

The Best of Men by Claire Letemendia.
Jonathan Cape 2009.

Claire Letemendia took ten years writing this novel, her first, and having finished it I can only express the hope that she produces her second in much less time, because I don't want to have to wait a decade to read it!

The Best of Men is set in 1642, its complex plot focussed on events surrounding the English Civil War which was to cost King Charles 1st his head. Letemendia's hero is a dissolute but honourable young aristocrat, Laurence Beaumont, son of an English peer and his aristocratic Spanish wife, who has returned to England after military service abroad and as a result of a theft in a Dutch brothel, finds himself inexorably drawn into a plot at the very heart of the Royalist cause.

Among the other characters in the book, some real others fictional, is the marvellously seedy Dr Seward, Laurence's former tutor at Merton College Oxford, the exotic Isabella Savage with whom, in her determination and willingness to flout convention, I suspect the author feels some empathy, the evil spy master Colonel Hoare and the hapless Sir Bernard Radcliff.

Claire Letemendia's story has elements of the 17th century romp – and very enjoyable they are too – but it has a complex plot that is exceedingly well constructed and more than conveys a sense of what life was like at the time as well as the pressures and intrigue that swirled around a royal court struggling to re-take control of the country it believed itself born to rule.

The Best of Men would make a great present for anyone who enjoys historical fiction as well as lovers of plots that keep the reader guessing almost till the last page.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh