



The Persephone Biannually

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'The Letter' Wybrand Hendriks (1744-1831)



OUR BOOKS FOR AUTUMN/ WINTER 2021-22

We have reached Persephone Book No. 140 and in one way it is quite untypical of a Persephone book, but in another it is extremely representative. *The Rector's Daughter* (1924) by FM Mayor (1872-1932) is untypical because, although it fell out of print in the decades after it was first published, it was reprinted by Penguin in the 1970s and since then has not technically been out of print, being both a Penguin and a Virago Modern Classic. Yet this certainly does not mean it is widely available. For the reason Flora Mayor's book is a representative Persephone book is because it really is a neglected work of genius (the word used by several of the original reviewers); so we felt this extraordinary and truly classic novel had to be part of the Persephone collection.

Flora Mayor came from a comfortably off, academic family. She went to Newnham College, Cambridge (something extremely unusual then), writing hundreds of letters home to her twin sister (an invaluable source of material about women attending university in the 1890s). At the age of 30 she was still trying to be an actress when she became engaged to be married and made plans to join her fiancé

in India. But he died there and her life was shattered. For thirty years, until her death, she lived at home, or other people's homes, with her sister Alice, trying to write, trying to be happy.

In 1923 she sent the manuscript of *The Rector's Daughter* to Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who had established the Hogarth Press a few years before. They published it, with Flora and her family's financial help. (But they saved money on proof-reading: our edition is the first to be properly edited and corrected since the one that came out in 1924, although of course only the most pernickety would ever have noticed the typos, the names mysteriously different in one chapter from another, the misquotations, the scores of words that were simply wrong.)

The plot is timeless: a young woman called Mary Jocelyn lives at home in the rectory with her widowed father, a classical theologian; at first she finds fulfilment through looking after her disabled sister but eventually is left alone to be her father's companion. She realises that she feels deeply about the local curate and for a while it looks as though she might be happy at last. Rather like *The Fortnight*



Endpapers from a printed silk fabric manufactured in Manchester for the Calico Printers' Association in 1924.



1914-23 design for a chiffon voile by Margaret Macdonald Mackintosh.

in September, PB No. 67, it doesn't sound much. But it is everything. And it is why we wanted Persephone readers to be able to read this superb novel and understand why it has been praised so highly by generations of critics. In fact when it was first published there were so many laudatory reviews that Boots lending library had to ration loans due to its popularity. Then it disappeared. Completely. But in 1941 Rosamond Lehmann called Mary 'my favourite character in contemporary fiction: favourite in that she is completely real to me, deeply moving, evoking as vivid and

valid a sense of sympathy, pity, and admiration as do the Brontë sisters. The poignancy of the sisters lies in their moral grandeur. The same is true of Mary Jocelyn. Plain, not young, dowdy, shy, and from shyness awkward, proud, passionate, reserved, she is herself an individual, to an extraordinary degree. At the same time she becomes, to me at least, a kind of symbol or touchstone for feminine dignity, intelligence and truthfulness.' But it was wartime, there were paper shortages, and although Penguin had begun its series of reprints five years before (why, why did they choose

the tedious *Madame Claire* by Susan Ertz to be among their first ten Penguins?) it took another thirty years for them to commission the novelist Kay Dick to write a reader's report about *The Rector's Daughter* (it was rather like the reader's report on p. 9 but infinitely more perceptive). She concluded: 'I think that FM Mayor has a truly classical touch. In fact her work is enormously impressive. Parallels immediately spring to mind: Compton-Burnett, Katharine Mansfield, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and she comes through as very strong, truthful to the edge of bitterness



Stone Dean, Jordans, Buckinghamshire (perhaps a rectory) 1940 by Stanley Anderson © V & A

intellectually, powerful, dramatic, and, what is most important, a superb prose writer. There is a strong compulsiveness about her style and one is ever conscious of expertise. Here is a real craftsman and, the crux of the matter, a real creative artist. The pace is fantastic, one can hardly bear the piling up of sorrow and yet all is so perfectly plainly stated. It is really a most passionate book in the best sense of the term – intensely moving.’

Penguin did reissue it, slightly half-heartedly, and twenty years later added a preface by Susan Hill, who had by chance discovered *The Rector’s Daughter* on their list. She realised that ‘here was indeed a masterpiece, a flawless English novel... most beautifully written, with economy, plain elegance, perspicacity, grace’; yet, she added, FM Mayor ‘is still not a familiar name, the novel’s place in literary history is not

yet immovably secure.’ In 1986 there came Virago’s reissue (with an informative preface by Janet Morgan). But still it stayed in the shadows, albeit with occasional flurries of attention, for example the critic DJ Taylor in *The Times* last year found it a mystery ‘why FM Mayor, with her impossibly subtle style, isn’t better known’, saying that ‘if, on the one hand, it is one of the saddest books ever written, then on the other, its 300 or so pages are alive with compassion, warmth and the sense of human possibility.’

In the 1980s Flora Mayor was the joint subject of a biography of two women born in October 1872, the other being her friend Mary Sheepshanks. In the chapter on *The Rector’s Daughter* the author, Sybil Oldfield, quotes many of the 1924 reviews, including Rebecca West proclaiming Flora’s immense superiority to Galsworthy, and EM Forster

sending her a long letter in which he said that ‘the book interested and moved me much... Mary begins as ridiculous and ends as dignified, this seemed to me a very great achievement.’ Flora’s book and *A Passage to India* were both nominated for the Femina Prize in 1924; Forster’s won ‘but to be defeated by EM Forster would be almost a distinction,’ wrote a friend.

The Persephone Preface is by Victoria Gray, Flora’s great niece, and contains much new information taken from family papers; she and her late husband, the playwright Simon Gray, admired *The Rector’s Daughter* so much that he dramatised it for radio. Victoria has the original recording and we shall make it available on our website with the proceeds going to the charity Give a Book. *The Rector’s Daughter* is also freely available online as ten 15 minute BBC R4 ‘Book at Bedtime’ episodes read by Juliet Stevenson.



Flora Mayor



Dorothy Canfield Fisher

Victoria Gray lives in the house she inherited from her grandmother Beatrice (‘Bobo’) Mayor (1885-1971), Flora Mayor’s sister-in-law, of whom ‘family legend has it that the raffish interloper, Kathy, is a thickly disguised portrait.’ One of the Persephone team once lived next door to Mrs Mayor, as we knew her; she used to talk about Virginia Woolf, at a time when her work was still unappreciated. But *The Rector’s Daughter* was never mentioned at all.

Persephone Book No. 141, *The Deepening Stream* by Dorothy Canfield Fisher, is one that is so close to our heart that we find it quite hard to write about without being ridiculously partisan and over-emotional. We had not read it until recently, when we simply turned the pages in awe and sat like a statue when it was finished (and it's extremely long, another 600 pager like *The Oppermanns*). Of course we *thought* we had read it. Being such huge fans of Dorothy Canfield Fisher (if life was different we would be spending six months in Burlington, Vermont, where her papers are, trying to write a

book about her) we assumed we had read everything – obviously the inimitable and perfect *The Home-Maker*, PB No. 7, but also *The Brimming Cup*, *Her Son's Wife*, *Seasoned Timber* (her last, 1939, novel which is so remarkably prescient in its defence of human rights), the Montessori manuals. But *The Deepening Stream* has a rather slow start and, although we are ashamed to admit it, we wonder if on first reading we simply gave up.

A Persephone reader, Lyn Baines, said much the same thing on her blog *I Love Reading*: 'I loved this book and can't

imagine why it took me so long to get around to reading it. It's the coming of age story of Matey Gilbert. We first meet Matey (her name is Penelope and the nickname is never explained) as a small child, living in France with her parents and siblings Priscilla and Francis. All three children are scarred by the experience of tiptoeing around their parents. Matey learns to cope by avoiding confrontation and through the love of her dog, Summer. I admired the accuracy of Dorothy Canfield Fisher's psychological insights into the mind of a sensitive child like Matey even though I have never really been



'Patients at Arc en Barrois playing cards' 1915 by Wilfred de Glehn, in a private collection

interested in books written from a child's eye view: usually I skim the opening chapters of biographies too, especially when they go back several generations. However, here it was compelling. Once Matey grows up and visits Rustdorf, her future home, I couldn't put the book down. This is where she begins to develop as a person, the deepening stream of her personality begins to emerge from her troubled childhood.'

But above all this book turns out to be absolutely extraordinary about life on the home front in France during WW1. Matey has a miraculously happy marriage. Then in 1915 she and her husband make the decision to go and help the French war effort. The description of their life in France is quite simply stunning and one can safely say to anyone reading this – you will never read anything like it, and never forget it. As the novelist and critic Diana Birchalls wrote to us: 'This is the best evocation of what domestic life was like in France during WW1 I have ever read' and it will undoubtedly prove to be the most memorable book on the subject that any Persephone reader has ever read as well.

Our proofreader (always a wise voice) wrote: 'I loved the book! She has the best description I've ever seen of absolute total exhaustion in the scene where Matey is helping the doctor with the wounded soldiers returned from

the Front. Also such fascinating stuff about America's early, and later, responses to the war in Europe. It feels like lived experience of being on the Home Front in France during WW1 – not to mention her very lived experience of Quakerism. It is one of the few books where, as a Quaker, I can recognise her experience in Meeting, and on matters of ethical banking, and conscientious objection – and it's not too over-idealised, which can be easy to do. It must have been progressive for its time in its references to the pleasures of sex for a woman. I felt it was a very new, very interesting voice for me.'

In 1931 an American reviewer wrote: 'Every little detail is by her exquisite art and keen insight turned into a sort of combined telescope and microscope, enabling us at one and the same time to view life in its entirety, life in its universal aspects, and life in its most minutely specialised individualisations. I have read her novel with a fervour and a glow of satisfaction that, alas, comes to my share but rarely after a long lifetime of voracious reading. Every page of hers lives with a life which I am forced to accept as authentic, and which, nevertheless, does not draw that sense of genuineness from any one-sided gloating on the darker ways of our existence. There are not many artists in America today, or anywhere, who could make us see Matey's parents with the ruthless exactitude shown by Dorothy Canfield Fisher.

Matey herself is a figure not easily forgotten. But beside her we find a whole gallery of men and women and children, all with their human frailties written large on them, and yet drawn in such a manner that our hearts are opened to them for keeps. In every one of them we discover a little bit of our own selves, and by viewing these fragments as presented by the tenderly impersonal art of DCF, we are able to see ourselves and our own lives in a new light. For once I feel like shouting out to say: *The Deepening Stream* is one of the biggest books that have come out of America in many a year.'

