names around Benjamin's, Habermas locates Adorno, Scholem and Brecht, while the anti-Marxist Scholem maps Freud and Kafka alongside him.

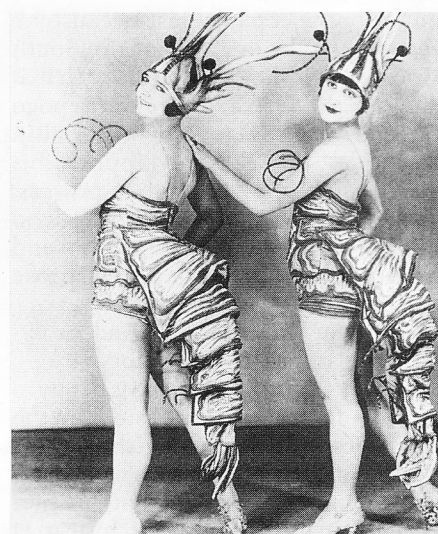
Benjamin can also be legitimately approached through German Romanticism and idealism, through art history or mass-media technologies, through his flirtation with Marxism, or through the Messianic outlook that defines him best.

Momme Brodersen brings further angles and strategies to his biography. He has written a concise guide to Benjamin's life that negotiates its constant movement and Benjamin's characteristic densities with considerable authority. Weighted towards what he regards as the lesser-known aspects of his subject, it makes a good introduction and deserves to be read.

Brodersen approaches Benjamin via Berlin, where he was born in 1892. Benjamin's "life's work... is basically a constant reflection on his own city origins", a city that, Brodersen argues, epitomised modernity. Benjamin's family were wealthy, assimilated Jewish Germans who lived on their investments. We receive a full account of Benjamin's education and involvement in the "student pedagogical movement" before the first world war. Brodersen argues that Benjamin was "a rather spoilt, reactionary, narrow-minded, exceedingly *German* youth", unacquainted with and uninterested in his Jewish origins.

Yet he avoided fighting and, with his new wife Dora, exchanged Germany for a Swiss refuge. From there, as Scholem records, he engaged in protracted discussions about Judaism. Brodersen emphasises Dora's lack of intellectual influence on Walter, while making a vague reference to the fact that her father was the editor of Theodor Herzl's Zionist writing.

Benjamin first attempted to produce a journal in 1920. It was to be called *Angelus Novus*, and governed by principles of "contemporary relevance", "dictum" and "verdict". Brodersen argues that Benjamin's "mental attitude" was established by the early 1920s, citing his work on Goethe's *Elective Affinities* and his *Origins of German Tragic Drama* (1928). Certainly, from his essay on language published in 1916 to the "Theses on the Con-



Dancers in their shrimp costumes for "Trois Fille Nues" (c1925) at the Bouffes-Parisiennes, from Carol Mann's comprehensively documented "Paris: Artistic Life in the Twenties and Thirties" (Laurence King, £24.95)

cept of History" (1940), the foundations of his thought are consistent.

Crucial to Benjamin's life and work was his stay on Capri in 1924, where he fell in love and encountered Marxism. He also wrote a brilliant piece about Naples. He described the city's architectural labyrinths as "theatres of new unforeseen constellations" where "the stamp of the definitive is avoided" and "porosity is the inexhaustible law".

Naples allowed him to conceive of a critical practice dedicated to the constant recovery of the present and the "unfolding" of handed-down concepts. These eschatological processes link present and past into the constellation of "the Then and the Now", which he calls "a Messianic cessation of happening". Yet it is from this mystical and redemptive thinking that what Brodersen calls "his rather curious" historical materialism develops, in which the "shock" of "profane illumination" induced a political "awakening".

Benjamin fled Germany in 1933 and the ensuing perilous years were spent struggling to publish, writing his hugely influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1936) and his unwieldy archive on the Arcades. Finally, entrapped by Hitler's Europe, he took his own life in the Pyrenees. Benjamin described suicide as the heroic modernist gesture, but his own is a defining symbol of the 20th century. If Benjamin's could not be a model life then, as he said about Proust, it was an exemplary one. His criticism remains exemplary, for its confrontation with difficulty and its

search for a position "on the brink".

Benjamin is no longer a revolutionary wizard, but he is a huge subject. Commentaries proliferate, but his work is only partially translated. Brodersen has produced an honourable portrait but Benjamin requires a multi-layered gallery in which his Jewishness and cultural politics can be seen in better perspective.

GAIL VINES

Sermons in stones

LIFE'S GRANDEUR: THE SPREAD OF EXCELLENCE FROM PLATO TO DARWIN

Stephen Jay Gould Jonathan Cape, £17.99

The palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould is a publishing phenomenon. The author of more than 200 evolutionary essays collected in eight volumes, he has produced another full-length book, to follow his bestselling *Wonderful Life*. Why do people buy his books in such vast numbers? Granted, Gould is a talented writer, but why should so many people want to read about evolution?

Intriguingly, it is one of the few topics that sells science in the high street. Cosmology, consciousness and quantum physics also shift books, while worthy tomes about chemistry and engineering languish on the shelf. Could it be that as we struggle to make sense of Stephen Hawking or Richard Dawkins we are searching for clues to the meaning of life? That's how the publisher Ravi Merchandani explains the sales figures. He reckons that popular science books are read not so much as useful sources of empirical facts but as metaphysics and philosophy.

No wonder science books with an "origin" story fly out of the shops. (If they mention God, so much the better.) And when it comes to moral tales about evolution, no one can surpass Gould in finding sermons in stones and books in babbling brooks. He makes "the singular and the small speak to the general and the great", according to the Cambridge historian James Secord. Like a good sermon, he engages our imagination and our sympathies, then moves them on.

As an analytical tool the technique has its limitations. And Gould's style, verging on chummy bonhomie, can jar.

He wants us to repent the sin of pride – our tendency to regard ourselves (and our close animal relatives) as more "advanced" or complex organisms. We should, instead, celebrate the whole range, the "spread of excellence". In a