Decline and fall of a cad

For a man who wasted his wealth and talent, Willie Donaldson has been indulged by his biographer.

Anthony Holden

You Cannot Live as I Have Lived and Not End Up Like This: The Thoroughly Ungraceful Life and Times of Willie Donaldson

Hilary Blacker

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SAD to be Willie Donaldson. More than most well-educated, middle-class talents of his generation, he bootlegged his life away as a forlorn, creationist flaneur, deriding squandering several inherited fortunes to achieve renown under a false name playing an elaborate practical joke.

Then a blatant rip-off. In 1979, American comedian Don Novello came with a US bestseller in The Lazlo Toth Letters, a collection of polite replies from important celebrities to letters of support or protest from an apparently sincere patriot desperate to defend traditional values. What a wheeze, thought Donaldson, who began to fire off his own bright ideas, bankruptcy, paid escorts and sexual perversion, serial abandonment of wives, lovers and offspring, alleviated only by the success of Henry "working with a Renaissance painter". Only a disciple could quote on consecutive pages Donaldson's views that "We must live the truth, otherwise we learn..."

In Russia in the early Nineties a limited selection of postcards was available. My favourite showed a cartoon of a bear emerging from a giant matryoshka doll as a scantily-clad lady circus performer looked on, shocked. The English caption read: 'Unexpected Russia! Fifteen years on and this assessment is truer than ever: Russia is indeed a strangely unpredictable place. This is the sentiment Simon Roberts evokes in his ground-breaking photographic collection Motherland. Roberts took in 65 destinations on an 18-month trip from Kaliningrad to Vladivostok. His pictures are unmistakably Russian, almost to the point of cliche: women walking in fur hats across snowbound squares, Cossacks astride horses, two drunks smoking dubiously from a park bench. But out of the expected, something unusual emerges. There is a universal quality to these images: they end up more a portrait of humanity than of Russia. In fact, seen through Roberts' eyes Russia is a place suffused with a peculiar, bright-eyed happiness - a sort of enthusiastic defiance. This is not what you'd expect from a portrait of modern Russia. An inspiring visual treat - and unexpectedly beautiful.

Viv Groskop