The Duel – Pakistan on the flight path of American power by Tariq Ali.
Simon and Schuster 2008.

Several highly informative, and often disturbing, books about Pakistan have been written since 9/11, looking at, inter alia, the covert development of its nuclear capability, its political structures, the relationship between its security service, the ISI, and the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, and its internal cohesion. To this burgeoning bibliography must now be added the Duel, by the veteran radical activist and Pakistani-born journalist Tariq Ali.

Ali writes as a long time observer of the land of his birth, and as someone genuinely concerned with and for its welfare, and these are combined with his personal history, activism within Pakistan and outside it, and intimate personal knowledge of many of the key players in Pakistan's troubled history.

The Duel is actually the third book that Ali has written about Pakistan over the last thirty years, and it is probably the most caustic and gloomy. He reviews the history of the country, its troubled origins – when so many poisonous seeds were sown – its dysfunctional governance, both civilian and military, its influence on and manipulation by radical Islam, and its multi-faceted relationship with the United States, especially but not exclusively since the terrorist assaults on America of 9/11.

The final chapter, Can Pakistan be recycled?, looks towards the future and considers whether Pakistan has what it takes, and the infrastructure it needs, to continue in a viable form; as he mulls over the inadequacies of civilian rule and the terrors of military dictatorship, the threatening food crises and the instability in the tribal areas, Ali is far from positive, yet the lines of the poem with which the book ends have a glimmer of optimism, though having read this excellent book it is hard not to see it as a triumph of hope over history.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh