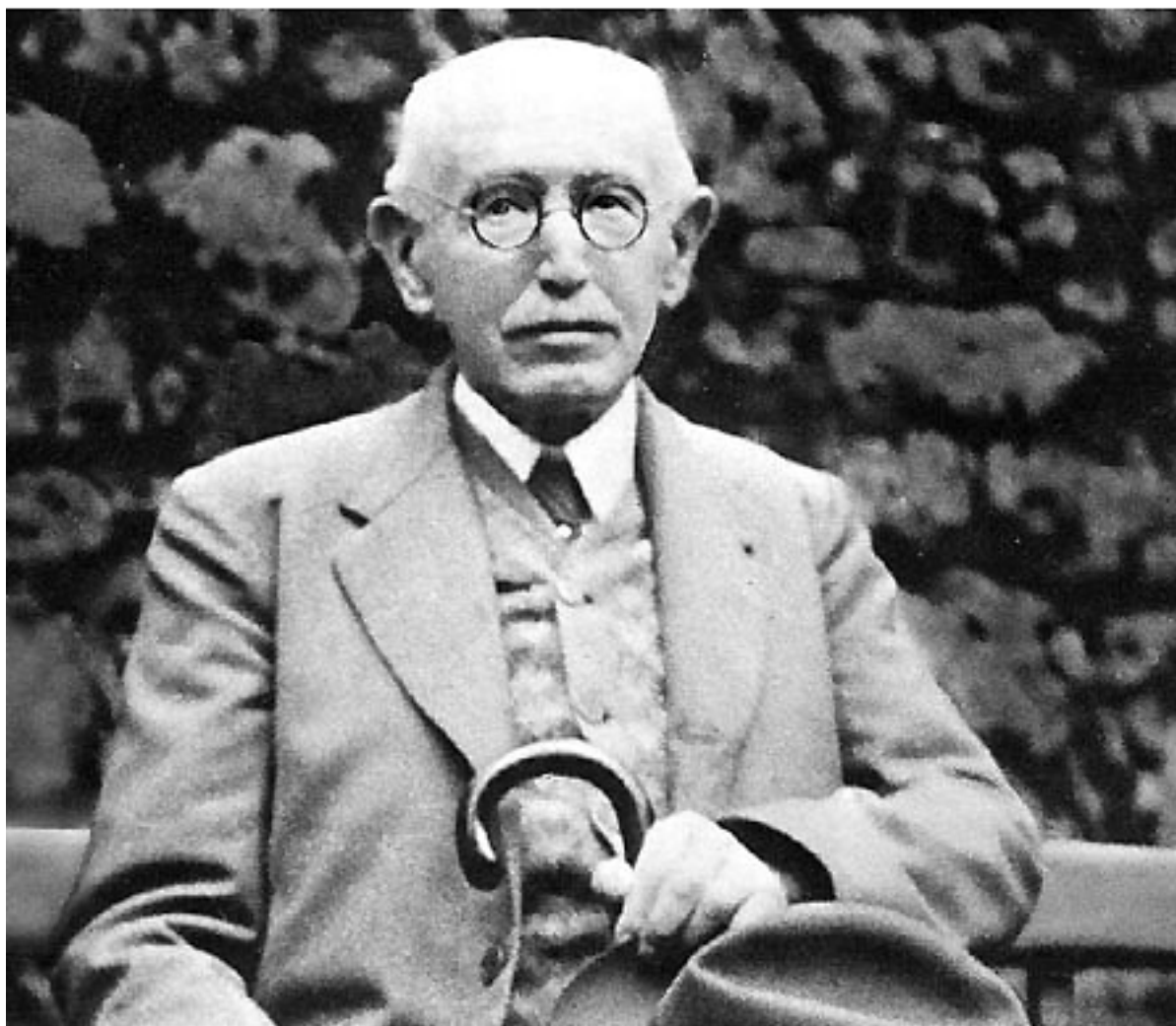


The Dreyfus Affair by Piers Paul Read: review

The Dreyfus Affair by Piers Paul read offers a novelist's take on a defining drama of turn-of-the-century France



The last known picture of Captain Alfred Dreyfus, taken in the 1930s Photo: EPA

The Dreyfus Affair brought down one government, caused the resignation of three Ministers of War, led to France's most famous novelist being sentenced to a year in prison and almost precipitated the country's second civil war in little more than 100 years.

