

MEMOIRS

Revels recalled

RICHARD DAVENPORT-HINES

Michael Peppiatt

FRANCIS BACON IN YOUR BLOOD

A memoir

416pp. Bloomsbury Circus. £25.

Walking through Les Halles in the 1970s, Francis Bacon skidded in a pool of blood and clutched at a cask to steady himself. Peering inside, he saw that the vessel was full of calves' heads with jellied eyes and severed necks ending in a dried bubble ruff of lymph and blood. Stimulated, he examined the next container, which held a gratifying mess of foam-specked tongues resembling disembodied screams. Bacon jabbed one of his thick, meaty fingers at a nearby carcass of beef. "Life's just like that", he told his acolyte Michael Peppiatt standing beside him. "We're all on our way to becoming dead meat." Bacon was the artist of gristle and offal rather than of delicate cuts. He was also a man who kept his pockets crammed with banknotes, crushed fivers into the hands of waiters whenever his wine glass was refilled, favoured flash restaurants patronized by expense account parvenus and boasted, "I've bought my way through life". The gruesome nihilism, the grasping of chances, the quick profit from *actes gratuits*, and the flourishing improvisations in a fractured and destructive environment – how right Keith Vaughan was to call Bacon a "spiv-existentialist".

Michael Peppiatt (then finishing his second year as a Cambridge undergraduate) first met Bacon in a Soho bar in June 1963. Usually Bacon surrounded himself with alcoholic toadies, rough trade and undisciplined artistic tinkers. Peppiatt was none of these: a *coureur de femmes* whose one attempt at homosexual experimentation lasted about four seconds, he was nevertheless taken into Bacon's train, joined his revels, watched his private abasement and public triumphs, and apparently noted his table talk over twenty-nine years. In time, Peppiatt became an editor of *Le Monde's* culture section, Paris-based arts correspondent of the *New York Times*, an exhibition curator

and expert on Giacometti. He has produced several books on Bacon, including a biography in 1996 which scrutinized the paintings, analysed Bacon's creative impulses and recorded (in his subject's phrase) "the gilded gutter life" of big earnings, alcoholic squalor and masochistic queer sex. Peppiatt's new book is an intimate memoir of two intense and interlaced lives, his own and Bacon's, which augments rather than duplicates his previous efforts.

One caveat should be made about this punchy, gutsy, jumpy memoir, full of gossip, binges, nausea, bruises, stained sheets, punchlines and death wishes. It brims with long quotations, sometimes extending over pages, which Peppiatt says that he recorded in diaries and *cahiers*. These are unsourced and dateless, though, and often relate to marathon drinking bouts of which reliable detailed recall must be doubtful. The aggression, the gambling against the odds, the power plays, the aesthetic disquisitions and existential rants are brutally credible in their substance. Even if the long reconstructed dialogue after the booze-and-pills suicide of Bacon's companion George Dyer lacks exact verisimilitude, it is not worthlessly false. But alert eyes will spot recurrent moments of legerdemain and feel sure that sometimes Peppiatt's refashioned memories must be faulty. Sonia Orwell, for example, is quoted as enthusing in 1963 about "the publisher Nikos Stangos who's delightful and a very talented American writer called David Plante". Stangos worked in the Greek diplomatic service until 1967; talented or otherwise, Plante did not publish a novel until 1970. It makes one doubt the further tale of Peppiatt being fellated, while washing up dinner dishes, by Sonia Orwell as Cyril Connolly paced in the corridor outside.

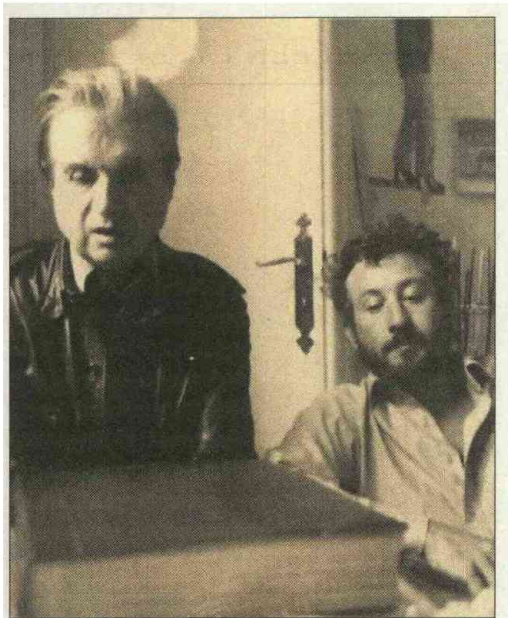
There would have been no difference to Bacon's art or to the careening trajectory of his life if he had not met and trusted Peppiatt. The latter, though, was propelled by his friendship with Bacon from a life of dabbling enthusiasms, with the likely destiny of becoming either a frustrated arts administrator or niggling columnist, into being a watchful fast-lane hanger-on. It was because of Bacon's introductions that Peppiatt was hurtled around London



in Lucian Freud's murderously accelerating Bentley, welcomed into the Marlborough Gallery for privileged viewings of new work, lunched at Wilton's with the Duke of Devonshire, overheard dealers in the Connaught bar peddling an Andrea Mantegna to Heini Thyssen, and sat on the adjacent banquette to Marlene Dietrich in a Paris bistrot and heard, not Hollywood star anecdotes, but a dull, drunken grumble, repeated like a stuck record, "My husband never let me eat hot dogs".

Bacon was sexually submissive but alcoholically dominant. He incited weaker cronies (including his bedroom masters) to drink themselves to death. His money created the private hells in which these miserable sots lurched and perished. The booze, beatings and buggery raise an easy journalistic sensation, but they surely mattered less to the form of

Bacon's art than his life's financial nexus. He started his career as a rent boy, loved wads of cash in his pocket, savoured the power of money and was supremely an artistic mercenary in an epoch when huge fortunes could be made by the great dealers. It is the created market demand and the price manipulations – not the delinquency – that make Bacon interesting. Like the black market profiteers whom he knew in post-war Soho, he flouted rules, supplied needs and defied conventions to make money. Like any spiv with contraband goods to peddle on the street he was encouraged by adversity and saw the opportunities in deprivation and deformity. "I'm optimistic about nothing", Bacon told Peppiatt. "Even though I don't believe in anything I'm rarely depressed because my nervous system is filled with optimism." There speaks the quintessential spiv.



**Francis Bacon and Michael Peppiatt
by David Hockney, 1975**