

RIMBAUD**QX Magazine: Chris Barber****www.chrisbarber.eu****RIMBAUD**

I conceived to purge my mind of all human hope. On all joy, to strangle it, I pounced with the stealth of a wild beast.

I called to the executioners that I gnaw their rifle-butts while dying. I called to the plagues to smother me in blood, in sand. Misfortune was my God. I laid myself down in the mud. I dried myself in the air of crime.

I played sly tricks on madness.

A Season in Hell

Gay poets are ten for-a-rhyme, but Arthur Rimbaud is a queer poet, whose life and work reveal a towering queer icon, and most controversial modern poet. He was also a Decadent drug-user, people's revolutionary and gunrunner. His promiscuous relationship with Paul Verlaine, provoked a scandal; Rimbaud was called 'the French Oscar Wilde'. Now there's an explicit and revealing new biography by Stuart Robb.

Jean-Nicolas-Arthur Rimbaud was born in Chareville, France, in 1854. His father abandoned the family, leaving Arthur at the mercy of his tyrannical mother - a zealous Christian, who demanded strict obedience. Yet Arthur excelled as a young student and began writing verse. His first published poem was *La Revue pour Tours* (1870).

Rimbaud frequently ran away to Paris, living in poverty and writing poetry on his travels. When the Paris Commune was established, Rimbaud joined the revolutionaries on the barricades, where his suspicion of the Church turned to radical atheism. While continuing to develop his own poetic style, he avidly read occult and immoral literature – most importantly Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857), and *Poemes Saturniens* (1866) by contemporary Paul Verlaine. Arthur alienated himself from conventional society, lacing his poems with obscenity. Now he began to formulate his own philosophical doctrine, which dominates his later prose poems, proposing the poet should become a seer or visionary, through a '*derangement of all the senses*' (*Lettres du Voyant*). He sent poems to Verlaine, in Paris.

In 1871, Verlaine invited Rimbaud to Paris; but Verlaine had abandoned his radical lifestyle and married into the respectable bourgeoisie. The welcome was short-lived; this rude and disrespectful waif shocked Verlaine's pregnant wife, and her wealthy family. Rimbaud was utterly contemptuous of bourgeois values and hypocrisy, swore profusely, and vandalised their property. However Verlaine recognised Rimbaud's talent and was torn between two worlds. Unable to sacrifice his lust for Rimbaud, Verlaine rented a room, where sixteen year-old Rimbaud lasciviously seduced Verlaine (26) inaugurating a tempestuous affair. Having caused havoc between Verlaine and his wife, Arthur took-on Parisian café/salon society (established literati) many of whom were Verlaine's friends. The couple frequented trendy artist hangouts, causing trouble. They would get pissed on Absinthe while smoking hashish and opium; Rimbaud insulted and brawled with respected artists and poets.

When Verlaine plucked the courage to leave his wife, they moved to London. In 1872 they inhabited digs in Soho and Camden (there's a commemorative plaque: 8 Royal College Street). Mrs Verlaine pursued divorce proceedings, but Rimbaud was now pissed-off with Verlaine's sentimental narcissism and wanted the relationship to end.

Rimbaud and Verlaine returned to France separately in 1873 and Rimbaud began his most famous, epic poem: *UNE SAISON EN ENFER*. Verlaine grew suicidal and charged-off to Belgium, cabling Rimbaud to join him in Brussels. Rimbaud responded, finding Verlaine inebriated and wretched. Tempers frayed and Verlaine

produced a revolver, shooting Rimbaud in his wrist. Luckily, Rimbaud was more shaken than hurt, but Verlaine continued playing the drama queen. Amidst this chaos, Verlaine's wife appeared with divorce papers. Wife and beau tried to calm Verlaine, who threatened Arthur. Raving, Verlaine was arrested, tried and sentenced to two years hard labour; Rimbaud went home and finished *A SEASON IN HELL!* It radically breaks with poetic tradition; sections read like angry, polemical rants, drifting in and out of a nightmarish, hallucinatory world. When review copies reached Parisian critics, they were still shocked by the Brussels scandal and snubbed Rimbaud's work.