It's a subject that's been obsessively picked over in a vast slew of books, and as Piers Paul Read admits at the outset, he hasn't come up with any startling new information. What he has done, however, is retell the story for a generation which may never even have heard of Dreyfus, demonstrating how the ramifications of the affair continue to be felt today. But it's the nature of the retelling that's key here. In bringing his novelist's eye to bear on events, Read ensures they unfold with a compelling sense of drama.

And what an extraordinary story it is. In August 1894, a cleaner at the German embassy in Paris in the pay of the French intelligence service sent over the contents of the German Military Attaché's waste-paper basket. Among the rubbish was a note torn into six pieces. When pieced together, it turned

out to have been written by a French officer offering information about a new cannon.

Suspicion quickly fell on a 35-year-old infantry officer called Alfred Dreyfus. Unpopular with his superiors – “pretentious and with an undeveloped character,” wrote one – Dreyfus had no sense of humour, a “metallic” voice and was fond of taking long solitary walks. He was also Jewish.

The only evidence against Dreyfus – or purported evidence – came from an amateur graphologist who claimed his handwriting was similar to the writing on the note. Even he conceded the writing wasn't identical, but explained this away by saying that Dreyfus was clearly trying to disguise his true hand.

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Dreyfus was arrested and given a loaded revolver in the hope he would do the honourable thing. However, he stubbornly refused to kill himself, insisting he was innocent. At his trial, yet more fabricated evidence ensured Dreyfus was found guilty and he was sent to Devil's Island, from where it was confidently expected he would never return.

But Dreyfus didn't die and L'affaire Dreyfus, as it became known, refused to go away. By the time Émile Zola's pamphlet *J'Accuse* was published in January 1898, the real spy had been unmasked – another officer called Commandant Marie-Charles-Ferdinand Walsin Esterhazy. Esterhazy's handwriting wasn't just similar to that on the original note – it was identical.

At his court martial, Esterhazy was found innocent – again on the basis of fabricated evidence – with the verdict greeted by shouts of “Death to Jews” from the predominantly Roman Catholic anti-Dreyfusards. Meanwhile Dreyfus was stuck in solitary confinement on Devil's Island. “I am more silent than a Trappist,” he noted glumly in his diary.

And then, after more than four years of imprisonment, the chief warder handed him a letter in June 1899 saying that he was to be retried. Two months later, Dreyfus entered a courtroom in Rennes to be greeted by appalled gasps. “His arms were withered, his knees so thin that they seemed to pierce the cloth of his trousers.” But once again Dreyfus was found guilty – this time he was sentenced to 10 years' detention. It was only after fears that other countries might boycott the forthcoming Exposition Universelle in protest that he was pardoned by presidential decree.

The Dreyfus Affair was a defining moment in the history of the Catholic Church. As a Roman Catholic himself, Read wonders if anything can be said in favour of the church's behaviour. Not much on the face of it – almost a third of the anti-Semitic books published in France between 1870 and 1894 were written by Catholic priests. That said, the church paid a heavy price for backing the wrong side.

Following Dreyfus's pardon, all Catholic religious orders in France were dissolved and all Catholic schools closed.

Yet however strong Read's affiliations, he never allows them to skew his narrative. In admirably clearheaded fashion, he disentangles the facts from the myths and shows that this was a far more morally ambiguous story than has often been presented.

Dreyfus's very lack of qualities made him an ideal blank surface onto which a generation could project their prejudices. Throughout his whole ordeal, he remained unvaryingly, almost heroically, dull. One Paris hostess who invited him to one of her soirées was heard to remark, through clenched teeth, "What a pity we can't choose someone else for our innocent."

John Preston - The Telegraph