Our preface writer Sadie Stein concludes: 'It is a mystery to me why *The Deepening Stream* is not listed alongside *Testament of Youth*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *Parade's End* as a definitive WW1 novel... Without ever taking the reader into the trenches, DCF makes us feel how war grinds you down, until one's receptivity to tragedy is necessarily blunted... *The Deepening Stream* is strikingly modern: domestic hurts are addressed with complete seriousness; the pain of the war, meanwhile, is rendered intimate. The focus remains tight, unsparing, humane. By the time I read her taut descriptions of the ravages of the Somme, I realised I had come to respect DCF as what she is – a great American writer – and *The Deepening Stream* as a neglected treasure of the last century.'

EDGAR BUILDINGS

Our new shop in Bath is in one of a row of nine houses, named after King Edgar (crowned at Bath Abbey in 973) and was probably built in 1761 by Thomas Jelly. The centre of the row faces Milsom Street; we are a little further along and look out at an imposing Victorian building (it's been a bank, offices, Loch Fyne restaurant, now who knows). There is a gap in the buildings opposite, so from the first floor we have a superb view of the Abbey and through to Prior Park in the distance.

Soon after it was built, a house in Edgar Buildings became the residence of William Wade, Master of Ceremonies at the Assembly Rooms from 1769-77. He had a position of enormous social power (eg. publishing ads in the *Bath Chronicle* telling people what to wear!).

'Elevated and airy' said a 'house for sale' ad in 1798 and in 1818 *Walks Through Bath* mentioned 'an elevated, respectable terrace' which, in *Northanger Abbey*, is 'a very neat Row with a spacious pavement

Terrace'. Since there are two kitchen ranges in the basement of No. 8 (indicating a lodging house) we like to think the Thorpes lived in our building.

Later on No. 8 was a dentist ('no charge made until perfect satisfaction is given'), then offices, and in 1923 a shop-front was installed by the Bath architect WA Williams; this included the lovely art deco decorative metal panel along the top. (Williams, who built the stunning Bath Corporation Electricity Department in 1933 – sadly torn down in 2007 – will be the subject of a piece in a future *Biannually*.)

In *Black Sheep* (1966) by Georgette Heyer, set in 1816, Edgar Buildings is 'situated just within the fashionable part of the town, which extended northward from the top of Milsom Street to the exclusive heights of Upper Camden Place. Mr Leonard Balking would have chosen to set Mrs Grayshot up in style there, but he realised that the long climb up to Camden Place was not the thing for an invalid. So he had established her in Edgar Buildings, whence she could visit all the best shops, and even, without exhaustion, walk to the Pump Room, or to the Private Baths in Stall Street. He was fortunate enough to discover a first floor suite which he thought tolerable, and everyone else described as handsome.'



Edgar Buildings in 1935; no.8 is the second shop along from the corner.

MISS P, AS SEEN FROM 2020

In *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day*, a comedy about identities, Winifred Watson confronts her heroine with a variety of complicated situations, *Aileen Behrendt wrote in 2020*. She playfully negotiates gender, class, and national identities that were at the time undergoing profound changes. The novel picks up many important discourses of its time such as (metaphorical) borders, social hierarchies and Englishness. It also shares many thematic and stylistic similarities with other inter-war comedies, especially the novels by Evelyn Waugh, PG Wodehouse, Anthony Powell and Nancy Mitford.

Miss Pettigrew constructs Englishness as middle-class and domestic, but with the twist that she places female friendship at its centre: the comedy privileges female friendship over class hierarchies and heterosexual relationships. Miss P turns Miss LaFosse's small apartment into a safe space for the articulation of female power and the blossoming friendship between two women.

It has been argued that during the 1930s a defence of middlebrow values and identity emerged: the middlebrow spoke to and for a majority of people, and stands for balance, sanity, substance and humour. The narrative's support of these values restructures the chaotic bohemian world. The author presents a pragmatic, no-nonsense heroine who tidies up the lives of her newfound

bohemian friends and dismisses outsiders perceived as threatening or unworthy due to her racial bias.

The traditional premise of mistaken identities is completed with the comic trope of the *naïf* being catapulted into the world of the urban demimonde. Miss P can easily navigate their bohemian world because they openly welcome her middle-class authority. At first glance, the novel obeys the conventional narrative end of a romantic comedy by suggesting the future matrimonial bliss of Miss LaFosse and Michael, and also the possibility of Miss P's marriage, thereby affirming society's heteronormativity and class hierarchies. But the novel suggests that marriage does not suffice to ensure female happiness. While middlebrow comedy allows writers to speak about the cruelties and disappointments of domestic life (eg. *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, PB no. 105), the novel's comic resolution offers a remedy for these disappointments by advocating that female bliss is found in friendship and domesticity. The friendship between Miss P and Miss LaFosse serves as the true happy ending of the narrative. The comic resolution does not lie in heterosexual marriage but homosocial friendship and domesticity. The novel insists that friendship offers female empowerment so that the

homosocial bond between the protagonists far exceeds the novel's heterosexual romances. One could go further and read the novel as a story of lesbian desire that hides behind the institution of marriage. Also one could argue that the text mocks Miss P's racist views ('I think there was a little Jew in him. He wasn't quite English') yet it appears to endorse them by showing her triumph over Miss LaFosse's other lovers and her success at structuring her social world. The national and racial stereotypes were, in the 1930s, well-established within contemporary discourse and undoubtedly figured as class comic elements. The comedy consolidates xenophobia and an exclusive Englishness; from today's perspective these elements are highly problematic. But the author's exploration of female identity through homosociality, and especially the comic and playful investigations into the role of work for her female protagonist, places *Miss Pettigrew* in a larger context of women's inter-modernist writing.

This makes *Miss Pettigrew* an important middlebrow text that needs to be considered critically. Its emphasis on female friendship and a particular version of Englishness make it an invaluable addition to the study of women's inter-modernist comedy.

Taken from Interwar Women's Comic Fiction ed. Darwood & Turner

'THE RETURN' (1986)

I picked her up that hot sand-blasted day
In Euhesperides – a rubbish tip
Where all Benghazi's refuse piled across
Scatterings of a millennium of mess:
A broken head of earthenware, a face
Staring out silently, wreathed in her dress
Of fragile terracotta. Picked her up
And brought her home, and meant to let her stay.
She lodged there in a cabinet, and moved
As we moved, to this other place, and lay
For twenty years in England.

Till today

I looked inside the cabinet, observed
The spilt of dust and splinters at her neck,
A fallen garment. As I gently took
Her head within my hands, she split and broke,
Her chaplet and her vestiges of dress
Shivering to sand.

I threw her all away
Onto the flowerbed all of her except
The one remaining scrap, her oval face
Lying within my palm. I have it here,
This small masked relic. In this chilly year
The northern damps had killed her where she slept

The last frail remnant of Persephone,
Whose head it was, whom I picked up that day
After so many broken centuries,
Miraculous and lasting testimony
Among the camel corpses, salt, tins, glass,
And brought her home to live here, till today
She went back to the underworld, as dust.

Her tiny face looks up, and will not last.

Anthony Thwaite (1930-2021)

HOW WRONG CAN ONE BE?

In April 1980 one of the Persephone team was working as a reader at Cape. It is evident from her report that she failed to see the point of Anita Brookner's 'A Start in Life', published to great acclaim the next year.

A rather depressing if intelligently written novel with a good shape (which is something and actually come to think of it not unlike that remorselessly Sunday evening pudding beloved of institutions). *A Start in Life* is about Ruth Weiss brought up in a stultifying flat in Oakwood Court. 'Mrs Weiss (her grandmother) had brought from Berlin pieces of furniture of incredible magnitude in dark woods that looked as if they had absorbed the blood of horses. Wardrobes with massive double doors and fretted cornices seemed to house regiments of midget Renaissance

condottieri...' Ma is an actress and Pa an antiques dealer and they sponge off their housekeeper and stay in bed most of the day and Ruth does not really have much of a childhood. She does research into French lit as the peace of accumulating file cards and the hush of the library are her only security. She achieves a measure of liberation in her own flat in Paris but is summoned home on the death of Ma. By the end she is an asst. lecturer looking after aging dad and life at forty has nothing else to offer beyond the accumulating growth of her planned three vol. work on women in Balzac's novels.

There are some good things about this novel, but one can't hope to capture people's interest when everything is so dull. One can't sustain a novel around a life of such flatness – it's not that the happy ending or the lover or even 'job satis' are prerequisites for readability, but there must be some kind of spark. I need a M Arnold or James quote here about life and lit. uplifting. So no to this on the grounds that 3000 people are unlikely to want to read about a boring childhood leading to a put-upon middle-age interspersed with a few file cards about French lit.

OUR READERS WRITE

‘Mollie Panter-Downes was noted for her wit, perception and incisiveness thanks to her reflections on English domestic life during the war years. *Good Evening, Mrs Craven* explores the common themes of the day, discussing fear, separation, evacuations and the wartime obsession with food. This is a lovely set of stories that whilst each entertain in their own right, together give the impression of a complete and cohesive look at the progression of the war. Each story is a little vignette into the lives of those left behind. There are sewing circles and committees to sit on, there are tales of evacuees, not so much how they themselves reacted to being moved across the country but the hidden views of those who took them in. The great thing about short stories is that you can dip in and out of them when you have a few spare minutes. There’s a wonderful layering to them. Each one adds its own colourful element to give the reader an idea of what life may have been like at the time. This is a fascinating collection. It is no doubt one I shall return to in the future.’ *From First Page to Last*

‘In *Miss Ranskill Comes Home* we meet a woman who fell overboard a cruise ship in 1938 after an unfortunate slip and found herself stranded on a desert island. She only finds her way back to Britain in 1942,

a country now in the middle of the Second World War. Let me start by saying this book feels incredibly modern. It was first published in 1946 and would have been a contemporary story at the time. But it could just as well be historical fiction written now. I was expecting a cosy perhaps even whimsical book and I was surprised by how deeply reflective it was, and how it provides a social commentary on Britain at the time. Miss Ranskill had spent many a time fantasising about her return to England, but when finally she does, she finds herself lost in a place where rationing, coupon books, black-outs and drills are now the order of the day. She finds it hard to fit in in a society that is on the one hand suffering terrible losses and destruction and on the other hand uses very rigid rules and is fixated on trivial norms. Having been away, she questions and critiques the new way of living in Britain and thus finds herself misunderstood by her family, feeling a stranger in her own country and even longing to be back on the island, where things were hard, but made sense. She longs to share her grief, and her traumatic experience of being stranded on a desert island, but finds no one quite understands what she has been through. I think everyone who has ever been away from home for an extended period of time will recognise the alienating feeling of returning to a place

