'Out of the Gloom Comes Salvation'

*Goth*. *A History*, Lol Tolhurst (242pp, hbck, Quercus)

Were The Cure ever Goth or were they just miserable bastards? Was their music simply a rejoinder to the high speed (and speed-high) energy of punk? Music for and by those who'd rather lie in bed mumbling rather than wake up? Music made by those who revelled in their own depression? When exactly did Robert Smith decide not to comb his hair? And when did his make-up get so smudged, allowing the music press to decide that because of The Cure and the by-then-cheesecloth-bedecked Siouxsie & The Banshees, Goth was a thing?

Tolhurst's book is a strange mix of band biography and autobiography, a beginners guide to Goth and a fan's review of other music. The Cure became the band of that name in 1978, recorded a first album they didn't like the year after, then went on tour as support to the Banshees. By 1979 they 'were neophytes to the glamourous and sometimes riotous world of London's punk rock scene' and recorded a stunning trio of albums: *Seventeen Seconds* (1980) *Faith* (1981) and *Pornography* (1982). The tour which followed was, according to band biographer Jeff Apter, when 'the band [...] first adopted their signature look of big, towering hair, and smeared lipstick on their faces.'

Smith then became a fill-in Banshee and it was only with record company persuasion that he and Tolhurst recorded 'Let's Go to Bed', the first of their successful pop songs. This new focus on witty lyrics and accessible tunes brought the band fame, fortune and alcoholic addiction to Tolhurst, who was kicked out of the band in 1989 after their *Disintegration* album, which many (including me) saw as a return to the form of their defining trilogy. Tolhurst played in a couple of unsuccessful bands, played again in some reunion shows with The Cure in 2011, and published a book, *Cured: The Tale of Two Imaginary Boys* in 2016. He also has a podcast series, *Curious Creatures*, examining the legacy of post-punk, which he makes with Banshees drummer Budgie.

The earlier book explains why The Cure history is not a more significant part of this new volume. Instead, Tolhurst rounds up a number of artists for several chapters about the origins of gothness and what he thinks of them. 'The Poetry of Pain' has the usual suspects Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, Camus and Sartre, along with T.S. Eliot whom Tolhurst brands a 'Modernist Goth'. I imagine Eliot is turning in his grave and Tolhurst doesn't make much of a case for this peculiar inclusion.

Chapter Three, 'Prototypes', also contains some strange choices. Teutonic chanteuse, film star, ex Velvet Underground singer and heroin addict Nico? Fair enough. Mascara-clad pantomime frightshop Alice Cooper? If you must. New York electronic psychorockabilly confrontationalists Suicide? Great band but I'm not convinced. Scott Walker? Nope. David Bowie? Not really. Marc Bolan? Oh come off it, now you're just being silly. He was a pixie not a Goth.

The people we might truly blame for Goth music are highlighted in the single chapter which makes up Part Two of the book, 'Eternals'. Here we find Joy Division, Bauhaus, the Banshees and The Cure themselves singled out as 'Architects of Darkness'. I tried to type that with a straight face and failed, I mean come on... it's only rock & roll and even though I like it, Joy Division weren't anything to do with Goth and Ian Curtis' suicide was a result of mental illness and emotional instability, nothing to celebrate and not a Gothic suicide following in the footsteps of Plath and Sexton (who were, of course, also both dealing with mental health issues). And I blame the remaining members of Joy Division for New Order, who I suppose we could consider a Gothic counterpart to Pet Shop Boys. But Tolhurst didn't think of that, and I know who I prefer listening to.

Bauhaus made a 12" single about Bela Lugosi, which was truly awesome despite or because of the out-of-time bass and flange pedal abuse, and also gave us the best cheekbones in the music business along with a great couple of adverts for Maxell cassettes. Siouxsie and the Banshees? A great band who slid into recycled hippydom (I mean, there are even recorders on *A Kiss In The Dreamhouse*!) and were the cause of a massive spike in hair crimper sales as punks bought into the softer image the band adopted from *Juju* onwards. Like The Cure they produced three great albums, but not in a row: the suitably titled *The Scream* in 1978, *Kaleidoscope* in 1980, and the aforementioned *Juju* in 1981. Then, like other bands, Siouxsie put on the punk version of Kiss make-up and offered up an endless number of cod-psychedelic albums with hints of the occult, horror and subversion, although Tolhurst labels it 'Liberation and Lament'.

And what about The Cure in all this? Tolhurst deems their music '"Phil Spector In Hell": Cold Psychedelia', though I guess that's better than the cod version. Not only does Tolworth talk about songs which came from his weird dreams, 'full of shadows and statues and the dark of night', but he coolly declares that he considers The Cure 'one of the fertile fields that Goth arose from'. Suddenly all those poets and authors and musicians who paved the way are put aside: THE CURE ARE HERE. The trio of their great albums gets compared to a Francis Bacon triptych: high praise indeed, but not a comparison that is explained, and not quite so convincing when it comes from one of the band members who made those albums. What else made The Cure so great according to our guide? Catholic guilt, 'deeper, darker feelings' taking hold of the music and a realisation – courtesy of a quote from the singer of All About Eve – 'about the ultimate healing power of music and lyrics'.

Tolhurst is magnanimous enough to admit that the band weren't the result of immaculate conception and that there were precedents in the shape of 'a rich vein of English musicians like Bowie, Drake and Martyn that shaped the making of *Seventeen Seconds*.' This feels like a namedrop and adopted lineage rather than any serious influence, but maybe I'm just cynical? I confess that I find it hard to take Tolhurst's discussion of the past very seriously:

The first line of the album *Pornography*  
 revels in nihilism and negation galore, but then consider the last line's determina-

tion to fight. Underneath it all, as much as death swam by, I found hope.

