# <u>Book Review</u>

#### By JOHN SCANLON

# Courses For Horses: A Journey Round Racing In Britain and Ireland

Nicholas Clee

Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 2023

ANY OF our readers might be familiar with the previous work of Nicholas Clee, whether as the author of the excellent Eclipse: The Story of the Rogue, the Madam and the Horse that Changed Racing or in his contributions about books for the Times, the Guardian, the Observer and the Times Literary Supplement.

In this, his latest work, Clee reports on his experiences in visiting 30 or so racecourses in Britain and Ireland. Effectively, it's a diary of his experiences in visiting a personal selection of tracks from late December 2019 to July 2022. Travelling largely by public transport, he reflects on the accessibility of some racecourses, the welcome he received, the people he encountered, the facilities he enjoyed (or, in some cases, of which he lamented the lack) and the whole experience of 'a day at the races'.

He reflects on the availability of food and drink options, and isn't afraid to call out substandard fare. He is particularly harsh on an offering of curry at Ayr racecourse, which was so bad it seemed to colour his impression of the town as a whole –'the dismal experience of trying to swallow and keep down a



few mouthfuls of this meal seems to be a symptom of the more depressing aspects of Avr'.

Given the format of the book, his views are of course subjective, and in this lies the weakest aspect of the book. Happily, there is another more positive aspect to the project; Clee skilfully weaves into the narrative of each visit histories of the racecourses and introduces

entertaining and informative rehearsals of some of the issues facing the sport in recent times. He interviews racecourse officials, commentators, Grand National-winning jockeys and leading trainers, and offers views on racehorse welfare, the whip, alterations to the Grand National, prize-money, and the new stand at the Curragh. It's all told in a confident style and laced with a gentle sense of humour.

Although the book doesn't set out to rate the courses he visits, Clee can't resist naming York and Chester as his two favourite racecourses, and in talking about the Knavesmire track he also discusses some major figures in racing history in Sir Charles Bunbury, Lord George Bentinck and Admiral Henry John Rous.

Given that the book includes a useful glossary of racing terms, I'm tempted to suggest that this book would be ideal for someone who is relatively new to racing but anxious to know more about the sport and the industry that surrounds it. It also includes some fascinating pearls of wisdom; in discussing Doncaster and the St Leger, Clee asserts that no St Leger winner has sired a Group 1 winner for 25 years.

This book makes for an interesting and enjoyable read. It might perhaps have been enhanced by the inclusion of photographs, but for all that readers will find much to enjoy.



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