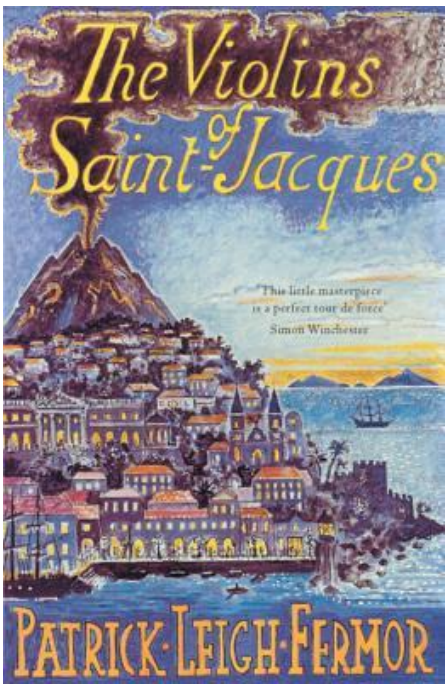

The Violins of Saint-Jacques

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On an Aegean island one summer, an English traveller meets an enigmatic elderly Frenchwoman. He is captivated by a painting she owns of a busy Caribbean port overlooked by a volcano and, in time, she shares the story of her youth there in the early twentieth century. Set in the tropical luxury of the island of Saint-Jacques, hers is a tale of romantic intrigue and decadence amongst the descendents of slaves and a fading French aristocracy. But on the night of the annual Mardi Gras ball, catastrophe overwhelms the island and the world she knew came to an abrupt and haunting end. The Violins of Saint-Jacques captures the unforeseen drama of forces beyond human control.
Originally published in 1953, it was immediately hailed as a rare and exotic sweep of colour across the drab monochrome of the post-war years, and it has lost nothing of its original flavour.

The Violins of Saint-Jacques Details

Date	:	Published May 1st 2008 by John Murray Publishers (first published 1953)
ISBN	:	9780719555299
Author	:	Patrick Leigh Fermor
Format	:	Paperback 139 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Travel, Literature, Historical, Historical Fiction, Classics, Fantasy, European Literature, British Literature, 20th Century, Novels

From Reader Review The Violins of Saint-Jacques for online ebook

S.P. Moss says

If you've read any of Patrick Leigh Fermor's travel writing, you'll know what to expect from his only published work of fiction. Wild, rich descriptions, a cinematic sense of place, colourful larger-than-life characters ('he combined the appearance of a Neapolitan barber with the manner of a prize bounder and the reputation of a crook') and the necessity to keep a dictionary close at hand.

This 'Tale of the Antilles' is related to the novel's narrator by Berthe, an elderly French lady, who, as a young woman in the early 1900s, had been governess to an aristocratic French family on the (fictional) island of St Jacques. The story concerns the last hours of the island before it is destroyed by the erupting volcano, and the setting is a carnival ball, throughout which a duel, an elopement and all manner of other intrigues ensue.

PLF regularly breaks rules and guidelines of modern creative writing - he does love his lists, and so do I: 'The rest of the room was a jungle of globes, astralabs, telescopes, albums, ancient maps, sheet music and old instruments of all kinds.' Needless to say, this style is not for everyone.

'The Violins of St Jacques' is magical, intoxicating, brilliant, gaudy, melodramatic and completely over the top. There. I've made a list of my own!

Al Bità says

This is a masterpiece of fiction which still reverberates vividly in my mind.

Fermor has created a world complete unto itself, so to speak, yet intensely linked to the dying days of the colonial experience. Set in the Caribbean, the author fills this short work with a plethora of exotic characters in one of the most exotic locations of the world. The language scintillates with rich, vivid and florid descriptions, many of which are daring in their audacity. One example, from relatively early on in the work:

"The day had ended in a flaunting sunset so apocalyptic — a Last Judgement, an apotheosis, an assumption, one could have thought — that each falling ray seemed a ladder for the descending Paraclete, and Berthe almost expected to see long-shafted trumpets advance along the slanting beams from the gold and crimson clouds. Then it suddenly died away into night."

There are many more.

