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COMMENTARY

Palaima: A new book that's both very big and very good

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Austin American-Statesman Thursday, March 9, 2006

"Mega biblion mega kakon," said the Greek poet Callimachus. "A big book is a big bad thing." Callimachus' remark rings true. Think of "Mein Kampf," or the 999 prolix pages of Bill Clinton's "My Life."

But there are exceptions that prove the rule, and I think I might have found one. Actually, I didn't find it. It was given to me by University of Texas at Austin professor W. Roger Louis, editor-in-chief of the "Oxford History of the British Empire." Roger has written or edited more than 20 books and has served as president of the American Historical Association. He also has received the honor of Commander of the British Empire from the Queen of England and the University Co-op Research Excellence Award. He is best known around UT for directing the faculty seminar in British studies that has met regularly in the Harry Hunt Ransom Humanities Research Center for more than 30 years.

Roger, wearing that bowler hat, gave me a copy of his new book, "Burnt Orange Britannia." With its introduction, it is nearly Clintonesque. Its dust jacket bears an illustration from the 1920s of a personified Britannia arriving at the British Museum in a horse-drawn carriage, driven by a British lion sporting a crown, whip in hand. This is just the kind of too-too-British image that activates my dormant counter-Anglophiliac tendencies. The rest of the dust jacket is awash in glowing burnt orange, making it about the only thing that color on the Forty Acres these days that is not sold at high profit for the direct benefit of athletics coaches' salaries.

When I got my copy, I read that it contained 60 autobiographical essays by participants in the British studies seminar during its 30 years. I thought: Let's see. It's big. It's British. Its burnt orange cover screams to Texans, "Please buy me!" And it looks like a big exercise in academic narcissism.

It is all of these things, more or less. But to my great surprise, it is also a "mega kalon" - a big good thing. These candid self-portraits take us into the minds and lives of remarkable people, all academic or non-academic devotees of British culture and its influence. Among them is an astronomer born during World War I, a professor of German who did his university studies in mathematics and physics after serving in the Hitler Youth, and a historian from Nigeria who remains piously devoted to tradition as a source for understanding who people have been, who they now are and what they can be.

We read of one philosopher who went from Oxford University to Vietnam to Princeton before coming to Texas. He somehow has remained sane, noble, pious and dedicated to making the university a better place for current and future students. And we read about the babe of the

group, born during Lyndon Baines Johnson's Vietnam-haunted presidency, who "skated by at Harvard, caring mostly about sports and girls" before dropping out to work as a paralegal in a securities litigation firm. He has come back to scholarship and teaching about ethics and how philosophies of mind and language intersect.

We also read how a former dean of liberal arts became a Yiddish linguist and scholar of India after earning his undergraduate degree from Georgia Tech, the first of many career decisions in which "chance-random mindlessness-has always played the principal role."

Then there is the promising journalist, who covered Lech Walesa, Boris Yeltsin and James Baker in Europe and then went back to school and became a historian dedicated "to showing students that history did not follow a sure path to their existence and to the world we now know."

This big book should be mandatory reading for every current and future legislator, educator and administrator in our big state. The lessons of these lives are that big.

How many young lives and spirits are we crushing, and how many potentials will go unrealized because we are teaching to the test, emphasizing choosing a major and finishing a degree as quickly as possible, offering students the illusionary security of undergraduate professional degrees?

When you pick up this "mega kalon," read professor Toyin Falola's essay first. The factors that brought about a decline in the dignity of professors in his native Nigeria and the loss of their role of "speaking the truth to power," are now being replayed in our own state and country. Still, he speaks passionately of his sacred duty as a "storyteller" to provide students with the skills and knowledge that will enable them to cultivate catholic tastes, understand foreign cultures and enjoy freedom without losing discipline and focus.

Those are all very good and very big things.

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