

# Life studies

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## Telling Lives

Alistair Horne (ed) *Macmillan, 400pp, £20*

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In 1969, the formidable historian Alistair Horne founded a fellowship in conjunction with St Antony's College, Oxford, to fund aspiring writers who, here, contribute an innovative collection of mini-biographies, including pieces on Kim Philby, Charles Stewart Parnell and Germaine Greer. Duff Hart-Davies's account of Peter Fleming's journeys, his probably chaste association with Kini (Ella Maillart) and his love for Celia Johnson, is a happy story. Frank McLynn contrasts Burton's hatred of African blacks with Stanley's equal loathing for Arab slaves. Roland Huntford describes Nansen's crossing of Greenland and subsequent worldwide popularisation of skiing, his failure to be "first" at either Pole, his work for the League of Nations, famine relief and refugees, his Faust to Philip Noel-Baker's Mephistopheles, the seduction of Captain Scott's widow. Redmond O'Hanlon's rather shy tale of Bruce Chatwin precedes Martin Meredith's astonishing depiction of the Afrikaner Bram Fischer - the leader of the Bar Council and Nelson Mandela's ally as communist underground cadre.

James Clad initially alleges that General Suharto himself was "behind" the 1965 Indonesian coup that brought about the slaughter of his fellow generals, the fall of the Communist Party and of Achmed Sukarno, and his own rise to power. But Clad later retracts this view: "He is just a poor old man now." Roger Adelson reviews Churchill's association with the Middle East, scarcely to that worthy's advantage. D R Thorpe reminds us that Alec Douglas-Home, despite media sneers, left Downing Street with his reputation enhanced and with the respect and affection of Kennedy, Gromyko and his own colleagues. John Grigg touches on Herbert Gladstone's little-known son, the governor-general of South Africa. Tim Hilton writes on Clement Greenberg, the critic of abstract expressionism, "the original egghead". Laurent Bonnaud reveals Aime Thome de Gamond, who founded a Channel Tunnel Committee in 1867, "the first rational study . . . of that project".

Horne's personal essay concerns Axel von dem Bussche, who survived the Second World War and life in the "Resistance" - including his "mad, one-man suicide plot" to kill Hitler, with grenades concealed in his own overcoat - to become the headmaster of Salem, the German Eton. In another fascinating contribution, John Campbell subtly illustrates how Margaret Thatcher's femininity didn't "feminise" politics, while Michael Ignatieff examines the roots of Isaiah Berlin's security, acceptance and equanimity - "how to die well", he calls it. This delightful and instructive compendium also includes, among much else, a joyous elegy to Carole Lombard, the star, sex symbol and wife of Clark Gable.