

The festival represents bookloads of opportunity for authors

# Gibraltar LITERALLY



Lord Byron thought it ‘detestable’, Coleridge found it suffocating, Anthony Burgess labelled it ‘an emblem of waste and loneliness’... Writers who saw the Rock in its grey garrison days didn’t have many good words to say about it. If only they could return to earth for next month’s Gibunco Gibraltar Literary Festival to see it now! It would be a treat for the festival’s expected 50+ authors and hundreds of book fans to meet these literary legends and hear them eat their words!

WORDS BELINDA BECKETT PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID CUSSEN AND COURTESY OF THE GIBRALTAR GOVERNMENT

It’s that time of year again when there’s autograph potential on every street corner in Gibraltar. From November 12-15, over 50 renowned and best-selling authors will descend on the Rock to sign copies of their new books and give gripping talks in iconic buildings. This year you might spot Dame Esther Rantzen of *That’s Life* fame shopping in Main Street, or a party of university professors touring Gibraltar’s own groves of academe – the new university at Europe

Point. Authors love to mingle, listen and observe – it might make a plot for their next novel. For one long weekend, top writers will almost become part of the fabric of the city, whether that’s enjoying a waterfront drink at Ocean Village, strolling in splendid Commonwealth Park or sampling Gibraltarian cuisine, written about in three new books since the Gibraltar Literary Festival first started, and counting... Many authors visiting Gibraltar

have been similarly inspired over the centuries although, in Daniel Defoe’s case, not by the food. The *Robinson Crusoe* author didn’t think much of the grub although, as he was writing a pamphlet on the 13th Siege (1727), when commodities were scarce, it’s no surprise he found the ‘mutton from the Barbary Coast poor thin stuff without any fat’ and the wine, though ‘cheap at five pence a pint,

so miserably bad that in England we should have thought it dear at two pence a quart...’ John Drinkwater, the British officer who founded the Garrison Library and wrote about the 14th and last Siege (1779-1783) had other phobias: ‘The scorpions, centipedes and other venomous reptiles which abound among the rocks and the old buildings’.



Literary lineup: Novelists Kate Mosse, Joanne Harris and Lucy Atkins with critic Erica Wagner in the chair

## Monkey Business

Gibraltar’s Barbary macaques were a more appealing form of wildlife, motivating ‘Father of Science Fiction’ Jules Verne to pen *Gil Braltar*, an irreverent lampoon on the British garrison, thought very disrespectful at the time. ‘Gibraltar captured by the apes. A short story to write’, Verne noted in his diary as he rounded the east face of the Rock, marvelling that there was ‘no finer sight in the world!’ His satirical tale concerns a minor and demented Spanish nobleman with ape-like features called Gil Braltar who reckoned his name gave him a claim to the territory. He dresses up in a monkey skin and leads the macaques in a rebellion against the garrison and its ‘General MacKackmale’. In spite of this wicked story, which was only complimentary to the monkeys, the author of *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*, and *Around the World in Eighty Days* found much to admire in Gibraltar. He visited it twice, in 1878 and 1884, aboard his own luxuriously-appointed steam yacht. According to one of his biographers, he got rather drunk on the latter visit after consuming too many cocktails in the Officer’s Mess! Then, as now, the monkeys were a curiosity to all-comers and Mark Twain came up with his own theory for why they never leave Gibraltar: loyalty! He bases it on the fact that there are

no monkeys left high and dry in Spain today, as there must once have been when the Mediterranean dried out and then re-flooded (one of the reasons given for the presence of macaques in Gibraltar). ‘The hills in Africa, across the channel, are full of apes, and there are now, and always have been, apes on the rock of Gibraltar – but not elsewhere in Spain!’ he writes in his travel book, *The Innocents Abroad*. ‘The subject is an interesting one. Of course those apes could travel around in Spain if they wanted to, and no doubt they do want to; and so, how sweet it is of them, and how self-denying, to stick to that dull rock, through thick and thin, just to back up a scientific theory. Commend me to a Gibraltar ape for pure unmitigated unselfishness and fidelity to Christian principle.’ Twain based his best-selling travel book on a sea tour of Europe and the Holy Land with a group of American travellers in 1867. Stopping off in Gibraltar where they ‘rode on asses and mules up the steep, narrow streets’, Twain rhapsodised over ‘soft-eyed Spanish girls from San Roque’ and ‘veiled Moorish beauties from Tarifa’ but was less impressed by the view of the Rock from the isthmus: ‘suggestive of a gob of mud on the end of a shingle.’



CM Fabian Picardo at Blenheim with HRH the Duke of Gloucester (left) and Prof Andrew Lambert who will give this year’s Gibraltar Lecture



Young book fan introduces *Chocolat* author Joanne Harris to a Gibraltar monkey



Outgoing Governor Jim Dutton and his wife Elizabeth will miss this year’s festival



Steve Hogarth of British rock band Marillion set his autobiography to music last year







## Swarthy Moors & Spanish Guitars

No doubt Lord Byron would have sympathised. The poet and aesthete dismissed Gibraltar as 'the dirtiest and most detestable spot in existence' when he visited during a Grand Tour of Europe from 1809 to 1811. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, stopping off for five days in 1804, complained that the levanter cloud made him ill with 'a sense of suffocation' that caused his tongue 'to go furry white and his pulse quick and low'. The Rock reminded him of 'a rude statue of a lion couchant... the lion's head towards the Spanish, his stiffened tail to the African coast.' He was also fascinated by the locals. 'I could fill a fresh sheet with the description of the singular faces, dresses, manners, etc., etc., of the Spaniards, Moors, Jews (who have here a peculiar dress resembling a college dress).'

Novelist William Makepeace Thackeray was equally beguiled by the 'swarthy Moors, in white or crimson robes; dark Spanish smugglers in tufted hats, with gay silk handkerchiefs round their heads; fuddled seamen from men-of-war, and at every few minutes' interval, little squads of soldiers tramping to relieve guard at some one of the innumerable posts in the town.'

He also observed: 'From the Jolly Sailor or the Brave Horse Marine, where the people of our own nation are drinking British beer and gin, you hear choruses of *Garry Owen* or *The Lass I left behind me*; while through the flaring lattices of the Spanish ventas come the clatter of castanets and the jingle and moan of Spanish guitars and ditties.'

## Clockwork Soldier

One century later, conditions on Anthony Burgess's 'emblem of waste and loneliness' hadn't sufficiently improved to impress the author of *A Clockwork Orange*, who also noted the town's 'carious yellow stucco, wooden lattices shutting in bugs, stink, babies...'

Burgess was stationed in Gibraltar for three years during WW2 as a teacher in the Army Educational Corps, translating his experiences into a humorous novel. *A Vision of Battlements* chronicles the misadventures of the profligate and married Sergeant Richard Ennis ('sinner', spelt backwards) who indulges in drinking, womanising and general insubordination. The book is a colourful insight into garrison life as well as the character of Burgess himself, who admitted it was 'as autobiographical as a book can get'.

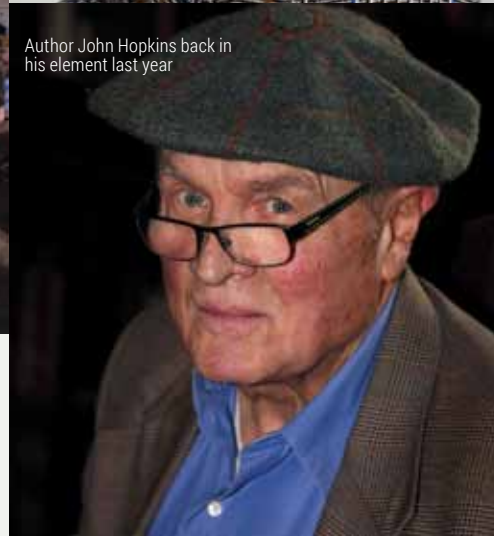
Burgess also wrote music, including an overture called *Gibraltar*. When he first arrived on the Rock, he was 'empty of music but itching to create. So I wrote this novel... to see if I could clear my head of the dead weight of Gibraltar.'

Authors seeing the Rock today, demobbed and transformed from military uniform to civvies, will have little reason to disparage it or dip their pens in poison. As Chief Minister Fabian Picardo told book fans in Britain when he introduced the Gibraltar Lecture at Blenheim Literary Festival in September, "Our history is as a garrison and fortress but our future is not to be confused with our impenetrable city walls. We are the opposite, in fact. We are an open and modern European city."

From the very first literary festival two years ago, organisers were delighted by the eagerness of top authors to spend a long expenses-paid weekend in Gibraltar. Cookery queen Madhur Jaffrey came twice, fulfilling a childhood ambition to visit Gibraltar since the liner bringing her family from India to London



La Lipman is back for a second year



Author John Hopkins back in his element last year

called in but didn't allow passengers off. Actress/comedienne Maureen Lipman will be coming back for second helpings this year. Broadcaster Peter Snow came for the first festival to revisit "a precious part of my life". He lived in Gibraltar for three years during the 1950s, when his father was Deputy Fortress Commander, and recalls happy days of "sailing, climbing, walking, exploring every corner of the Rock, and of course enjoying the night life which I remember as second to none." John Hopkins, author of *The Tangier Diaries* who made his debut last year, thought the festival "a terrific success. In Gibraltar I felt I was back in my element, speaking Spanish and soaking up those balmy, Mediterranean temperatures."

This year, there will be many new faces at the festivals as well as revisiting authors and other names still to be announced as **essential** went to press. But whoever else is on the literati list, one thing's certain – if you don't recognise at least one well-known writer in Gibraltar this month, book that appointment at Specsavers!

