

# 'The Death of the Fronsac' by Neal Ascherson

## Review by David Malcolm



Let me confess from the start: I am [Scottish](#). I like this novel. I have lived almost half my adult life in Poland. I am Scottish. I greatly admire Neal Ascherson's work as a journalist, historian and travel writer. Indeed, I have long been envious of the dense webs of stories and detail that his articles and books contain. His [book](#) (1997), for example, is extraordinary and wonderful in its mixing of personal experience, historical anecdote, and scientific account, and in its broad understanding of the forces of climate, geography, economics, and culture. Material for more than a few novels lies within it.

Ascherson is a writer who knows the world, writes beautifully, and moves easily between Scotland and Poland, Germany and the Black Sea, and can range even further afield in his journalism if he wants to (Marseilles to Malaga, in my reading). So, yes, I would like this novel. And in fact, I do very much.

[The Death of the Fronsac](#) is an absorbing, intelligent, rich novel, one that does some difficult and worthwhile things very well.

The [ship](#) in question is a French destroyer in harbour in Greenock, which explodes and sinks, with some of its crew trapped aboard, one morning in 1940 shortly before the German invasion of France. The cause of the disaster is not clear, but sabotage is suspected. This event shapes the lives of the group of characters that are central to the novel – the Melville family, that is Mrs Melville, her daughter-in-law Helen, her son Johnstone, their daughter Jackie, and their lodger Major Maurice Sucki, a Free Pole, who has escaped to France after the September 1939 campaign, and who has been sent to liaise with the French Navy in Greenock. But the explosion (accident or sabotage?) is also the pivot of events for a large cast of other characters, including Scottish civilians, an English (really German-Jewish) intelligence officer, French naval personnel, and sundry Polish soldiers and emigrants and emigrees of various ranks and provenances. Most of the

novel is told by Sucki, but other characters are vitally present throughout its story. I must not reveal here the complicated twists and turns of events over the next fifty or so years, but that element of the novel keeps the reader intrigued and in suspense throughout the novel. Suffice it to say that there is a solution to the mystery of the \_\_\_\_\_ and that our central characters not only play their parts in that mystery, but also in its solution (although only the \_\_\_\_\_ know the whole truth in the end).

The sheer richness of Ascherson's novel is striking. It attempts to do a lot, and manages to do that very well. The richness is apparent on many levels. It is a historical novel that concentrates on the years 1940 to 1945, but ranges forward into more recent times, the Polish October of 1956, for example. Its historical locales reek of authenticity. It is a novel about war, the complex loyalties and dilemmas that it involves, the misconceptions and insights it is surrounded by, the freedoms and terrible demands it brings, its accidents and chance encounters, its wretched wasteful horrors. It is a psychological novel about Jackie's growing up in the shadow of lies and absences, and of her winning

ears 1940 to 1945, but the novel ranges back to pre-War Volh nia, and forward into the Polish Recovered Territories in the 1940s, Warsaw in 1956, France in the 1980s, and then briefl into post-1989 Poland. There is an appropriate panopl of characters: Poles of all sorts, Scots from common folk (families displaced b bombing, drinkers in bars) to aristocrats to communists, Free French and Vich French, and a secondar cast of English officers, soldiers, and spies. There is even a small group of rather nast SS prisoners. The languages, too, in the novel are man : Polish (almost entirel accurate, I believe), Scots (ver well done), standard English, and French. The whole jostling, diverse world of 1940s Scotland is there in a microcosm. This world is reflected in how the novel is narrated. The stor is supposed to be S c ucki s account of events, and in most of the novel he tells the stor in the first person. But at times, he has to change to Jackie s point of view, and at times tell of events that neither he nor Jackie experience directl . At another point, S c ucki tells Wisia s tale of exile, imprisonment, and escape, partl in his words, partl in hers. The amplitude and intensit of events are be ond one point of view.

For a novel about war and set in a time of war, actual fighting takes up a surprisingl small part of the novel. Moments of violence are embedded in periods of waiting, meeting people, worr ing, planning, travelling, falling in love, working out what to do in life, having accidents that shape our fate (S c ucki, through no fault of his own, keeps missing out on grand events, apart from the explosion on the ). Indeed, the novel besides its focus on war, action and histor is a moving consideration of what we mean b home (which S c ucki for obvious reasons is constantl reflecting on) and on the chances, necessit , and cost of escaping from that home. S c ucki and Helen, and so man others are displaced b the War. This entails costs and pain, but also brings possibilities of self-recreation. Helen becomes someone different and gets to do exciting things b running off to Canada. S c ucki must constantl recreate himself in new situations. Loss and chance shape the lives of the characters in the novel, both the likeable and the distinctl unlikeable (Johnstone Melville, the collaborationist Guennec). Little survives, buttons, an earring, memories. Pre-War Poland and the Ro al Nav pass into histor . Senior Polish officers, who performed great and brave things during the War, end up working in bars in Edinburgh. A lover dies. The admirable Captain le Gallois sa s it best in his office in Greenock overlooking the port:

This novel is as wise as it is rich. It is an absorbing, complex and humane piece of fiction about terrible times and how good and bad people make the best they can of them.

Neal Ascherson is published by Head of Zeus, 2017. Let me confess from the start: I am

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in which he must make intricate and painful accommodations with changing times and agendas. The novel, too, and part of its interest lies in this – is a good thriller, one in which there is intrigue, betrayal, manipulation, horror, decadence and obtuseness in abundance.

The novel has a grand array of settings, which you might expect in a novel about a world war and its aftermath. There is a lovingly recreated Greenock and other parts of Scotland (S c uckie, probably rightly, records the miserable weather above all), Poland before and after 1939 (done with subtlety and accuracy), Canada (in Helen's accounts of it), Soviet Central Asia, Persia, France, and the Netherlands. The range of time settings is also considerable. The focus is on the years 1940 to 1945, but the novel ranges back to pre-War Volhynia, and forward into the Polish Recovered Territories in the 1940s, Warsaw in 1956, France in the 1980s, and then briefly into post-1989 Poland. There is an appropriate panoply of characters: Poles of all sorts, Scots from common folk (families displaced by bombing, drinkers in bars) to aristocrats to communists, Free French and Vichy French, and a secondary cast of English officers, soldiers, and spies. There is even a small group of rather nasty SS prisoners. The languages, too, in the novel are many: Polish (almost entirely accurate, I believe), Scots (very well done), standard English, and French. The whole jostling, diverse world of 1940s Scotland is there in a microcosm. This world is reflected in how the novel is narrated. The story is supposed to be S c uckie's account of events, and in most of the novel he tells the story in the first person. But at times, he has to change to Jackie's point of view, and at times tell of events that neither he nor Jackie experience directly. At another point, S c uckie tells Wisia's tale of exile, imprisonment, and escape, partly in his words, partly in hers. The amplitude and intensity of events are beyond one point of view.

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