that should feel familiar and comforting but isn’t.’ *Marcella and Her Books*

E*nglish Climate* by Sylvia Townsend Warner contains a tremendous collection of twenty-two stories that sum up a lot of the British attitudes to the Second World War. Written in the moment, these stories were submitted to the *New Yorker* and other publications and have been collected by Persephone in this fascinating book. Though some have not been seen since their original wartime publication, all stand up to being read again in the twenty-first century. Their accurate representation of life in the English countryside is witty, full of atmosphere and conveys a lot of the sense of people’s reaction to the shortages, rationing, evacuees and so many other elements. These stories, though excellent and successful, were often unpublished since the original publication; indeed, as Lydia Fellgett writes in her excellent Preface, STW was uncertain herself as to whether some of the stories had actually appeared in the *New Yorker*, given the complicated wartime situation. Fellgett goes on to write that the stories “perfectly balance the domestic and the political. And they bring such joy with their quick humour and their lively detail.” This book features stories of implication, suggestions and dialogue which speak of people beset by war,

coming to terms with a new way of life. It is a collection to be savoured. Persephone have produced several collections of stories, diaries and novels actually written during the Second World War, and for its immediacy, its ability to convey an impression of how people felt, and sheer audacity of its style, this is an incredible example of a Persephone reprint.’ *Northern Reader*

‘I quite understand why you chose to finish with that selection of reactions to **Guard Your Daughters**, rather than just one Afterword, because we were round-eyed and didn’t know ourselves quite what we thought about the ending. It’s a fascinating comparison with all those novels about sisters – Austen, Alcott, Dodie Smith, Mitford, *The Fountain Overflows* (the narrator’s horrible contempt for the less musical sister) – and then the ending, which had something of the awful routing of Aunt Ada Doom, but with none of the sparkle and humanity which sends Ada off in a sports car to the Riviera. Somehow, the fact that “darling Mother” is never actively rehabilitated, except insofar as the narrator speaks of her always so affectionately, makes what we thought was reasonably good-humoured into something suddenly dark and tragic and unresolved. The beautifully comic observed cross-currents of English family life and embarrassment in Diana Tutton’s writing are suddenly as nothing

when Mother’s neurotic egotism is unmasked, and you wonder how seriously damaged these girls are – how their “eccentricity” is really going to dog them for the rest of their lives. I suppose some of Austen’s novels have a serious thrust at the end, and perhaps the sparkle just distracts us. Sir Thomas has some very bitter perplexity and regrets about the way he brought up his own children at the end of *Mansfield Park*, for instance. I wonder if DT had this in mind and was trying to say something quite serious as well as to write a social comedy?’ *THM, Southampton*

‘**Greenbanks** is a quietly profound and moving novel, concerned with the relationship between Louisa and her granddaughter Rachel. It is the story of women across generations, their growth, and the factors that hinder this, all set within the context of a sprawling upper-middle-class life between the period of (roughly) 1910 and the 1920s. This timeframe allows Dorothy Whipple to explore the changing roles and experiences of women and men at a time of great upheaval. I felt it was very strong on how family relationships are often most harmonious between grandparents and their grandchildren where the inevitable distance in years can bring greater understanding and acceptance of necessary growth and change. I found DW’s observations of family life insightful, along with the choices we make in our youth and how

they come to define us as we age, often in ways we don’t expect. There is both great humanity and unflinching honesty in this novel. Human foibles are understood and presented with compassion, but there are no simplistic resolutions to life’s dilemmas, just hard choices to be either made or shied away from. The novel does not end with resolution of difficulties, but with some degree of hope for some of the characters. Perhaps this reflects life as we experience it, and perhaps this is enough.’ *Ynott on Instagram*

‘**Stella Martin Currey’s One Woman’s Year** is one of Persephone’s domestic non-fiction volumes, which I enjoy just as much as their reprinted novels, even though I am far from domestic myself. Each month has a beautiful woodcut as an opener, then an excerpt from *The British Merlin*, 1677, with gardening, cooking and health tips. Then you have a longer essay (for example, “Books for the Family” which included many classics of my own childhood), the Most Liked and Most Disliked Jobs of the Month (getting one’s hair cut when the children go back to school versus getting the sand out of sandwiches), a recipe, an excursion (the Tower of London or, more prosaically, a modern telephone exchange), and then a couple of linked excerpts from novels or poems. It’s a jolly read with plenty of domestic mishaps and disasters, from buying a piece of furniture slightly too large to go up the stairs comfortably (we



Some of David Gentleman's woodblocks, photographed for The World of Interiors in 2009

donated ditto after trying to move it up a floor a little while ago) to having a sticky kitchen moment when attempting to make brandy snaps. It's gentle and sweet, quietly acerbic about rudeness and chores, quietly perceptive about England seen through a French schoolboy's eyes, and obviously a period piece but also

comforting as the months roll round and things aren't maybe quite so different as one would imagine. Another Persephone triumph.' *Adventures in reading, running and working from home*

‘Published by Persephone Books (believe it or not, I do sometimes read books by

other publishers), **English Climate** is a collection of short stories inspired by Sylvia Townsend Warner's experience of the Second World War while living in the British countryside. We see vignettes of villagers who could populate any rural area all over the UK, and we have to wonder – à la DE Stevenson's

wonderful character Miss Buncle, also reprinted by Persephone – how many of these people were inspired by those whom Sylvia knew personally. STW writes in a typically Persephone manner (if such a thing exists), in that she has a crisp but friendly tone, slightly admonishing those who judge others negatively, and with a sharp ability not to waste words on unnecessary sentences – which is a great skill in any writer. And at this time when we are all feeling mentally fragmented and emotionally spent, some comforting short stories from a simpler time are just what we need as we brace ourselves to go into a second year of pandemic mayhem, this time with the added nightmare of Brexit.’

Madame J-Mo

‘I read the first paragraphs of ***A Very Great Profession*** and was surprisingly hooked. It is described as a book of literary criticism, which perhaps makes it sound a little drier than it is. Subtitled “The Woman’s Novel 1914-39” it really is right up my alley. I found it completely absorbing, a real celebration of many of the kinds of books I love – written by the founder of Persephone books and originally published by Virago in 1983. In this book Nicola Beauman looks at women like Katherine in Virginia Woolf’s *Night and Day* and Laura in the film *Brief Encounter*. These were women who borrowed books from the circulating libraries, and whose lives were so often recorded in the very fiction that they read.

Following her introduction – in which Beauman explains how the book was conceived and written – each of the eight chapters takes a different theme: war, domesticity, sex, psychoanalysis etc. Drawing on numerous novels from this period between the two wars Beauman explores the lives that were being led by the middle-class women who would have read them. These novels often reflected the changing lives of women – and what the middle-class concerns of many at this period were. Throughout this book I loved reading the extracts from the novels I had previously enjoyed as well as encountering many I had never heard of. Each chapter is just wonderfully immersive for the lover of novels from this period – largely those written by women though one or two by male writers are included. This book was an easy five star read for me; I knew that when I had only read a third of it – I was so thoroughly absorbed I gulped it down quickly. It is surely a must for any lover of the kinds of novels published by Virago and Persephone. Nicola Beauman is an able literary critic: she fully understands these novels and the women who read them and how inextricably linked the readers and the novels were – and I dare say still are. This book is now my favourite book about books I have read for some time.’

HeavenAli

‘***Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*** is a funny and beautifully written novella focusing on a dysfunctional,

miscellaneous group of people thrown together, and sizzles with acerbic observations and dramatic revelations. It was originally published by Hogarth Press, founded by Leonard and Virginia Woolf. The book is set during the course of a single day at the centre of which is the wedding of our protagonist, 23-year-old Dolly Thatcham. The wedding is set to take place in a church close to the Thatcham estate in the country. One of the striking features of this novella is that there is so much scope for the reader to read between the lines. Most of the characters don’t really reveal what’s exactly on their minds, preferring instead to drop subtle hints. Even in their conversations, the haziness of their feelings persists. All of which leaves a lot of room for us to figure it out ourselves. Julia Strachey’s writing in ***Cheerful Weather*** is marvellous, brimming with evocative descriptions – whether it’s the heavily furnished rooms in the house, or the tumult of the characters’ emotions. There are generous doses of sly humour in the book. ***Cheerful Weather*** feels sophisticated and assured as Strachey displays a flair for making nuanced observations on her varied set of characters. A distinct highlight is the novella’s razor sharp focus on the consequences of suppressed emotions and things left unsaid. It’s another gem from Persephone Books, well worth reading and re-reading.’

Radhika’sReadingRetreat

THE PERSEPHONE 141

1. **William – an Englishman** by **Cicely Hamilton** Prize-winning 1919 novel about the effect of WW1 on a socialist clerk and a suffragette. Preface: Nicola Beaman

2. **Mariana** by **Monica Dickens** This funny, romantic first novel, which came out in 1940, describes a young girl's life in the 1930s. Preface: Harriet Lane **Also a Persephone Classic**

3. **Someone at a Distance** by **Dorothy Whipple** 'A very good novel indeed' (*Spectator*) about the destruction of a formerly happy 1950s marriage. Preface: Nina Bawden, R4 'Book at Bedtime' **Also a Persephone Classic**

4. **Fidelity** by **Susan Glaspell** 1915 novel by a Pulitzer-winning writer brilliantly describing the effect of a girl in Iowa running off with a married man. Preface: Laura Godwin

5. **An Interrupted Life** by **Etty Hillesum** From 1941–43 a woman in Amsterdam, 'the Anne Frank for grown-ups', wrote diaries and letters: they are among the great documents of our time. Preface: Eva Hoffman

6. **The Victorian Chaise-longue** by **Marghanita Laski** A 'little jewel of horror': 'Melly' lies on a chaise-longue in the 1950s and wakes as 'Milly' ninety years before. Preface: PD James

7. **The Home-Maker** by **Dorothy Canfield Fisher** An ahead-of-its-time 'remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house-husband' (Carol Shields). Preface: Karen Knox, Afterword: Elaine Showalter **Also a Persephone Classic**

8. **Good Evening, Mrs Craven: the**

Wartime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes Short stories first published in *The New Yorker* from 1938–44. Five were read on R4. Preface: Gregory LeStage **An unabridged Persephone audiobook read by Lucy Scott. Also a Persephone Classic**

9. **Few Eggs and No Oranges** by **Vere Hodgson** A 600-page diary, written from 1940–45 in Notting Hill Gate, full of acute observation, wit and humanity. Preface: Jenny Hartley

10. **Good Things in England** by **Florence White** 'One of the great English cookbooks, full of delightful, delicious recipes that actually work.' Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall

11. **Julian Grenfell** by **Nicholas Mosley** A biography of the First World War poet, and of his mother Ettie Desborough. Preface: author

12. **It's Hard to be Hip over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life** by **Judith Viorst** Funny and wise 1960s poems about marriage, children and reality. Preface: author

13. **Consequences** by **E M Delafield** By the author of *Diary of a Provincial Lady*, PB No. 105, in this 1919 novel a girl who fails to marry goes in to a convent. Preface: Nicola Beaman

14. **Farewell Leicester Square** by **Betty Miller** Novel (by Jonathan Miller's mother) about a Jewish film-director and 'the discreet discrimination of the bourgeoisie' (*Guardian*). Preface: Jane Miller

15. **Tell It to a Stranger** by **Elizabeth Berridge** Observant and bleak 1947 short stories, an *Evening Standard* bestseller. Preface: AN Wilson

16. **Saplings** by **Noel Streatfeild** A novel by the well-known author of

Ballet Shoes, about the destruction of a family during WW2; a R4 ten-part serial. Afterword: Jeremy Holmes **Also a Persephone Classic**

17. **Marjory Fleming** by **Oriel Malet** A deeply empathetic novel about the real life of the Scottish child prodigy who lived from 1803–11; translated into French; a play on Radio Scotland.

18. **Every Eye** by **Isobel English** An unusual 1956 novel about a girl travelling to Spain, highly praised by Muriel Spark: a R4 'Afternoon Play'. Preface: Neville Braybrooke

19. **They Knew Mr Knight** by **Dorothy Whipple** A 1934 novel about a man driven to committing fraud and what happens to him and his family; a 1946 film. Afterwords: Terence Handley MacMath and Christopher Beaman

20. **A Woman's Place** by **Ruth Adam** A survey of women's lives from 1900–75, very readably written by a novelist-historian: an overview full of insights. Preface: Yvonne Roberts

21. **Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day** by **Winifred Watson** A delightful 1938 novel about a governess and a nightclub singer. Read on R4 by Maureen Lipman; now a film with Frances McDormand and Amy Adams. Preface: Henrietta Twycross-Martin. **A Persephone audiobook read by Frances McDormand. Also a Persephone Classic**

22. **Consider the Years** by **Virginia Graham Sharp**, funny, evocative WW2 poems by Joyce Grenfell's closest friend and collaborator. Preface: Anne Harvey

23. **Reuben Sachs** by **Amy Levy** A fierce 1880s satire on the London

Jewish community by 'the Jewish Jane Austen', praised by Oscar Wilde. Preface: Julia Neuberger

24. Family Roundabout by Richmal Crompton By the author of *William*, a 1948 family saga contrasting two matriarchs and their very different children. Preface: Juliet Aykroyd

25. The Montana Stories by Katherine Mansfield All the short stories written during the author's last year; with a detailed editorial note and the contemporary illustrations. Five were read on R4.

26. Brook Evans by Susan Glaspell An unusual novel written in 1928, the same year as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, about the enduring effect of a love affair on three generations.

27. The Children who Lived in a Barn by Eleanor Graham A 1938 classic about five children fending for themselves; starring the unforgettable hay box. Preface: Jacqueline Wilson

28. Little Boy Lost by Marghanita Laski Novel about a father's search for his son in France in late 1945, the *Guardian's* Nicholas Lezard's Paperback Choice, R4 'Book at Bedtime' read by Jamie Glover. Afterword: Anne Sebba. Also a *Persephone Classic*

29. The Making of a Marchioness by Frances Hodgson Burnett A very entertaining 1901 novel about the melodrama when a governess marries a Marquis; a R4 Classic Serial. Preface: Isabel Raphael, Afterword: Gretchen Gerzina. A *Persephone* audiobook read by Lucy Scott. Also a *Persephone Classic*

30. Kitchen Essays by Agnes Jekyll Witty and useful essays about cooking, with recipes, published in *The Times* and reprinted as a book in 1922. 'One of the best reads outside Elizabeth David' wrote gastropoda.

com. Also a *Persephone Classic*

31. A House in the Country by Jocelyn Playfair An unusual and very interesting 1944 novel about a group of people living in the country during WW2. Preface: Ruth Gorb

32. The Carlyles at Home by Thea Holme A 1965 mixture of biography and social history describing Thomas and Jane Carlyle's life in Chelsea.

33. The Far Cry by Emma Smith A beautifully written 1949 novel about a young girl's passage to India: a great *Persephone* favourite. R4 'Book at Bedtime'. Preface: author

34. Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes 1947–1965: Second volume of short stories first published in *The New Yorker* and not known in the UK.

35. Greenery Street by Denis Mackail A delightful, very funny 1925 novel about a young couple's first year of married life in a (real) street in Chelsea. Preface: Rebecca Cohen

36. Lettice Delmer by Susan Miles A unique 1920s novel in verse describing a girl's stormy adolescence and path to redemption; much admired by T S Eliot.

37. The Runaway by Elizabeth Anna Hart A Victorian novel for children and grown-ups, republished in 1936 with Gwen Raverat wood engravings. Afterwords: Anne Harvey, Frances Spalding

38. Cheerful Weather for the Wedding by Julia Strachey A funny, sardonic 1932 novella by a niece of Lytton Strachey, praised by Virginia Woolf. Preface: Frances Partridge. An unabridged *Persephone* audiobook read by Miriam Margolyes. A film with Felicity Jones. Also a *Persephone Classic*

39. Manja by Anna Gmeyner A 1938 German novel, newly translated,

about five children conceived on the same night in 1920, and their lives until the Nazi takeover. Preface: Eva Ibbotson (the author's daughter)

40. The Priory by Dorothy Whipple A much-loved 1939 novel about a family, upstairs and downstairs, living in a large country house. 'Warm, witty and realistic' (Hatchards). Preface: David Conville

41. Hostages to Fortune by Elizabeth Cambridge 'Deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy' (Harriet Lane, *Observer*): a remarkable fictional portrait of a doctor's family in rural Oxfordshire in the 1920s.