I don't wish to belittle how grief affects us, especially as Tolhurst discusses his mother's death, but in this section he weaves a rather tangled web of rejected Catholicism, hatred of the institutional church, grief and loss, quite rightly noting that 'If you think [it is] all doom and death, you're not paying attention [...] It's more ecstatic than that.' But then Tolhurst returns to self-praise and self-analysis: 'We put everything into that record. It was our therapy and our salvation', indeed those three albums turned out to be:

A transcendent light compressed into a pinpoint that then

flooded and washed the known and unknown universe. Out of the gloom

comes salvation.

What a blessing I was given.

Amen brother! Despite the fact he 'played with the urgency of punk and the sadness if Plath', Tolhurst now sees the music as something bigger:

In the end it's all about the music and the instrument we played that

brought us here in the first place. It's about the meant to an end. How to liber-

ate your soul and have a happy-sad time doing it.

Having written Goth large as a spiritual exercise, a liberation, therapy and salvation, the third part of the book returns to chapters full of other bands, who Tolhurst seems torn between taking acclaim for as an inspiration or wanting to question or perhaps disown. The 'Spiritual Alchemists' in Chapter Five include the Cocteau Twins and Wire, neither of whom are even Goth-related, the (genuinely) anarchic and ramshackle pop-punk of The Damned, along with the poseur brigade: Sisters of Mercy, The Mission and All About Eve. Oh, and also And Also The Trees, though that seems to be because Tolhurst had something to do with producing their album rather than anything else. I can't quite see the leather-clad soft-metal of The Mission or Sisters as 'spiritual' or any alchemy going on: gold discs perhaps, but mostly shit, which is also my general reaction to the pages exploring The Batcave, Californian Deathrock (a genre I've never heard of before) and an autobiographical interlude where our scribe goes to The Priory for rehab and bumps into some of Depeche Mode. Well I never. Serious questions: Is addiction Goth? Is synthpop Goth? There are no answers here.

Chapter Seven drifts into a whole bunch of bands I've never heard of and which, because they are here alongside Nine Inch Nails, I never want to hear of again or ever listen to. I suspect by this time even Tolhurst didn't quite know where he'd end up if he continued on this trajectory, so Chapter Eight returns to another version of the history of Goth, this time in terms of the visual and fashion, attempting once more to round up another bunch of artists and musicians as honorary Goths. The Symbolist poets get enrolled straight off, and on the back of him changing his name in honour of one of those poets (Paul Verlaine), Tom Verlaine of Television gets included. The painters Edvard Munch, Odilon Redon and Gustave Moreau are also members of the club, and several Expressionist artists are added to the list, whilst Francis Bacon gets another namecheck, this time along with his mate Lucian Freud. Tim Burton's films were 'dark and strange' (well, they still are), so he's in, and Batman gets a mention by association.

Better still, Goth must be good because Tolhurst 'know[s] a lot of people in the Goth subculture, and many of them are still doing creative things.' OK. The trouble is I know a lot of people in a lot of subcultures who do the same, so I am not persuaded by Tolhurst's apparently rhetorical question 'Does the Goth mindset help people deal with the problems of aging?' I've no idea, though I guess choosing which black t-shirt and jeans to wear makes life much simpler. And I'd question his statement that 'Both punk and Goth espouse a "fuck you attitude"', because of the tense. Espoused, at the time, past tense, yes. Now? I don't think so. As Tolhurst himself says 'you might ask, Why does Goth matter? After all, it was just part of the story of the eighties, right?'

Sorry, but yes, exactly. Goth isn't or wasn't 'the last true alternative outsider subculture' and like most subcultures it isn't 'a type of cultural resistance' any more; in fact it probably wasn't for more than a few months back in the day, before it got swallowed up and vomited out in a hundred commercial variations by the record companies, music press and t-shirt manufacturers. Tolhurst thinks it's great that fashion designers now create Goth wedding dresses, but I can only see that as something that raises questions about patriarchy, feminism, religion, cultural assumptions and money-making. To be honest I think Asda's (or whichever supermarket chain it is) new line of £25 wedding dresses is far more revolutionary!

The trouble is – and I imagine I am around the same age, certainly the same generation, as Tolhurst – there *have* been other outsider subcultures since punk and Goth, it's just that we were probably both too old to get excited by and partake of them. But the whole rave scene happened, Britpop happened, grime and new r'n'b, grunge, hardcore, EDM, ambient, Emo, Industrial and loads of other stuff have come and gone. I'm sure they changed people's worlds too, and am also aware that mainstream pop carried on regardless, singer-songwriters carried on singing and song writing, Eurovision happened annually, and genuinely avant-garde music went on its meandering way, dipping in and out of contemporary classical, noise, electronics and improvisation. But let's give Tolhurst the final word, from his annoyingly upbeat and chirpy Afterword:

I'm sure some will have heard stuff went down a different way, but this is my

version—how I perceived things. For better or worse, it's my reality inhabiting

these pages, showing how the atmosphere if the times fused all this together,

reflecting on the societal changes, and demonstrating why we need to hold on

to the good transformations even more than ever.

I'm sure he's right\*, but I think I might go and play a Cure album in the dark and make myself properly miserable. I'm not sure (and neither, in places, is Tolhurst) the band were ever Goth but they certainly knew how to write depressing songs. Tolhurst in one of his most lucid moments tells us that the band 'started with gently smudged colours and ended up with slabs of darkness'. Sounds good to me.

Rupert Loydell

(\*Sorry, I changed my mind. It's my review, so I get the final word.)

(2202 words)