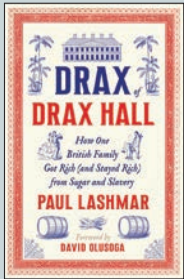


## Drax of Drax Hall

By Paul Lashmar, Pluto Press, London 2025

*Review by Christopher Roper, January 2025*



SOME 70 years ago my history teacher began a class by drumming his fingers on his desk top, and saying, “I want you to hear the squire on his horse, trotting through the eighteenth century, property, property, property.” The improvement in agricultural methods in this country, and the expanding wealth arising from

West Indian sugar plantations were two sides of the same coin. They formed the economic base for Britain’s global mercantile empire that extended through the eighteenth century, and the Industrial Revolution of the nineteenth century. In *Drax of Drax Hall*, Paul Lashmar tells the story, of how “*One British Family Got Rich (and Stayed Rich) from Sugar and Slavery*”, as a lens that illuminates many interwoven strands of British history from the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII down to the present century.

Two fixed points in his story are Charborough Park in East Dorset, familiar to anyone passing on the A31 from its long wall and elaborate gates, one crowned by a five-legged stag, and Drax Hall in Barbados, first settled by James Drax in the early 17th Century, where the Drax family still grow sugar in the 21st century. James Drax was not just another settler; he pioneered the use of enslaved Africans in growing and processing sugar, and embedded the concept of chattel slavery, unknown in British Law, under which the enslaved person loses all rights as a human being and is treated in the estate accounts as another form of livestock, alongside mules, horses and cattle.

James Drax calculated that it was cheaper to work enslaved Africans to death over five to ten years, and replace them with new imports, than to treat them humanely and lengthen their working lives. Drax’s methods, geared to the integrated production of refined sugar, rum and molasses, were innovative, highly efficient and hugely profitable, allowing the owner to “live like a prince,” according to a contemporary visitor. His system of production was widely copied and became the template for producing tobacco and cotton using enslaved African labour in the southern colonies of North America, underpinned by a refusal to recognise the common humanity of those enslaved.

The full name of the present owner of the two properties is Richard Plunkett-Erle-Drax, with the extravagant hyphenations charting matrimonial alliances, contracted when the family lacked a male heir, and the story of the Erles is as interesting as that of the Drax family and deeply

linked to Dorset. Walter Erle began his adult life as a skilful musician at the court of Henry VIII, when the dissolution of the monasteries opened a field of opportunity to the quick-witted and ambitious. At the beginning of Henry’s reign religious orders are estimated to have owned 25% of all England’s agricultural land, and with the expulsion of the monks, it all passed into private hands. Since the monks had been the main providers of education and medical care to the rural population, it’s not surprising that this massive transfer of wealth was not universally welcomed, and resisted in northern and western England.

Walter Erle accumulated land through a combination of grants from his royal patrons, speculative purchases from the Court of Augmentations, the office charged with selling off monastic lands, and an advantageous marriage to Mary Wykes, who brought Charborough into the family as part of a shared inheritance. By the time his son Thomas died in 1597, he owned 11,000 acres, much of it around Charborough. His descendants navigated the religious and political upheavals of the 17th Century with skill, siding with Parliament in the run up to the Civil War, but avoiding involvement with the execution of the King, ready to welcome the Restoration, assist in the suppression of Monmouth, but ready to support William III against James II both in England and Ireland. Several held seats in Parliament.

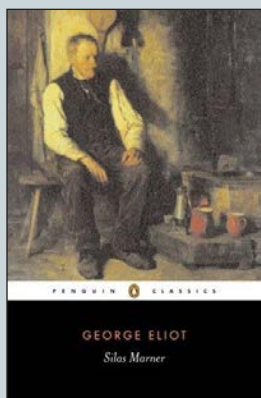
The dynastic twists and turns are complicated, but following them is eased by excellent family trees, and a well-structured index. Anyone interested in understanding our history, and particularly the history of Dorset, should read Paul Lashmar’s engrossing book, which brings both academic rigour and journalistic flair to bear on his material. I liked the way he lets the facts speak for themselves, calling in contemporary sources to buttress the narrative, without attempting to apply twenty first century value judgements to seventeenth century sensibilities.

He deals with the issue of reparations well, recognising its complexity, but not letting the Draxes off the hook, contrasting Richard Drax’s attitude with those of the Trevelyan and Lascelles families. In his Introduction, Paul refers to how little he and others of his generation (me included) learned at school about Britain’s role in developing the transatlantic slave trade, and its economic importance. He mentions at one point how Charborough Park and Jane Austen’s Mansfield Park could be interchangeable, and I recalled how Fanny Price’s request that her uncle, Sir Thomas Bertram, tell her about the slave trade, is met with “dead silence” from her family. *Drax of Drax Hall* makes a significant contribution to penetrating the curtain of silence.

