A late winner from Austria

The England football manager Roy Hodgson is a surprise fan of esoteric literature, including Stefan Zweig. Clive Davis on this neglected author’s revival

Football managers are not renowned as cultural tastemakers, but when Roy Hodgson, the new England boss, told reporters that Stefan Zweig was one of his favourite writers, he helped to revive interest in a man who was one of the world's most widely read authors before he committed suicide in Brazil in 1942. Acclaiming Zweig's novel Beware of Pity as "absolutely magnificent", Hodgson joined an unlikely band of aficionados, from the actor Colin Firth and the pop singer Neil Tennant to the novelist Anita Brookner and the historian Antony Beevor. All have proclaimed their passion for the work of an Austrian Jew who ultimately fell victim to the Nazis far from his homeland.

As another admirer, Clive James, has put it: "Zweig was the incarnation of humanism." An urbane writer of short stories, novellas and biographies, he captured the spirit of a lost age in his superb memoir, The World of Yesterday, a work completed just before his death. The Europe he knew, cultured and cosmopolitan, had been blown apart by two world wars. Although only 60, Zweig was too weary to start afresh on a new continent.

The rediscovery of his legacy gathers pace. Last week, the University of London hosted a three-day conference, Stefan Zweig and Britain. In France, where he has always been more highly regarded, a bestselling novel about his death has been turned into a graphic novel. And in Brazil, in surely the most poignant tribute to a writer whose serene manner masked a tempestuous and depressive soul, the building where he and his young wife, Lotte, took their fatal dose of Veronal is about to open to the public.

Renamed Casa Stefan Zweig, it stands on a steep side street in a humble, traffic-choked quarter of Petropolis, an hour's drive along the mountain road north of Rio. Zweig and Lotte, his former secretary, arrived there in 1941. A committed pacifist and pan-European, he had been shattered by the rise of Nazism. After abandoning his beloved Salzburg, he had settled first in London, then Bath, before moving on to New York. Unable to adjust to the pace of life there, he emigrated to Brazil, a country with which he had fallen in love on a lecture tour some years earlier, his every appearance greeted by adoring crowds.

Petropolis promised to be a refuge where Zweig could devote himself to his work and recover his peace of mind. He even published an optimistic book, Brazil, Land of the Future, a motto still much in use today. Yet news of the war was impossible to ignore. On a visit to the Rio carnival in February 1942, Zweig saw headlines proclaiming the fall of Singapore and the sinking of a Brazilian merchant ship by a U-boat. Seemingly as calm as writing was banned for years, then turned down political office in 1969 when the playwright Vaclav Havel became president. His comic touch and sceptical stance made a respected chronicler of modern life.

Hodgson's other heroes

** Milan Kundera (b 1926) ** opted for exile in France after the Russians invaded his native Czechoslovakia in 1968. His work explores life under totalitarianism, though he denies being a political writer. He is best known for The Unbearable Lightness of Being (1984), about the Prague spring, the first and last of his texts he allowed to be filmed.

** Ivan Klíma (b 1931) ** is a maverick spirit who achieved exile in 1988, when the Soviet tanks rolled into Prague. He worked in jobs such as street-sweeping when his