Notoriously, Rimbaud refused to write any more poetry. For the rest of his life, he lived as an adventurous vagabond and entrepreneur. Confined to a life of wretchedness and squalor, Rimbaud's health deteriorated. His last dangerous venture employed Arthur smuggling guns into Abyssinia, barely escaping alive. His leg became infected and was amputated. Months later, plagued by sweating fevers and adrift on laudanum, Rimbaud died in 1891.

In 1997 came Rimbaud and Verlaine - the Movie, better known as *Total Eclipse*, based on a critically acclaimed play. The film's director Agnieszka Holland previously made *Europa, Europa* (1991) a slick, enjoyable feature about foreskins and identity (or how a cute Jewish lad eluded the Nazis by joining the Hitler Youth); it was nominated for Best Foreign Film Oscar, which probably explains why Hollywood producers backed this Polish, woman director's film about a queer, European poet! David (*Naked*) Thewlis plays Verlaine and Rimbaud (believe it or not) is Leonardo Di Caprio – who's unexpectedly convincing in a role you wouldn't expect him to take. *Total Eclipse* begins absorbingly and zips along at-a-pace, lavishly recreating nineteenth-century Parisian *flaneur* culture, with meticulous *mise-en-scene* realism. The seduction scene between the unruly poets is stunningly erotic - almost pornographic. Since I doubt Di Caprio actually submitted to the apparent penetration, it must have necessitated numerous takes and cunningly sharp editing. Further along the film flounders somewhat, but most shameless queens will doubtless forgive its cinematic faults for the lingering one-legged, naked-butt shots of Di Caprio!

'Arthur Rimbaud has been one of the most destructive and liberating influences on twentieth-century culture. ... The first to live a homosexual adventure as a model for social change...'

RIMBAUD - Graham Robb's new biography, is a compelling and definitive *tour de force*, breathing new life into this often-misunderstood *muse*, for today's generation. Previous lies and embarrassed apologists for Rimbaud's radical queer lifestyle are debunked. What emerges is, *'an experimental self who saw homosexuality as a path of enlightenment.'*

Meticulously researched, Robb explores Rimbaud's affair with Verlaine, uncovering fascinating documentation, like the letter from a police-spy:

'Verlaine fell in love with Rimbaud, who shared his ardour. ... The two lovers have been seen in Brussels, publicly engaging in their amorous affairs. ... (Verlaine) bared his chest in front of his wife. It was bruised and tattooed with knife wounds administered by his friend Rimbaud. These two creatures were in the habit of fighting and lacerating each other like wild animals just so they could have the pleasure of making up again afterwards.'

Robb also examines poems, previously censored for their 'deliberate obscenity':

'Something like a joint statement was issued by Rimbaud and Verlaine. It took the form of a sonnet: "Sonnet du trou du cul". The quatrains, by Verlaine, are on top, Rimbaud's tercets underneath. ... The "Arsehole Sonnet". ...

*Dark and wrinkled like a violet carnation,
Humbly crouched amidst the moss, it breathes,
Still moist with love that descends the gentle slope
Of white buttocks to its embroidered edge.*

...

*Oft did my dream suck at its vent;
My soul, envious of physical coitus, made it
Its musky dripstone and its nest of sobs.*

[extract]

Candid insights into Rimbaud's other sexual adventures are revealed, '*Rimbaud boasted publicly of his homosexual relations*'. Apparently Rimbaud once met fellow poet Maurice Rollinat in a café, and described his latest exploits in a loud voice: '*I'm completely shagged out. X... fucked me all night long, and now I can't keep my shit in.*'

Oh la' la'!

Picador publishes RIMBAUD by Graham Robb.

Total Eclipse is now available on video.

A SEASON IN HELL and THE DRUNKEN BOAT (English translations: Louise Varese) published by New Directions.

Rimbaud's poems (French & English) are on the Internet: Web Rimbaud Association @

<http://www.ardennes.com/arthur/>

Chris Barber