More importantly, Fermor makes us care about the various characters, with all their foibles and their cares, their intrigues, their loves: we become concerned for them — it is not so much that we love them, but that they are so real and identifiable: we become caught in their intrigues; we wonder what will happen to them, how they will be resolved. It is precisely because we are concerned about them that the astonishing climax of the novel has such devastating power and a reverberation that lingers perhaps forever in the mind. The last few pages, from wherein the title of the work is taken, further cements this astonishing world in our minds, as a meditative piece of great beauty and sadness.

The writing and the descriptive power of the English language (only slightly tainted for modern sensibilities

with its occasional use of untranslated French) manages not only to capture all this wondrous creation, but also to be infused with hints and omens, perhaps a prophesy, of what is to come. Thus it also works on the level of metaphor, perhaps as a symbol for all human constructs.

Thanks, Wayne, for introducing me to this work.

Kris says

[including love interests found and lost, political tensions, a Mardi Gras ball, threats of a duel, and an elopement (hide spoiler)]

Jean Marriott says

I am a huge fan of Patrick Leigh Fermor's writing, I have read most of his stuff, however I was very disappointed with this book. It is full of text in French and as I cannot read French I was left mystified at time about the story. I could not engage with the families, he describes, who lived on the island of Saint - Jacques and their lives seem so remote and complicated.

Thomas Hübner says

http://www.mytwostotinki.com/?p=1017

Patrick Leigh Fermor was one of the greatest - if not the greatest - travel writers of the 20th century. The Violins of Saint-Jacques, the book I am reviewing here, is his only novel.

The narrator of the book spends part of his holiday on an Aegean island. He gets acquainted with Berthe, an elderly French lady who lives permanently on the island and who is a very respected figure there.

While dining at her home, the narrator gets interested in one of Berthe's paintings, a landscape of the Caribbean island of Saint-Jacques. Since the narrator visited this region not long ago, an interesting conversation starts during which Berthe begins to tell the story of her life that is closely connected to Saint-Jacques. She has lived during the most happy and exciting years of her life in this tropical paradise.

Having lost her parents in France at the age of twenty, young Berthe has practically nothing except her good education. An invitation from a relative in Saint-Jacques to work as a governess for his children is accepted by the penniless young woman immediately. The reception by her cousin, Count Serindan, and his family is warm and friendly and the children, just a few years younger as Berthe get soon very attached to the new arrival.

Count Serindan is the richest landowner of Saint-Jacques and also its mayor. Although in his political opinions a monarchist and reactionary, the Count is a charming and warm person who governs his estate (like his family) as a well-meaning father; his black workers - some are actually not so dark as a result of generations of extramarital activities of the Serindans - are treated well and are genuinely fond of the Count; he is also adored by his children and Berthe. (The mother is a somewhat absent person, ill in a vague manner

and either on holidays in Europe or withdrawn to her study room.)

The Count is not only a womanizer and philanderer, he is also a man of pleasure in a wider sense. He loves to organize house concerts - he plays several instruments very well -, he is an avid amateur actor, playwright and theater director; he also takes a strong interest in the newest literature from Europe. A kind of well-meaning renaissance ruler, transferred in time and space to the fin-de-siècle Saint-Jacques.

But even on a tropical island paradise not all is well. The count's oldest daughter falls in love with a do-no-good whose identity is only revealed later; the oldest son falls in love with Berthe; and the arrival of a new Governor of Saint-Jacques from France, a man with considerably different views on politics and a few other things as the Count, trigger the threat of some serious trouble brewing on the island. All is overshadowed by the increasing activities of the volcano towering over Saint-Jacques...

In order to calm down the political tension and reconcile with his opponent, the new Governor, the Count invites for a big carneval celebration that is meticulously planned. And indeed, in the light of the relaxed atmosphere of the Mardi gras, both opponents seem to admit that maybe they thought wrong about their rival; but during the feast, things are happening that put more than one serious threat to the island and the well-being of the Serindan family. (I don't want to spoil the story by telling too much.)

I have mixed feelings about the book. Leigh Fermor is one of my favorite writers of travel books. Also in this book he shows his excellent craftsmanship on many pages and in many details. The story is exciting, interesting and lively. The characters, especially Berthe and the Count will stay a long time with the reader. The setting on a tropical island and the description of a culture with which most readers will not be familiar, adds to the reader's entertainment.

Nevertheless, I had two problems with the book.

First - and this is the smaller problem - it was a bit too much for me: political crisis; threatening duel; secret love affair with kidnapping; suicide threat because of unhappy love; the lepers that turn up during the feast and almost provoke a disaster; the threatening volcano. I would have gladly done without one or two of these crisis that all culminate at exactly the same moment - and I bet that would have considerably added to the credibility of the story. Sometimes less is more and this seems also to include the writing of novels.

Second - and this is the bigger problem -: Leigh Fermor presents us the island as a kind of paradise, a world that is in the state of harmony, where more or less everything is in the right place (at least until the arrival of the new Governor).

But let us have a look at the real society of the Creole Caribbean islands at the beginning of the 20th century. The huge majority of the population was excluded from any rights to master their fate and to participate in the nominally democratic elections. Although de jure abolished, de facto the situation of the negro workers was a kind of slavery; and they lived usually in great misery. The picture that Leigh Fermor is presenting us is that of a reactionary imperialist: the paternalistic landowner provides entertainment and alcohol to his black subjects - and they are happy and adore him. For Leigh Fermor this is how life should look like and it is with obvious nostalghia with which he is describing this orientalist fantasy (interracial sex by mutual agreement included - the reality usually looked very different).

Having an oppressor who shows some human decency, reads books, loves music and is a theater addict, like the Count, doesn't make an oppressive imperialist society any better. Leigh Fermor was a man with conservative, if not reactionary ideas about society. It shows fortunately not (or not much) in his travel

books. But it flaws his otherwise very entertaining novel considerably.

Ilze says

Patrick Leigh Fermor's "The Violins of St. Jacques"
Patrick Leigh Fermor has been called the greatest travel writer of his time, and I can believe it on the basis of this book alone. It's actually a very short (140 pages) novel about a fictional Caribbean island in the French Antilles called St. Jacques. Fermor's descriptions of the island and its people and customs (especially an amazing description of Carnaval on the island) just made me want to go there immediately and see it for myself!

The book is so well written, with historical "references" to the island, even an extended quote in Latin by "an obscure Franciscan missionary" supposedly written in 1732, that at least one reviewer of the book on Goodreads thinks that the book is about a real island ;-)

I don't want to give away the plot of the story, but in the end the story turns into a philosophical parable to illustrate some of the greatest questions that confront us when we search for meaning in our lives and the fates the others. Regardless, the book, even taken purely as a work of fiction for one's edification and entertainment, is magnificent.

Myra Leysorek says

An odd little book, with a great excess of French, Latin and obscure vocabulary, allusions to things I had to look up on almost every page, which can be fun but also break the flow and seem show-offish.
For example, trigonocephalus. Unarmigerous.
But still fascinating, a story about a ball on a fictional Caribbean island, told to the narrator by an old woman he meets on an Aegean island.

I plan to read more by this author.

Vel Veeter says

A much different story for sure. In this short short novel an unnamed narrator is talking to an older French woman who reminisces on a dark night in her youth as both she and the English narrator look at a painting of a port town on a Caribbean Island. The novel then goes into long detail of a final party, a horrifying fire, and a servant class that has had enough.

The books is interesting but it’s not that much of a book. An exploration of a theme and an interesting set of narrative layering that puts at a distance from the action in the novel.

What’s also really interesting to me is that the Caribbean is just not the place where I tend to think of recent kinds of narratives in British literature. There’s a kind of layer of artifice between the reader and the novel and narrative that is the result of this knowledge. For how alienated but familiar JR Ackerley’s Hindoo

Holiday felt or any novel that takes place in British North Africa or Hong Kong or any of the other familiar haunts, the Caribbean just feels strange. In addition, this novel has a kind central European/Western Europran sensibility to it. Patrick Leigh Fermor was an incredibly continental figure, so this makes sense, and the general possessiveness over narrative that British figures in novels often take are absent here. I did like this novel, but it was slight and small, and as Patrick Leigh Fermor didn't write a whole lot of other fiction you can feel that experimentation working throughout.

Antenna says

In this short novel, written in a continuous chapter-free flow, an elderly artist name Berthe recounts to the narrator the dramatic climax of her time spent fifty years previously on the Caribbean island of Saint-Jacques, ruled as a benevolent dictatorship by the aristocratic expatriate French Count, by whom she was employed as a governess but came to enjoy the status of a respected virtual member of the family, his "confidant and counsellor". It took me a while to grasp that the island is outlined so sketchily on the map provided, because it is imaginary. This enabled me to overlook some of the worrying geographical inconsistencies (for a travel writer) of having lush forest grow so close to the active volcano forming the core of the island.

