

Tom Stern

All Too Human

I Am Dynamite! A Life of Friedrich Nietzsche

By Sue Prideaux

(Faber & Faber 444pp £25)

Sue Prideaux's biography tells a familiar story. Born into a religious family, Friedrich Nietzsche is a brilliant young student of philology, not philosophy, and soon becomes a professor in Basel, bewitched by Schopenhauer's philosophy and by Wagner's music, personality and wife. He breaks with Wagner to commence a nomadic life, especially in the Mediterranean and the Alps, funded by a generous pension (this is one of the few stories you are likely to read in which the most humane, generous and open-minded character is the university administration). Nietzsche is a gentle, troubled genius, unlucky in love, plagued by miserable health, whose mild personality contrasts dramatically with his bombastic prose. He goes mad in 1889 and dies in 1900, at which point the evil sister, Elisabeth, seizes control of his literary estate and aids in his disastrous misappropriation by the Nazis. The apolitical, individualistic and cautious philosophy of a man who hated anti-Semites and German nationalists is converted, tragically, into frothing, war-hungry racist brutality – an error the storyteller seeks to correct. Prideaux's biography ends in the gardens of the Weimar villa in which Nietzsche died, from where the modern visitor can gaze down to the chimney of Buchenwald concentration camp. The message is clear: Elisabeth invites the Nazis round to dance on Nietzsche's grave, while he meekly turns within it.

Prideaux's telling is lively and engaging. She has a talent for setting the scene and a novelist's imagination, eye for detail and turn of phrase. Richard Wagner bellows Saxon-tinged obscenities into an echo spot and then roars with laughter when they find their way back to him. Bernhard Förster, Elisabeth's anti-Semitic husband, has 'unsettling' eyes, 'their irises almost transparent; the colour of glacier ice'. Lou Salomé, the brilliant, unrequited love of Nietzsche's life, 'plunge[s] into the role of intellectual femme fatale'. When she returns from climbing Monte Sacro with Nietzsche, they are 'as radiant and transformed as if they had been making love up there' (spoiler: they had not). There are some odd repetitions. Prideaux can be brisk and unsympathetic, especially when it comes to female characters. Overall, though, the book is nicely paced and compelling, especially when it gets to Nietzsche slipping away into madness.

No matter the telling, though: the tale is old, and it needs an overhaul. Much of it is oversimplified, skewed or inaccurate. Some boy-genius myths, long since busted, are trotted out here. Prideaux's Nietzsche writes a daring essay on Hölderlin, which to her shows that 'by the age of seventeen ... Nietzsche was exploring the idea of emancipatory insanity and the validity of the irrational'. But the essay was plagiarised and Nietzsche is likely to have read little or nothing of a Hölderlin work he professes to love. Nietzsche's

schoolmasters call him ‘the most gifted pupil’ that the school ‘has ever had’ – almost certainly a fabrication of his sister. Prideaux includes it, following in a long tradition of biographers who excoriate Elisabeth for her myth-making while unwittingly including some of the choicest myths. Nietzsche is described as discovering Schopenhauer, by chance, in a bookshop, at a time when Schopenhauer was ‘little known and less valued’ and when ‘universities were highly reluctant to recognise him as a philosopher at all’. Schopenhauer was in fact extremely well known and Nietzsche had taken philosophy classes at university in which Schopenhauer’s philosophy was discussed.

Perhaps it doesn’t matter if his biographer makes him sound more gifted and original than he was. He *was* gifted and original. But other parts of the old tale call for more delicate treatment. Setting aside their tabloid appeal, it is odd for a biographer to make so much of the Nazis’ interpretation of a philosopher who wrote nothing after 1888. If Nietzsche’s posthumous reception is to be part of his biography, it should include the bigger picture. Everybody has claimed him at one time or another, including Zionists, feminists, socialists and dry-as-dust professors of philosophy. Prideaux reports that, in Nietzsche’s school days, ‘one of his classmates cut up a photograph of him and made it into a puppet that said and did ridiculous things’. Manipulation of Nietzsche did not begin or end with the Nazis.

The myth of the evil sister is a case in point. Elisabeth was a naive, lying, politically repugnant, manipulative admirer of Mussolini and Hitler who forged some of Nietzsche’s letters to serve her personal interests. Nonetheless, she has been treated abominably, at least in so far as she has been linked, as she is here, with misappropriation by the Nazis of Nietzsche’s ideas. After the war, she was thrown under the bus by scholars eager to defend Nietzsche, at all costs, from the taint of Nazism. Prideaux follows suit. You would never guess, from her account, how insistent Elisabeth was that Nietzsche did not approve of anti-Semites and was not among them, and how she tended to play down Nietzsche’s overtly anti-Jewish statements as attempts to flatter Wagner and his circle. In 1932, she herself supported Hindenburg against Hitler in Germany’s presidential election.

Perhaps such nuance is beside the point in a biography that works well, and works best, as a ripping yarn which doesn’t spend too much time showing its historiographical underpinning. Nor should Prideaux’s book be read or assessed as an introduction to Nietzsche’s philosophy. That’s not to say that she shies away from discussing his ideas. When she does, she continues to follow the postwar consensus in two notable respects. One is her insistence on how utterly repulsed Nietzsche was by racism and anti-Semitism, and how absolutely horrified he would have been by the exploitation of his work by the Nazis. Prideaux’s Nietzsche leaves the family home having ‘spent a whole month enduring [his sister’s] insufferable racism’. Prideaux admits that his writings contain ‘ugly elements which could be developed further into incitements to racism and totalitarianism’, but one would be hard pressed to think of a white, 19th-century author whose writings, as a whole,

do not meet that cautious description. To put it bluntly, the real Nietzsche was much more racist than the one you find here. If he was indeed disgusted by Elisabeth's racism, then it was partly because he thought hers was the wrong kind of racism. Nietzsche's infamous remarks about the 'magnificent blond beast' are misread by Prideaux, whether intentionally or not, to make him sound more benign. While there is room for debate about the nuances of the term 'race' in his day, and while Nietzsche's racism was not Nazi racism, Prideaux offers more of an apology than an even-handed analysis.

Another staple of postwar Nietzsche studies is the claim that his philosophy is aimed at the individual only: that is, he was not political. Prideaux sticks to this line: 'the irony of his [political] appropriation is that he was only ever interested in man as an individual.' This might mean two different things. One is that Nietzsche, like any self-help guru, just wants you to be the best you you can be, whoever you are. Another is that he was interested in producing the right conditions for the emergence of great individuals, at the expense of others. The first interpretation is inaccurate, unless it is a normal thing for self-help gurus to tell doctors that they ought to shame certain patients into killing themselves for the benefit of those left behind. As for the production of great individuals: if one of the ways to do that is to control who breeds with whom, then Nietzsche begins to sound a little political after all.

The point is not that Prideaux should somehow have explained Nietzsche's infamously shape-shifting philosophy more accurately, all the while maintaining her rapid, easy prose. Nor does Nietzsche deserve a hatchet job, though one is probably due. But she could have remained neutral, leaving his philosophy and, especially, its use by the Nazis well alone. By sticking with the misappropriated genius narrative, she does not remain above this fray, but wades into it, firmly on one side.