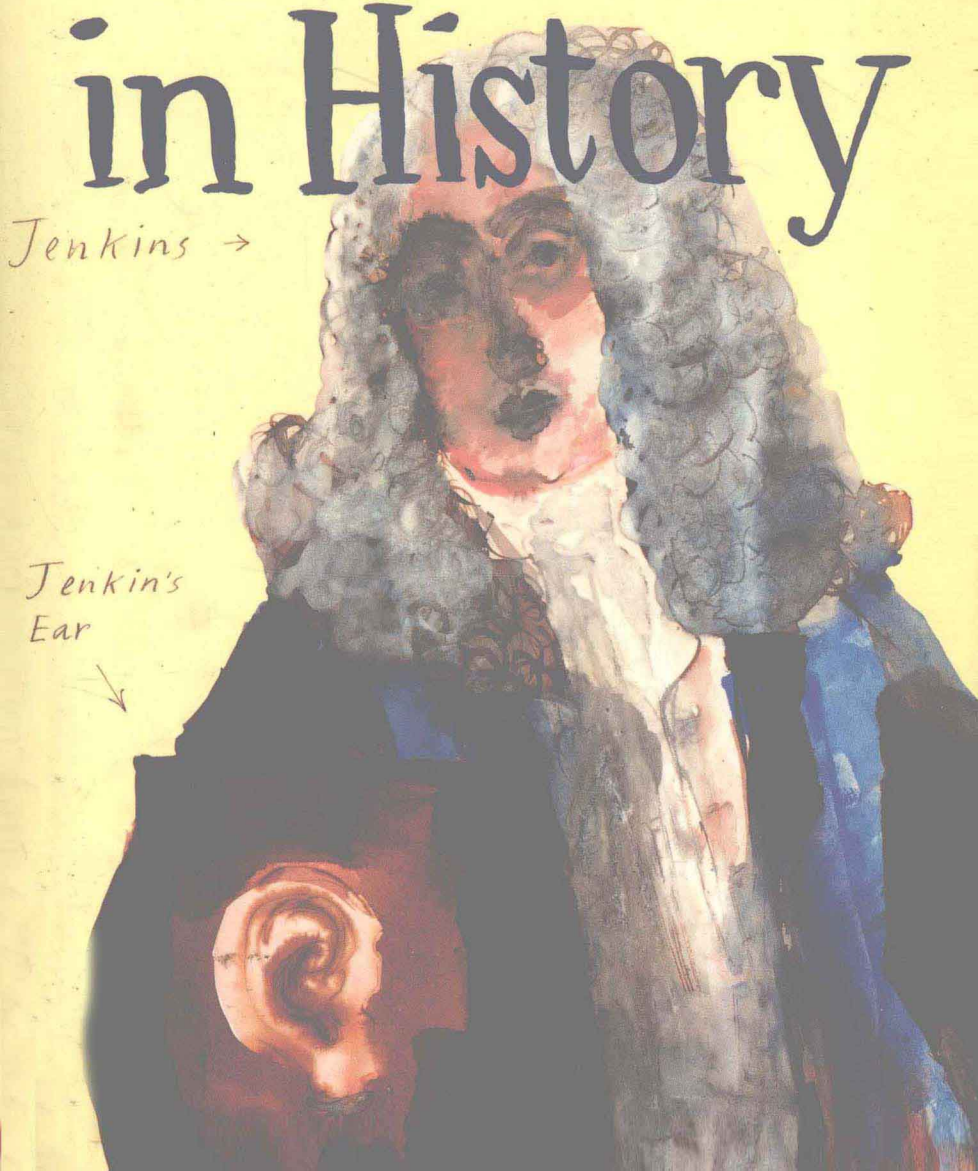
SAM LLEWELLYN

Small Parts in History



SMALL PARTS IN HISTORY

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SMALL PARTS IN HISTORY

By the same author

The Worst Journey in the Midlands
Yacky Dar Moy Bewty

Introduction

History is full of little people. Behind great characters and events, a huge rabble swarms. And every now and then, a member of that rabble does something that sets in motion a chain of causes that leads to a great event.

So far, the rabble has been overlooked. But now its time has come. From now on, members of the rabble are known as Small Parts.

What (you may say) do you mean, Small Parts?

A Small Part is an insignificant historical character whose actions have significant historical consequences.

The ideal Small Part is a person who lives a life of perfect obscurity on a collision course with Destiny. Having collided, he or she then moves back into obscurity.

There are no specific qualifications for becoming a Small Part. You may be active or passive, energetic or supine. In this book are the accident-prone and the meticulous, courtiers and conspirators, gigolos and con men, sportspeople and lawyers, bums and buccaneers. All they have in common is that at some point in their lives, they became the falling pebble that caused a landslide.

Collecting Small Parts has problems of its own. By their very nature, they are sketchily recorded if they are recorded at all. Also, the landslides of history are so many that there may be disagreement about who started which one. And finally, any collection of Small Parts will be at best a random dip into history – for a definitive collection would be no more or less than a universal biography of every man, woman and child who has ever lived.

Looking for Small Parts has its rewards. Once you start, you find that your senses are sharpened and that new Small Parts pop up where you had previously noticed none. Another is that it lends a pleasant randomness to history, hitherto wrapped in strait-jackets by a succession of philosophers. Mind you, if the scholars get hold of Small Parts there is no telling what may happen.

For the day of the Small Part is with us as never before. Never

before has the individual been so deeply submerged in the mass of humanity. All the signs are that history, having begun with the Small Part who first stood erect and brandished a bone tool, will end with another deep in a bunker, thumb hovering over a button, waiting for the order to play the last Small Part of all.

A little neglect may breed mischief . . . for want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe the horse was lost; and for want of a horse the rider was lost.

Benjamin Franklin

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Agostino di Duccio

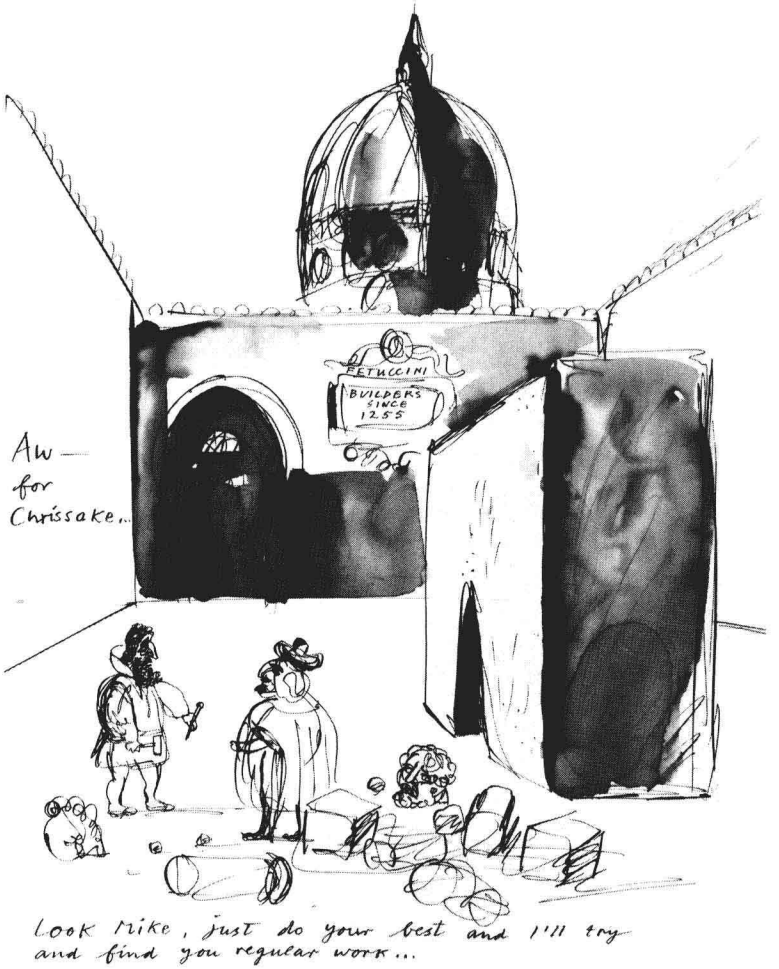
Who gave Michelangelo the lump

There are special places in history reserved for those who, through their mistakes, pave the way for genius. One of these places is reserved for the minor Renaissance Man Agostino di Duccio.