Although many devotees of the travel writer Patrick Leigh-Fermor may be delighted by the only novel he ever produced in a prolific writing career, I abandoned it mid-way and had to force myself to finish it. I concede that the second half is better, since it contains more dramatic action, when all the "hazards and sorrows ahead " begin to crack the surface of the idyllic bubble of exotic privilege which the author has inflated with his literary flourishes at full spate in the first half, largely devoted to the preparations and conduct of a grand Shrove Tuesday ball, no expenses spared.

I understand why some readers revel in Leigh-Fermor's Rococo prose, which I admit once aroused my curiosity to visit what proved to be the remarkable Austrian monastery of Melk. However, in this context, the verbosity is just too much to take. In the course of a lengthy description of the Count's background, Leigh-Fermor turns to the memorial slabs of his dead ancestors, the Serindans: "The orgulous record of their gestures…..their impavid patience in adversity…..the splendour of their munificence and their pious ends was incised with a swirling seventeenth-century duplication of long S's and a cumulative nexus of dog-Latin superlatives which hissed from the shattered slabs like a basketful of snakes". The "Serindan cognizance" crops up again: " a shield bearing three greyhounds passant on a bend on a field of cross-crosslets within a tressure flory-counter-flory". I found myself irritated by the author's continual flaunting of his erudition and addiction to flamboyant verbal excess, rather than sincerely seeking to create three-dimensional complex characters for whom one might feel real empathy.

The frequent inclusion of Latin tags, and dialogues in French, often with a Creole patois, plus an imitation of the Count's weak "r"s which the local people have innocently copied, often seem both pretentious and irritating if one cannot understand them. I may be underestimating his intention to write tongue-in-cheek as in the passage about ancient tree trunks, each "half following the spiral convolutions of the other like dancing partners in a waltzing forest; the rising moon entangled overhead in the silver and lanceolate leaves, had frozen these gyrations into immobility." – A "highly literary simile" which he attributes to Berthe. Perhaps I should excuse the dated character of a book written more than sixty years ago about a period now more than a century past. Yet, in his creation of a dawn of twentieth century period when privileged people still lived complacently in the conspicuous consumption of untrammelled luxury served with unquestioning loyalty by contented slaves, I have the uneasy impression that Leigh Fermor does not question the morality

of all this – it reads like a lost world for which he feels a sentimental nostalgia. An extreme example of this is the jovial acceptance of the Count's practice of "droit de jambage", a Leigh-Fermor conceit for "droit de seigneur".

Perhaps, I am taking it too seriously, and should simply laugh at a guest dressed as a swordfish, and a heroine in flight falling over an armadillo.

Chris says

July 2017 NYRB selection

This is the first book by Fermor that I have read, though I have a few of his books on my TBR ~~pile~~ mountain.

Fermor's only work of fiction is a tale of passion that reminds one of the Brontes and foreshadows in many ways Wide Sargasso Sea.

The plot of the short novel, novella really, is pretty simple and easy to call in many ways for most seasoned readers. The serious flaw is the depiction of former slave owners; it is very simplstic but considering who is telling the story not that surprising. The beauty of the novel is in the writing, in particular in the descriptive writing. Not only in the sense of the characters but also in the description of the island. The pacing of the novel, too, matches the plot.

Jim says

In 1902, the volcano Mount Pelée in Martinique erupted. The pyroclastic flows from the volcano engulfed the town of St. Pierre and killed some 30,000 people.

Some seventy-five years later, Patrick Leigh Fermor wrote a short novel entitled The Violins Of Saint Jacques about a Creole society that mounted a huge Shrove Tuesday ball on the island of Saint-Jacques -- a ball that reached a crescendo just as the volcano Saltpetrière blew its stack, and the lovely island and all its people sank forever into the Caribbean.

Left alone to tell the tale was a young woman who happened to be aboard a sailing ship looking back at the island's demise.It is she, who from the Greek island of Mitylene recounts the tale of the years she spent on Saint-Jacques, and of the island's weird fate.

As with everything of Fermor's that I have read -- and I have to date read all but one of his books -- there is a singular gemlike beauty to his prose. He is the author of sentences whose end you never hope to arrive at. There are exotic lists, words of great rarity and beauty, all put together to form this picture of a society that vanishes in one night, just as a spectacular fireworks display is answered by rumbles from Saltpetrière. Berthe, the narrator, muses on the disaster:

> I remember wondering, too, if there were any supernatural purpose in the island gathering its own together -- Sosthène, for instance, and Gentilien and the three Jacobean [that is to say, inhabitants of Saint-Jacques] sailors -- for this culminating holocaust; while the Caribs and I

> were allowed to escape.... In fact, there was no lesson, no consoling moral to be drawn. Except, perhaps, that although there may be a curious mutual magnetism between people and the things that happen to them in ordinary circumstances, these great tragedies (whether brought on by human agency or what is sometimes called the hand of God) spare and condemn with a lack of purpose that no law, divine, human or natural, can possibly rationalise. They are irrelevancies.

Within a page or two, the author/narrator -- presumably Fermor himself -- says that Saint-Jacques did not *quite* vanish without a trace:

> Last year when I was in Dominica and Guadeloupe, fishermen told me that anyone, crossing the eastern channel between the islands in carnival time, can hear the sound of violins coming up through the water. As though a ball were in full swing at the bottom of the sea.

Berthe had never heard this and is curiously gratified by the anecdote.

Fermor has written so few books -- all of them great -- that I am delaying finishing reading his *oeuvre* for a while yet. Because, when I do finish, I know I will have to start all over again. He is perhaps the greatest unrecognized author writing in English in the Twentieth Century.

Natch Greyes says

This was not, by any means, an easy read, but it certainly contained some of the most vivid descriptions of Carnival and a formal ball from the turn of the century (1900) that I've ever read. The build of the story - and the sudden tearing of it all down - was remarkable. This is one of the few stories that I've read that actually went from a middling and somewhat boring story to an incredible story in the span of a few pages. It's a novella, but it needs to be. The build-up to a larger story is vivacious, but the eruption of action (or is that the other way around?) which ends the novella is incredible.

Truthfully, I struggled with the language. I think most readers probably do. There is a dash of Latin, some French, and a fair bit of French-patois scattered throughout. Very rarely are these common phrases. More notably, the choice of English wording is so exacting that it's somewhat difficult to overcome. There almost isn't enough of the book to become familiar with the author's writing to begin to enjoy it, but the vividness of the descriptions overcomes much of that difficulty.

Nick says

A slight, but beautifully written, novel with just enough happening to justify the name. The characters never really develop beyond stock formulations, except perhaps for the narrator, an older woman whom the author meets in Greece one summer, and who tells the story of the Caribbean from many years before. It's a curious idea, and one that depends on a few set pieces -- a costume ball, a volcanic eruption -- for its drama. Fermor is rightly known for his travel books, especially the two concerning his fabled walk across Europe. This book doesn't threaten that legacy -- either way.

Jennifer S says

More of a novella than a novel, this is a long description of a Mardi Gras ball on an island in the Antilles, told 50+ years later by a woman who was serving as a young governess in the home of her distant relatives, the most prosperous family on the island. As with many books written in a different era (this one in 1953), it is long on description so it takes a bit of patience. There is some wonderful prose - I particularly liked this description of the wine cellar:

"Now the count gazed with the tenderness of a nurse at the alcove where, like sleeping children who must come to no harm, the fabulous clarets, uncorked with almost alchemical skill, lay at rest; cradled there for the last few hours, sleepers of Ephesus all gently waking, they mingled with the Antillean air the quiet breath they had held since their infancy by far-off castles on the banks of the Garonne."

Slow to get into, but once the ball was underway, the pace picked up and I enjoyed the last half of the book.

Lynne King says

The Serindan house was not only the biggest in Plessis, but the highest perched. It was islanded among ascending and descending terraces, and the balustrades were adorned with posturing graces and marble nymphs. Beyond their elegant barrier, the forest began: a huge wilderness of tangled ceibas and balisiers and tree-ferns that only halted a slanting six miles beyond at the jagged crater of the Salpetrière. The day had ended in a flaunting sunset so apocalyptic – a Last Judgement, an apotheosis, an assumption, one could have thought – that each falling ray seemed a ladder for the descending Paraclete, and Berthe almost expected to see long-shafted trumpets advance along the slanting beams from the gold and crimson clouds. Then it suddenly died away into night. The volcano had been burning for the last week or so with unaccustomed vigour. Now it hung in the dark like a bright red torch, prompting the island wiseacres, mindful of the terrible eruptions that had coincided over a century ago with the fall of the Bastille to shake their heads. But such renewals of activity and such gloomy presages recurred every few years. Each minor overflow of lava, heralded invariably by showers of ashes and an overpowering heat, was always halted by those intervening canyons known as "les chaudières" - a grey desert region of fumeroles and volcanic gas and half fossilised trees. "Ga'dez Salpetwière!" the negroes said joyfully to each other; "li pas faché", li fait bomba pou' Ma'di Gwas, comme nous", and the carnival drums beat vigorously all over the town. There had been not a drop of rain for many days – a rare event even in this dry season – and the trade winds had ceased altogether. The heat was appalling.

Now what do you look for in the blurb of a book? Presumably, unless you are eclectic of course, you will stay within your own genre? Is it the title that intrigues you or the cover? A known author? A review on the blurb by an unknown author that unexpectedly appeals to your psyche?

Well I consider myself an eclectic reader. I love biographies, travel books, fiction, reference books and dictionaries but I like to be a wildcard from time to time as it appeals to my adventurous and curious side.

This book for me has three things in its favour:

Firstly, the title: Now what is the significance of the violins? Surely there has to be some mention of it in this

one hundred and thirty nine page novella? Mentioned rather vaguely a couple of times yes and then a few pages from the end of the book, it is explained and my, did it bring tears to my eyes.

Secondly, well the cover showed a painting by the English painter John Craxton of a volcano, with smoke billowing out from it (I don't think that they are flames), with a port at the bottom and many people cavorting around. There are several palm trees to the right and a schooner can also be seen. It is sunset. John Craxton *was sometimes called a neo-Romantic artist but he preferred to be known as a "kind of Arcadian"*. Plus there is a tiny review added under the title by Simon Winchester which succinctly states: *This little masterpiece is a perfect tour de force*, with which I agree wholeheartedly.

Finally, the fact that this book was written by Patrick Leigh Fermor, *He was widely regarded as Britain's greatest living travel writer during his lifetime*. I was interested to read in a bio on him that he was a good friend of one of my favourite authors, Lawrence Durrell; truly a case of *what goes around comes around*. And it then set me wondering if I could obtain a signed first edition of this travel writer's only novel. Imagine…

The plot actually reads like a romance and I'm certainly not of that inclination but when you have an acclaimed travel writer, whose descriptive prose is heavenly and then to match it with unsurpassed fiction, well you have it all in my opinion.

Basically, it is the story of a French impoverished aristocrat called Berthe de Rennes, who is recounting the story of her youth there in the early twentieth century to a young Englishman, who she met on an Aegean island one summer. I should mention that Berthe was now a woman of seventy and still a remarkable individual.

In the 1890's she was offered the position, which she readily accepted, as governess to the children of distant cousins of hers, the Serindans, and spent six years living on the fictitious island of Saint Jacques in the Caribbean. The Count and his wife were a charming couple, as were the children, but it soon becomes apparent that this is *a tale of romantic intrigue and decadence amongst the descendants of slaves and a fading French aristocracy*.

But there are delightful quirky instances studded throughout this novella: the untranslated French sentences; the fact that the local Creole population, including the Serindans, could not pronounce the "R" in the words; the ash from the volcano known as white snow; a stumbling block proving to be an armadillo, to quote just a few.

At the Mardi Gras ball, it all happens here and the drama, so superbly written, begins to gradually unfold and from this point on I found I couldn't wait to turn to the next page. Then lepers came into the equation, which rather took me aback. But then being as contrary as ever, when I arrived at the penultimate page I had no desire to turn it as I wished to continue savouring this work.

The only negative aspect of this book that I can comment on is that it is far too short!

Nevertheless, when I read the final sentence of this remarkable gem of a book, a feeling of elation swept over me. I had never believed in miracles before but now I know they exist. I don't exaggerate either I can assure you. I had finished my fourth *perfect* novel within a month, the other three being those by the inimitable John Williams.