

**Oliver Gloag.** *Albert Camus: A Very Short Introduction.* Oxford University Press 2020. 152 pp. \$11.95 USD (Paperback ISBN 9780198792970).

Albert Camus was one of the most prominent and influential French philosophical writers of the 20th century, and it is fitting that Oxford University Press has dedicated a volume to his life and work in their highly successful series of *Very Short Introductions*. I'll give a brief outline of the book, and then explain why it fails to do justice to its subject.

There are seven chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 give an outline of the history of French colonialism in Algeria from the mid-19th century, and then a summary of Camus's life, from his birth in 1913 and his childhood in a poor, working-class neighbourhood in Algiers through to his participation in the French Resistance against the Nazi occupation in World War II. Chapter 3 provides a commentary on the trilogy of 'the absurd' of the early 1940s: the novel *The Stranger*, Camus's first play, *Caligula*, and the philosophical essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Chapter 4 provides a commentary on the trilogy of 'revolt': the novel *The Plague*, the play *The Just Assassins*, and the philosophical essay *The Rebel*. Chapter 5 covers the famous bust-up between Camus and Jean Paul-Sartre in the early 1950s, as well as Camus's third novel *The Fall*. Chapter 6 is concerned with Camus's relationship to his native Algeria, including his attitude to the Algerian independence movement, and includes a discussion of the short stories *Exile and the Kingdom* and the posthumously published novel, *The First Man*. The final chapter is concerned with Camus's legacy, including his status as a writer and a cultural icon.

Camus was a 'pied noir,' a descendent of the French settlers who moved to Algeria during France's colonialist conquest of North Africa in the middle of the 19th century. His father was killed fighting for the French Army in the First World War. His mother was an illiterate cleaning woman partly of Spanish descent, and Camus was brought up by her and his fierce and strict maternal grandmother. Camus thus belonged to the poorer part of the French community in Algeria, heavily outnumbered by the even poorer and disenfranchised Arab and Berber majority. Obviously, any writer's background is likely to play a large role in shaping his work and world-view, and this applies as much, if not more, to Camus as to any other writer. However, the main failing in Gloag's discussion is that he distorts the influence of Camus's *pied noir* background beyond measure into an all-encompassing if largely unconscious attachment to French colonialism. According to Gloag, 'nothing is more important to Camus than France's presence in Algeria' (105), and this attachment to French colonialism and its attendant values is invoked by Gloag to explain a variety of features of Camus's life and work. For example, Gloag claims that it motivated Camus to join the Algerian Communist Party in the mid-1930s: Camus did so 'to prevent Arab resisters from starting their own party' (75). But he also claims that it motivated Camus's *hostility* to communism: Camus was hostile to the communist movement because it threatened France's empire (e.g., in Vietnam). Gloag also invokes Camus's attachment to French colonialism to explain his anti-historicism (this is grounded in 'fear of a narrative that would end with the liberation of Algeria' (66). Most implausible of all, it is even invoked to explain Camus's love of nature: his 'veneration of nature' is grounded in an often 'implicit or unvarnished emotional defense ... of the racism of French *pied noirs* in Algeria' (94-95).

I'll return to Gloag's comments on Camus's love of nature below, but first it is worth noting that even where French colonialism isn't invoked, Gloag is unjustifiably uncharitable toward Camus. For example, he questions Camus's motives for joining the French Resistance in late-1943: 'Camus probably understood that not to join the resistance, which his friends had already done, would doom his literary career' (32). This is wildly implausible. As Olivier Todd explains in his authoritative

biography, Camus risked torture and execution for the role he played in producing an underground newspaper for the Resistance. (See e.g. p.187 of Todd's *Albert Camus: A Life*, Carroll and Graf 2000), where he recounts an episode when Camus, carrying in his pocket a layout page for a Resistance newspaper he was working on, came close to being uncovered on being questioned by German and collaborationist police at a road block in Paris). It seems implausible that Camus would risk torture and death just for the sake of advancing his literary career, and in any event, Gloag offers no evidence whatsoever to back up this claim. Unfortunately, this type of inaccuracy and uncharitable speculation are a characteristic of much of the book. I'll give a few examples to illustrate this.

In 1944, Camus wrote and published clandestinely a number of 'Letters to a German Friend', later reprinted in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death* (Alfred Knopf 1960). In his description of the third letter in the series, Gloag writes, 'Further linking colonial status to power and prestige, Camus wrote that France's superiority over Germany was that the former was a colonial power. Camus clearly believed that the key to France's prestige and power was its colonies' (32). An inspection of the third letter, however, shows that Camus wrote no such thing. In the relevant passage (reprinted in *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, Alfred A Knopf 1944, 21), Camus writes to his imaginary German interlocutor: 'You speak of Europe, but the difference is that for you Europe is a property, whereas we feel that we belong to it. You never spoke this way until you lost Africa.' Clearly, the reference here is to Germany losing the African Campaign in 1943, and the point Camus is making is that Germany now primarily sees itself as *colonizer of Europe*, whereas France by contrast sees itself as *part of Europe*. The passage thus concerns France's status as a part of Europe and not its status as a colonial power.

Predictably, Gloag attempts to make much of Camus's remarks to a supporter of the Algerian independence movement at a press conference following his receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in Stockholm in 1957. Camus was challenged to explain why he defended Eastern Europeans resisting domination by the Soviet Union but not Algerians fighting for independence from France, and Gloag repeats the standard rendition of Camus's reply: 'I believe in Justice, but I will defend my mother before Justice' (100). Camus thus appears to be putting filial love for his *pièd noir* mother above justice for the oppressed native Algerian population, and on the face of it this appears to be grist for Gloag's mill, once again exhibiting Camus's indifference to the Arab population even while reluctantly acknowledging the justice of their cause. However, as Alice Kaplan explains in her introduction to Camus's *Algerian Chronicles* (Harvard University Press 2014), this is actually a misquotation: Kaplan explains that what Camus actually said should be translated: 'People are now planting bombs in the tramways of Algiers. My mother might be on one of those tramways. *If that is justice, then I prefer my mother*' (*Algerian Chronicles*, 18, italics added). Clearly, the conditional form of Camus's comment about justice and his mother doesn't involve elevating her status above that of the Arabs. Rather, Camus is reasserting his view (familiar from *The Just Assassins* and *The Rebel*) that a political movement loses its claim to be a just cause as soon as it begins directing acts of terrorism and violence toward innocent civilians. This may be controversial, but one doesn't have to be a supporter of French (or any other) colonialism to make it. (And indeed, even if the original quotation had been accurate, there are more charitable interpretations than that made by Gloag; it could be an example illustrating Bernard Williams's famous critique of consequentialist normative ethical views on the grounds that they potentially alienate individuals from concerns constitutive of their moral identity. Again, although this is controversial, you don't need to be a supporter of colonial exploitation to see the force of it).

Gloag's penchant for uncharitable speculation about Camus's motives reaches its apogee with his account of Camus's love of nature: 'Camus favoured space (nature) over time (history) not

because of a love of nature per se, but rather because he saw human history as leading to the liberation of indigenous people, and thus to the downfall of French Algeria' (105). The idea that antipathy to the liberation of indigenous people might be behind the lyrical celebration of the sun, sea, sky, and wind in Camus's essays and fiction is so outlandish it would need to be backed up by a mass of evidence to deserve any degree of credence. As far as I can see, Gloag fails to provide any.

Overall, this is a very poor book, badly argued and displaying an almost obsessive bias against its subject. The author who gave the world *The Stranger* and *The Plague* surely deserves better than this.

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