

Wind, Ham, Lewis: The Bad Art of Cacography

By [Douglas Milton](#)

About the book: *Anthony Burgess*, by Roger Lewis (Faber £20)

One knew, roughly, what to expect. There had, after all, been that quote in the Books & Bookmen column of *Private Eye*: "I'm going to write a hatchet job". Then there was a nasty article in the *Daily Mail* (that *Völkischer Beobachter* for the English home counties) which accused Burgess of being, inter alia, a wrecker of other peoples' careers and a paedophile. One's hopes for Roger Lewis's book were not, to put it mildly, all that high. But even so, surely nobody could have anticipated quite how spectacularly it would live down to expectations. This is, beyond a doubt, the worst biography I have ever read. And yes, I've read Andrew Field's VN.

It starts off blandly enough, with a chronology of Burgess's life which is only offensive inasmuch as it's littered with errors. Then we're into the 'Prologue' which is a self-serving memoir about an encounter between Lewis, Burgess and Richard Ellmann in Oxford. Lewis was one of Ellmann's students, and obviously went off the rails fairly early. He was supposed to be writing a doctorate

about Ezra Pound, but ended up writing 'not one word'. Instead he turned to showbiz biographies. He's best known for his life of Peter Sellers, although I prefer the recent book about Charles Hawtrey. It's hard wholly to dislike a man who loves the Carry On films as much as Lewis. But quite what possessed him to tackle someone of the stature of Anthony Burgess is beyond me. He's massively out of his depth, and what's more he seems to know it, and compensates with a combination of bluster, cheek and sheer bloody dishonesty.

He's got a thesis, of sorts, and here's how it goes: Burgess's best work (although Lewis is pathologically incapable of praising anything from Burgess's hand) was all done while his first wife Lynne was still alive. Once she died, and he married Liana, he became a writing machine, whoring for Hollywood and the popular press, churning out cerebral novels like MF and Napoleon Symphony, 'deliberate, industrious, and a little bit dead.' Anybody who's read Burgess's later work will know that this is complete rubbish, and indeed Lewis himself seems to be uncomfortably aware that his attempts at denigration ring a little hollow. He's very chary of venturing an opinion about, say, A Dead Man In Deptford or Byrne, both of which were highly acclaimed by the critics and would give the lie to his nonsense about Burgess having given up the ghost around 1968. On the one hand, all of Burgess's novels, even the pre-'68 ones, are supposedly no good, apart from A Vision of Battlements – talk about a back-handed compliment. (His music's rotten too by the way, although Lewis gives not one sign of being musically literate. Still, that's no reason why he shouldn't dismiss Burgess's 3rd Symphony as being 'Elgar with bongo bongo drums'. Which gives you an idea of the general level of criticism in this lamentable book.) On the other hand, Burgess was self-pitying, brooding over a bad review for decades while ignoring the thousands of positive notices his work received from specialist and popular press alike. Thousands of wilfully wrong-headed reviews, one can only assume, given that AB's novels were supposedly so duff. At one point Lewis asserts that Burgess's scholarship, command of languages etc, only impressed the second-rate – real academics weren't fooled and felt nothing but embarrassment on Burgess's behalf.

Ah yes, all those second-raters, let's have a roll call... Christopher Ricks, John Carey, George Steiner, Frank Kermode, David Lodge, A S Byatt...fakers all of course, and no match for Lewis's brimingly potent critical powers. What a shame Lewis never finished that Oxford doctorate – perhaps they could all have benefited from his instruction.

This awful book really amounts to nothing more than one long jeer. Of course it won't harm Burgess's reputation in the least, because it actually has very little of lasting interest to say about his life or work and gives us instead a fascinating tour of the weird and wonderful mental world of Roger Lewis. He is, it has to be said, a distinctly odd fish. Hard research doesn't seem to be much in his line – he obviously hasn't deigned to visit any of the many well-stocked Burgess archives such as the one at the University of Texas, for example, which could have saved him from many toe-curling errors of fact. He gives grudging thanks to the Université d'Angers in the introduction then makes a slighting comment about the Anthony Burgess Centre towards the end, likening it to some sort of Goon Show appreciation society. Odd sort of insult from the biographer of Peter Sellers, but let us move on, move on. I've read this rotten thing three times, and counted at least two errors on every page. Here are some instances, picked at random out of hundreds. He tries to imply that Burgess was in the pay of MI5. Three thousand quid goes into AB's bank account, supposedly for writing the history of a great London corporation. Lewis excitedly asserts that there had been no such book, and that the money came from the Security Services (there were, apparently, clandestine Le Carrésque meetings with Burgess's controller outside Trumper's hairdressers on Curzon St, which might, perhaps, explain the elaborate Burgess coiffure, but no, one is still not convinced). Well, the book (a history of the City Of London Real Property Company) does exist, and Andrew Biswell (Burgess's real biographer) tracked down the original manuscript after just a few phone calls. This is typical dereliction of duty on the part of Lazy Sod Lewis.

I use that locution deliberately. Lewis has obviously read deeply of the Amis/Larkin Letters and seems to think that phrases like lazy sod, piss, pretentious prick etc are legitimate items of critical currency. By offering up a phrase like 'lazy sod' as a hostage to fortune he's really asking for it. OK Roger, had you been a little less lackadaisical yourself you wouldn't have made the following balls-ups. Xaverian College wasn't run by Jesuits, but by a secular order. Burgess didn't write that line in Moses the Lawgiver about 'I am circumcised of lips' – that was Burt Lancaster's daft improvisation. He didn't attempt to cover up the fact that the story about Shakespeare inserting his name in Psalm 46 was derived from Kipling's Proofs of Holy Writ – see page 337 of *You've Had Your Time*, for God's sake, if you're going to boast about having read everything Burgess ever wrote. You say Major Meldrum never married – he did, and had two daughters. Burgess didn't 'shout at Malay waitresses' in the documentary *A Kind Of Failure*. They were Chinese, and Burgess was making a point about the Chinese having always been a sort of master-race in Malaya and not needing to learn the native language. Incidentally, Lewis is at pains throughout to cast doubts upon Burgess's linguistic abilities. According to the Herefordshire polyglot, Burgess's skills were limited to greetings and asking for directions. Well, throughout the 1980s I saw AB on French, German and Italian TV, and he acquitted himself very well in those languages (I was watching with native speakers who were able to confirm this.) Obviously I can't speak for his Malay, although the fact that he passed the various Civil Service exams in record time, and with record grades would seem to indicate that he was rather gifted in that line. Lewis, by the way, gives no indication of knowing any languages apart from bog-standard French.

So far I've just been sparring. If I wasn't so reluctant to bore you all, I could list about three hundred errors of fact and at least fifty malicious distortions. Given that life's too short, let me try and sum up just why this book is so dire. Lewis goes to pathological lengths to slag off Burgess's writing and character. Big deal. He's entitled to his opinions, he's punching well above his weight and Burgess's reputation will easily survive. So far, one pities Lewis rather than Burgess. But then he makes some very unpleasant insinuations, of a nastiness quite unusual even in these post-Kitty Kelly times, and with the best will in the world I don't think they're forgivable. Lewis sneers at the idea that Lynne was assaulted and raped during the blackout, scoffing that she probably fell down a manhole during the blackout while drunk. He goes on to cast serious doubts on whether Burgess was the real father of Paolo-Andrea. Now Andrew is, tragically, no longer with us, but one has to ask – did Lewis even attempt to contact him and warn him of the bombshell he was about to drop? Or reflect for a moment that a man's name – any man's name – was a sensible thing to have on a birth certificate in the not-so liberal England of 1964? Especially if the real father were still married to someone else? My guess would be no. Then there's some mad stuff (obviously written with an eye to the sensationalist Sundays) about how *A Clockwork Orange* was funded by the CIA to soften up the public about brainwashing. Well if that's the case, one can only give a low whistle and say boy, did they ever get the wrong novel. Some of his assertions are frankly libellous. It would seem very unwise to state en passant that Georges Belmont (Burgess's wonderfully gifted French translator) was a 'Hitler Youth leader' (he wasn't), or that Burgess had an adulterous affair with Diana Gillon. Both of these people, while getting on a bit, are very much alive and kicking, although Lazy Sod Lewis probably didn't bother to check. One hopes they're litigious. These examples of Lewis's haplessness are picked at random, but I could go on and on. As the reader may have gathered by now, we're dealing with a terrible book, a non-book, the sort of black-hole, anti-book that Borges would have assigned to one of his most deluded characters; poorly written, badly researched and moreover one which provokes some hard questions.

First of all, what the hell's gone wrong with Faber? They used to have a reputation. No longer, it seems. Their only motive for publishing this malicious tripe must be the hope that they might make a quick buck, as if they needed it. Well, they won't. I can't imagine many people shelling out £20 for an anti-Burgess rant. If they like AB they won't want to, and if they don't, well they already know that, don't they? So everybody loses. Secondly, what on earth was going through Roger Lewis's head? He has a habit of coming out with these scurrilous books and then disowning them. I still remember hearing him on Radio 4's arts programme *Kaleidoscope* after the Sellers biography appeared, wilting in the face of some probing questions about his motives, urging listeners not to buy his 'terrible, awful!' book. I suspect he already feels the same way about this one. A friend of a friend at a Dutch press agency has just sent me a copy of an interview Lewis gave to an Amsterdam paper a few weeks ago. In it, he breaks down in the face of a stern inquisition from someone who seems to have got his number, and admits that he actually loves and admires Burgess and that the whole biography was an attempt to come to terms with the admiration, tempered with exasperation, that he feels for him. The last couple of paragraphs of his book would seem to bear this out. Lewis deliberately evokes the magnificent coda of Kingsley Amis's *Jake's Thing*, along with a dash of Molly Bloom's monologue, and seeks to achieve some sort of posthumous bonding with the great man. That Lewis finally

realised he wasn't fit to unlatch Burgess's shoes may be some sort of tragedy, but not one that need delay us for very long. Fortunately for all of us who read and revere Burgess still, whatever his venal faults (and who shall 'scape whipping?) 2003 will see the publication of Andrew Biswell's own biography, *The Fictionist*. From what little I've seen of it, it seems to be the best commemoration Burgess could have hoped for, witty, scholarly, sympathetic, and packed with all sorts of fascinating discoveries. In the meantime, one might as well delve deep into our reserves of pity and just pass over Roger Lewis's tragic waste of time. By the way, the great man implies that he spent some twenty years researching and writing this. Sorry, but I just can't see it. It reads more like something dashed off over the past year in order to enable the author to meet a deadline and trouser the advance.

Burgess's death provoked such a plethora of grief, not least from those critics who hadn't felt able to be generous enough when Burgess was still alive, that some sort of backlash was inevitable. Well, here it is, and pretty shabby too. Useful, probably, to get all the bile contained in one disposable volume. His reputation is, of course, unassailable. Halfway through writing this, in the grey hours of a rainy Paris dawn, I opened *The Doctor Is Sick* for the nth time in twenty-five years and responded in a way Lewis seems to have forgotten. I laughed.

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