

TWO ASSASSINS

THE BEAT SCENE REVIEW SECTION

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"Two Assassins" is an extraordinary two-in-one book, just out from Moloko/Sea Urchin. One book is by the eminent Oliver Harris and the other by an equally eminent polymath, the Iranian Farid Ghadami - it is structured as a double-beginner... you read one and turn over and around to start again the other. Both books deal with the enigmatic non-skeddo heretic, Hassan Sabbah aka Hassan-i-Sabbah aka Le Grande Maitre des Assassins who founded a sect of erudite schismatics who in turn recruited a loyal band of fedayeen around them as protecting hit men. The latter did the killing, the former did the thinking. Neither it would seem did any smoking. Or drinking. That they did indulge in such un-islamic behaviour was a fake news campaign by enemies. (nb The fedayeen are not the same as the fellaheen that Kerouac celebrated.) The sect was around for 200 years and it wasn't until the Mongol hordes of Gengis and Hulagu Khan ascended and laid seige and terror to the castles that the Hassan dynasty was pretty well wiped out and his famous Alamut library plus contents plus all fixtures & fittings completely destroyed. Only pottery fragments and worn coins remain. No Hassan bones or Hassan books. This explains why Hassan is such a mystery easily mined for golden romance and slander.

A lot of this nonsense is in a book by a Betty Bouthoul that changed its 1936 title from *Le Grande Maitre des Assassins* to *Le Vieux de la Montagne* in 1958. Gysin introduced the book to Burroughs and seemed to think it told the whole story. He vouched for Betty personally (is there anyone Gysin didn't know?) as a society portrait painter and the husband of a military historian/art corporation lawyer called Gaston. Gaston specialised in polemology - the study of conflict. Strangely, his books don't appear as referenced in Betty's.

Her book title change is covered in forensic and fascinated detail by Oliver, who tells us he was first sucked into the vortex when he visited Burroughs in Lawrence, Kansas at the age of twenty-three [that 23's in BOLD because it means something]. There are numerous other whys and wherefores to the many incantatory appearances and invocations of Hassan and his happy band of blissed-out sassy, sallying assassins and the detail is almost overwhelming. In places it is as if the Burroughs's text is on a couch in therapy like a patient under analysis who for years had said little but "Ice cream" only to be released when the therapist brainstorms himself and asks if he was really saying "I scream". Exit patient smiling to paradise.

Don't let this daunt you - get stuck in like a dagger and stay there till all the blood runs out. It is worth it. You will be in heaven.

And talking of detail, Oliver does compare the texts between both editions and the few differences are commented on. Most changes seem to have been to make the book shorter and not to make it different. One that Oliver doesn't comment on but I will: when Hassan was first establishing a base for his followers, they came across a castle that wasn't friendly enough so they stayed away. Even so they made some conversions, amongst whom was one of the castle's servants, a young lad called Buzurg-Humid. He had great looks and seemed pretty sharp. Hassan took him with him when they all turned back to Damegan. Abou-Ali and the ephebe could hardly keep up... In the 1959 version the 'ephebe' is lost, maybe to tone down the homo-erotics. But the word actually derives from a particular kind of ancient military service. My French Academy dictionary says it is: Grec. antiq. a youth of 18 yrs of age. Well, if you adjust for different life spans, metabolisms, diet, ages of graduation, consent and coming 2k yrs ago then I make 18 compute to 23 .., now that's what I call a Greek antic!!

A lot is made of the quote that introduces "Minutes to Go":

"Not knowing what is and what is not knowing I knew not".
Hassan Sabbah's "Razor"

You know you're in for a rough ride when an ontological banality masquerading as a 12C quote from a tract by a mysterious charismatic is portrayed as a gnomic utterance; but, as Oliver Harris reveals, it was in fact dreamed up by our boulevard charlatan with tight trousers, Brion Gysin.

And the ride gets rougher than a donkey's hobble up a mountain track to a ruined castle sixty mile north of Tehran. According to the map in the back of my copy of Willey's "The Castles of the Assassins" - a map Gysin must have seen when he tells us he consulted the author - this shows quite clearly the hill top fort of Shir Kuh nestling on the 4000 foot contour whilst Gysin tells us the top of Shir Kuh is 12000 feet - which it is, well, the one 400 miles south of Tehran is and is probably the one in the *Nagel* guide Gysin had used to flesh out detail for his piece for *Rolling Stone* called "A Quick Trip to Alamut". I doubt if the piece was rejected because blissed-out muso hippies would have got lost if they had read it; more likely it was because it is a pretty awful piece of writing.

The brilliance of this *Moloko* publication is how well Farid Ghadami's story complements its counterpart. Farid is an Iranian with roots that go back as far as Alamut itself - he is one of the few remaining

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