Like many other Florentines of the Renaissance, Agostino spent part of his youth as a mercenary soldier. Home from the wars, he began developing the other side of his nature, in approved Renaissance Man style, by taking up sculpture. His first independent work is the altar of Modena Cathedral. Having finished this in 1442 he returned to Florence, and demonstrated yet another side to his character when he was forced to leave town in a hurry having been arraigned with his brother on a church-looting charge.

Nearly twenty years later he returned to Florence. In the interim he had acquired a modest reputation for reliefs in the Attic style. The air of his home then inspired him to have a shot at something new on the Renaissance Man front. He ordered a very expensive eighteen-foot chunk of pure white marble from the famous quarries of Carrara. When it arrived, he complained that it was somehow the wrong shape. In the studio he managed to make it absolutely the wrong shape, by gouging a mighty chasm up its middle. He abandoned the project, left the lump of stone in the builder's yard of the Operai dell'Opera del Duomo – the Board of Works of the Cathedral – and died in 1481.

In 1501, the young Michelangelo Buonarroti was searching for a bit of marble from which to manufacture a statue to commemorate Florence's new Republican constitution. His friend Pier Soderini, knowing him to be short of funds, and being intimate with the Board of Works, gave him the Agostini Lump, which everybody had until then considered entirely wrecked. From it Michelangelo sculpted his



David, using the Agostino Overgouge as the space between the young giant-slayer's legs. The *David* was the work which brought Michelangelo his first recognition.

Richard Ameryk

Who really christened America

It has always been a matter of pride to Italian-Americans that their country gets its name from Amerigo Vespucci. Research shows that this pride is based on a fallacy: America is not called after Vespucci, but after the merchant Richard Ameryk of Bristol, England.

Ameryk – ap Maryk, or 'son of Merrick' in Welsh – seems to have been one of the pack of merchants who made Bristol England's second city in the late Middle Ages. He first swims into the ken of history in 1470, while engaged in a little real estate speculation involving the purchase of a third of the manorial lands of Clifton, and a good deal of the village of Long Ashton. This brought him into contact with other Bristol entrepreneurs, including the pushy John Cabot, who had a bee in his bonnet about an island provisionally called New Brasil which lay reasonably near Japan, a few thousand miles west across the Atlantic.

This was an attractive speculation of the kind Ameryk very much enjoyed. It was already known that large quantities of cod lay in those parts, and where cod was wealth could not be far behind. Ameryk therefore chipped in as principal backer of Cabot's expeditions. Cabot was a rapid and inventive talker, and a sound judge of human nature. (He had already inveigled several friars into taking part in the expedition, on the understanding that they would be allotted mighty bishoprics in the New World, when discovered.) In Ameryk's case, he presumably judged that what a hard-nosed self-made man wanted was money and immortality, not necessarily in that order. He therefore promised him large quantities of cod, gold, etc. and vowed in addition to name the new land after him. (It is interesting that the Ameryk crest, three mullets with bars, bears a marked similarity to the stars and stripes.)

The fact that Ameryk agreed to this deal is supported by the existence until the early nineteenth century of a calendar of Bristolian events for 1497, which deals with the Cabots' discovery of America – *mentioning America by name*. Yet the name did not come into general use in the rest of Europe for some ten years afterwards.

Italian-Americans who feel let down by these revelations can console themselves with the fact that both Cabot and Christopher Columbus were of Italian extraction. If they really want to commemorate national heroes, rather than colonialist financiers, they can always call their country Columbia; or, perhaps more accurately, and certainly more appropriately for the inhabitants of the north-east, Cabottia.