

NEW BOOKS

By Zadie Smith

There was no one wilder than Rimbaud. Before he was twenty-one, the boy-poet had crossed the Alps on foot, worked as a longshoreman in Leghorn, fallen in love with Verlaine (and been shot in the wrist by him, and seen the older poet go to jail for two years), enlisted as a mercenary, slept on the streets, lived in a flophouse drinking absinthe daily, walked from Charleville to Paris—oh, and written *A Season in Hell*, in which he predicted his next move: “My day is done; I’m leaving Europe. The sea air will burn my lungs; lost climes will tan my skin.” Next he joined the Dutch Colonial Army and sailed to Java, where he soon deserted, vanishing into the jungle. He stayed a few months and no one knows anything at all about what he did there.

Jamie James, a former art critic for *The New Yorker*, has written a necessarily short, delightful book about this “lost Rimbaud.” *RIMBAUD IN JAVA* (Editions Didier Millet, \$14.95) was intended as a novel, but James, despairing of putting dialogue in the mouth of the protagonist, veered into non-fiction: a sensible decision. His alternate route is still a high-wire performance. It’s not an academic book and it’s not really a history either; nor is it—God help us—a “meditation.” It generally spares its readers the pointless formulation: *If Rimbaud had been here he most probably would have . . .* Instead it offers a more honest motivation for writing, stripped of the veneer of “professionalization”: love. As James puts it, this book is “an act of enthusiasm.”

He is obsessively enthusiastic about Rimbaud, and so, like his fellow devotees, is profoundly, perhaps irrationally interested in whether or not Rimbaud smoked opium out there in the jungle, or had a lover, or took the *Prins van Oranje* steamer or a local *phinisi* schooner on his return journey—all of which it’s impossible to know. Such speculations fascinate James, and he weaves the possibilities into his understanding of the poetry, and of the man. If it all sounds too whimsical at first (it did to me, reading the blurb), you soon realize that the best reason to stick with *Rimbaud in Java* is not for the facts or the fantasy but for the spectacle of reading someone write beautifully about something he finds, well, beautiful:

The glamour that has attached itself to Rimbaud’s odyssey-in-reverse, the reason some people care so passionately about reconstructing the itinerary of his ceaseless efforts to escape from home, partakes of the magnetic attraction of his poetry. It derives its potency from an essential quality of the enigma: the longer one ponders Rimbaud’s life, the more it can seem as if the pattern of riddles thrown in one’s way is a deliberate creation, a premodernist adumbration of a witty postmodernist gesture, rather than a life lived at hazard, like any other life.

You can always find a coffee-table-crushing cultural history, but I quite like the idea of learning, in a few hours, a whole lot about Java, Orientalism, Rimbaud, Victorian attitudes toward homosexuality, global shipping routes, and the Suez Canal. The book shines a torch down the well of the nineteenth century and illuminates a little patch on an inner wall near the bottom. Before, you had to trawl for miles through the stacks to figure out what you sought; now you know sooner, and know sooner what you’ll never find. Microhistory? If it’s the beginning of a trend I won’t complain.