One message I took from this admirable book is a quote from James Baldwin that heads the Introduction, “Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced”. Paul brings us face to face with our history.

*Published by Pluto Press in March 2025. Hardcover ISBN: 9780745350516. eBook ISBN: 9780745350523*





### ***Silas Marner* by George Eliot**

Reviews by John Davis

WITH all the emphasis in recent years on the works of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, the Brontës and Thomas Hardy, George Eliot is a Victorian novelist who often slips under the radar.

Eliot was really Mary Ann Evans who chose to write under a pseudonym because she believed it would increase her chances of getting her work published.

*Silas Marner* is one of the few books that I return to after previously reading which is why I recommend it here.

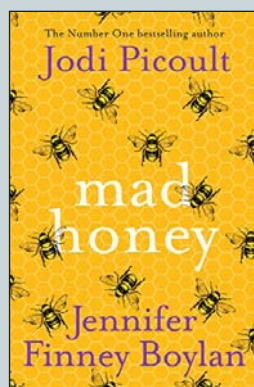
The title character is a linen weaver falsely accused of stealing money from the strict religious group to which he belongs. He has probably been framed by his best friend who makes matters even worse by marrying the woman Silas is engaged to. Banished from the sect, his life shattered, his trust in God lost and his heart broken, Silas re-locates to a village in rural Warwickshire where he continues to work as a weaver although living a more reclusive life.

He toils all hours. His work is highly skilled and the pay is good. He becomes a hoarder of the hard-earned coins, many of them golden, which he loves to count. One foggy night the coins are stolen and Silas sinks back into a deep depression.

Then, one snowy New Year's Eve, a two-year-old waif wanders into his cottage. The child's mother is found dead in the snow outside and Silas takes on the role of adoptive parent. He has been robbed of his material gold but symbolically has it been returned to him in the form of this golden-haired youngster who he names Eppie?

Other notable novels written by Eliot and worthy of attention include *Adam Bede*, *The Mill on the Floss* and *Middlemarch*, described by Virginia Woolf as "one of the few English novels written for grown-up people."

**Published by Penguin Classics**



### ***Mad Honey* by Jodi Picoult**

and Jennifer Finney Boylan

THERE were two reasons for choosing this title. The first was the fact that Jodi Picoult is a well-established American novelist I'd not sampled before. The second was to see how characterisation, narrative and plot come together when two authors wield the pen (or, more likely these days, the keys).

How do joint authors combine their talents? Do they sit around the table with coffee while one dictates and the other types, adding ideas of their own, or do they use elaborate display boards full of flow diagrams, photographs, arrows and memo notes like they do in crime detection programmes?

Whatever method this pair used it works. With an intricate plot, it's not the easiest read but persevere with the frequent time scale changes, the social issues that are raised like abuse and gender and more twists and turns than a mountain road through the Alps.

In essence, the lead character Olivia has escaped her abusive marriage and returned to her roots to take charge of the family beekeeping concern.

Her son, Asher, was six at the time but now he is fully grown and in his last year at high school. Kind, good looking and athletic, he is popular at school and has a girlfriend, Lily.

The action ramps up when Lily is found dead at the bottom of a flight of stairs and Asher becomes the local detective's prime suspect. Perhaps Asher has hidden things from her, so to what lengths will Olivia go in order to prove her son's innocence?

Footnote: On completion, consider whether the choice of the title has importance as a metaphor for the story as a whole. In actuality, mad honey is reddish in colour and is made from the nectar and pollen of rhododendrons. While sweet to the taste it can be toxic once digested.

**Published by Hodder**



# Selima Hill launches illustrated new poetry with exhibition in Ilminster

DORSET poet Selima Hill's latest book *The Blessed Virgin Mary of My Dreams* is an illustrated sequence of short 'poems in prose', published by Guillemot Press.

Awarded the Kings Gold Medal for Poetry in 2024, Selima lives by the sea in Dorset with her dog Edward.

To celebrate the launch of the book there is an exhibition of the original illustrations by Moby Hill at the Ilminster Arts Centre. Also on show are works in response to Selima poems by Rod hill (textiles) and Archie Stokes-Faiers (stone mason).

This month we feature a short poem from the collection with illustrations by Toby Hill.

## *First I'm Going to Have to Apologise*

*First I'm going to have to apologise and  
then, because it will have been so difficult,  
I'm going to have to ask you to leave; you're  
going to kiss the nape of my neck and walk  
away without another word.*

The exhibition will be at Ilminster Arts Centre, The Meeting Houses, East Street, TA19 0AN from 11 March - 4 April, Tuesday - Saturday 9.30 - 3.00.

