

***I am Dynamite!*—Sue Prideaux**

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Those familiar with the Julian Young, Curtis Cate, Walter Kaufmann, R.J. Hollingdale, Rüdiger Safranski, and Ronald Hayman biographies of Nietzsche open Sue Prideaux's nearly four hundred page *I am Dynamite!* with skeptical curiosity: has Prideaux discovered anything to say about Nietzsche's life that we have not already learned?

While the biography is certainly accessible enough to be enjoyed by Nietzsche novices, it is also filled with clues and riddles sure to intrigue those who have spent many years reading him. Take for instance Prideaux's discussion of the young Nietzsche's "paltry marks for mathematics, in which his interest remained faint" to which she adds almost as an afterthought, "apart from a brief period when he became fascinated by the properties of the circle" (p.29)—foreshadowing his postulation of the Eternal Recurrence. The book is rife with similar such small, but insightful minutiae, like her conjecture that despite Nietzsche's famous mountaineering spirit, he did not often make it to the highest altitudes on account of his extreme sensitivity to light: the sun's reflection off the snow would have blinded him.

One of the most charming aspects of *I am Dynamite!* is the penchant for the coincidental that Prideaux shares with Nietzsche. Her taste for exploring the accidents of fate within her subject's life impels her to find meaning in Nietzsche's presence in Venice during the time Arnold Böcklin was painting *The Island of the Dead*. She details the superstitions that surrounded the mountains Nietzsche climbed with Wagner and Salomé, and she describes the layout and history of the cities where Nietzsche felt at home. Her descriptions of the multi-layered coincidences of Nietzsche's life story help us to envision the nuances of the fate he entreated himself to love.

Prideaux does an excellent job of articulating and addressing issues that fall within the scope of biographical explanation. For instance, she frames the question of the origins of Nietzsche's aphoristic style beautifully, discussing a

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confluence of influences, from Empedocles and Holderlin to Paul Rée. However, Prideaux ultimately weighs in on the side of a practical and physiological explanation: his style was a necessity of his illness, “the only way he was capable of recording the bursts of significant thought between headaches” (p.184). Although previous biographies have provided detailed treatments on the matter of Nietzsche’s suffering, *I am Dynamite!* displays it with a rich physicality that keep the reader meditating on the presence of the illness that played a constitutive part of Nietzsche’s life and work.

Unlike Safranski and Young, Prideaux does not attempt to write a philosophical biography. She devotes relatively few pages to expositions of Nietzsche’s thought. Likewise her book does not aim to be as comprehensive as Cate’s. There are whole years to which she gives only a cursory glance (1886-1888 receives just thirteen pages of attention). She touches on, but does not dwell upon, the Oedipal nature of Nietzsche’s love for the Wagners. All these themes have already been well explored. The point upon which Prideaux surpasses previous biographers is in her attunement to the emotional life of Nietzsche. Her careful observation of Nietzsche’s habits and his moods, her speculation upon their changes and origins, is the strongest aspect of *I am Dynamite!*. Prideaux’s biography does the difficult work of portraying the complexity of Nietzsche’s anxiety and pain, the intensity of his desire and aspirations, and thereby helps us feel closer than ever before to Nietzsche as he lived and breathed. Prideaux’s previous work in biographies on the lives of Edvard Munch and August Strindberg, and her extensive research into the social etiquette and discontents of the late 19th century, contributes an impressive background which shapes her inquiry.

A detailed account like Prideaux’s of Nietzsche’s emotional odyssey is an eminently worthwhile project. To explore what Nietzsche was feeling would be one of the most genuine ways to write about the thinker on his own terms. Nietzsche would be the first to assert that his philosophical battles with Christianity, with Wagner, and with modernity were ultimately shaped by aspects of his emotional life. “Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings—always darker, emptier, simpler” (GS §179). Prideaux helps to emphasize that, due in large part to his extraordinary illness, Nietzsche had a deeper affective understanding of these problems than previous philosophers.

The biography’s emotionally oriented narrative does lead to an occasional tendency towards exaggeration. For instance on p.311 Prideaux states that Nietzsche “had no companions during his time in Turin. Not even any visitors.” While the overall point Prideaux is making is an important one—that Nietzsche established for himself a genuine sense of urban solitude in Turin—it is not quite accurate to say he did not have any company. He did at least become acquainted

with Pasquale D'Ercole, a professor at the University of Turin who shared many of his interests on matters of religion and the East. Nietzsche would write to D'Ercole before anyone else upon his arrival in Sils-Maria for the summer of 1888 (*KGB* III.5, p.326-7). Whether such intermittent exaggerations are serious impediments of this work is for the reader to decide. The wider impression the book gives is that Prideaux does quite an impressive job combining diligent scholarship with a spirited and imaginative writing style.

Prideaux's biography has the added dividend of following the story of Nietzsche's sister, and the development of the Nietzsche legend. Prideaux's observations concerning Elisabeth are imbued with a venomous humor. She illustrates with clarity and color Elisabeth's shameless efforts to exploit first the colonists of *Nueva Germania* (the 'racially pure' colony she founded in Paraguay), and then her brother's legacy. She conveys the inherent narcissism which motivated Elisabeth to portray Nietzsche as a living god, and to enlarge her own importance as his *Pythia*. Prideaux's judgments are sometimes sharp and witty, such as her characterization of one of Elisabeth's vacation letters: "Unfortunately, Von Moltke caught a cold while taking a trip on the lake. 'To the general dismay of all our party, [he] died,' Elisabeth noted, but this did not long dent her cheeriness; 'What happy and cloudless days were these three weeks in Lugano!'" (p.87). At other times she is appropriately damning of Nietzsche's sister, likening her and her entourage to the tarantulas Nietzsche employed as a motif in *Zarathustra*. Most who are familiar with how much work was required to revive Nietzsche's reputation after Elisabeth's distortions will not feel Prideaux unjustified in her passionate assessments. There are even a few unsent drafts of letters Nietzsche wrote to his sister (*KGB* III.5, p.218-20; p.237-8) in which he himself condemns Elisabeth with surprising malice, designating her as "superfluous," informing her that "the hair-raising idea came to me that you have understood nothing, nothing of my illness," and calling her his "former sister."

It is rare to find a scholar who writes a biography so aligned in terms of style with what their subject would have wished. Genius may necessitate at least a little madness, and Prideaux beautifully captures something of both, giving us an intimate and unique take on the Nietzsche legend.