42. The Blank Wall by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding 'The top suspense writer of them all' (Chandler). A 1947 thriller about a mother shielding her daughter from a blackmailer. Filmed as *The Reckless Moment* (1949) and *The Deep End* (2001); a R4 serial in 2006.

43. The Wise Virgins by Leonard Woolf This wise and witty 1914 novel contrasts the bohemian Virginia and Vanessa with the girl next door in 'Richstead' (Putney). Preface: Lyndall Gordon

44. Tea with Mr Rochester by Frances Towers Magical, unsettling 1949 stories, a surprise favourite, that are unusually beautifully written; read on R4 in 2003 and 2006. Preface: Frances Thomas

45. Good Food on the Aga by Ambrose Heath A 1933 cookery book written for Aga owners which can be used by anyone; with illustrations by Edward Bawden

46. Miss Ranskill Comes Home by Barbara Euphan Todd A wry 1946 novel: Miss Ranskill is shipwrecked and gets back to a changed wartime England. Preface: Wendy Pollard

47. **The New House** by Lettice Cooper 1936 portrayal of the day a family moves into a new house, and the resulting adjustments and tensions. Preface: Jilly Cooper
48. **The Casino** by Margaret Bonham 1940s short stories with a dark sense of humour; read several times on BBC R4. Preface: Cary Bazalgette
49. **Bricks and Mortar** by Helen Ashton An excellent 1932 novel by a very popular pre- and post-war writer, chronicling the life of a hard-working, kindly London architect and his wife over thirty-five years.
50. **The World that was Ours** by Hilda Bernstein A memoir that reads like a novel set before and after the 1964 Rivonia Trial. Mandela was given a life sentence but the Bernsteins escaped to England. Preface and Afterword: the author **Also a Persephone Classic**
51. **Operation Heartbreak** by Duff Cooper A soldier fails to go to war – until the end of his life. ‘The novel I enjoyed more than any other in the immediate post-war years’ (Nina Bawden). Afterword: Max Arthur
52. **The Village** by Marghanita Laski This 1952 comedy of manners describes post-war readjustments in village life when love ignores the class barrier. Afterword: Juliet Gardiner
53. **Lady Rose and Mrs Memmary** by Ruby Ferguson A 1937 novel about Lady Rose, who inherits a great house, marries well – and then meets the love of her life on a park bench. A great favourite of the Queen Mother. Preface: Candia McWilliam
54. **They Can’t Ration These** by Vicomte de Mauduit 1940 cookery book about ‘food for free’, full of excellent (and fashionable) recipes.
55. **Flush** by Virginia Woolf A light-hearted but surprisingly feminist 1933 ‘life’ of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s spaniel, ‘a little masterpiece of comedy’ (TLS). A ‘Book at Bedtime’ on BBC R4. Preface: Sally Beauman
56. **They Were Sisters** by Dorothy Whipple A 1943 novel by this superb writer, contrasting three different marriages. Preface: Celia Brayfield
57. **The Hopkins Manuscript** by R C Sherriff A 1939 novel ‘by Mr Hopkins’ about what happens when, in 1946, the moon crashes into the earth. Preface: Michael Moorcock, Afterword: George Gamow
58. **Hetty Dorval** by Ethel Wilson First novel (1947) set in the beautiful landscape of British Columbia; a young girl is befriended by the lovely and selfish ‘menace’ – but is she one? Afterword: Northrop Frye
59. **There Were No Windows** by Norah Hoult A touching and funny 1944 novel about an elderly woman with memory loss living in Kensington during the Blitz. Afterword: Julia Briggs
60. **Doreen** by Barbara Noble A 1946 novel about a child who is evacuated from East London to the country during the war. Her mother regrets it and the family that takes her in wants to keep her. Preface: Jessica Mann
61. **A London Child of the 1870s** by Molly Hughes A 1934 memoir about an ‘ordinary, suburban Victorian family’ in Islington, a great favourite with all ages. Preface: Adam Gopnik
62. **How to Run Your Home Without Help** by Kay Smallshaw A 1949 manual for the newly servantless housewife full of advice that is historically interesting, useful nowadays and, as well, unintentionally funny. Preface: Christina Hardyment
63. **Princes in the Land** by Joanna Cannan A 1938 novel about a daughter of the aristocracy married to an Oxford don; her three children fail to turn out as she hoped.
64. **The Woman Novelist and Other Stories** by Diana Gardner Late 1930s and early 1940s short stories that are witty, sharp and with an unusual undertone. Preface: Claire Gardner
65. **Alas, Poor Lady** by Rachel Ferguson Polemical but intensely readable 1937 novel about the unthinking cruelty with which Victorian parents gave birth to daughters without anticipating any future for them apart from marriage.
66. **Gardener’s Nightcap** by Muriel Stuart A 1938 pot pourri: miniature essays on gardening – such as Dark Ladies (fritillary), Better Gooseberries, Phlox Failure – which will be enjoyed by all gardeners.
67. **The Fortnight in September** by RC Sherriff Another novel by the author of *Journey’s End*, and *The Hopkins Manuscript*, PB No. 57, about a family on holiday in Bognor in 1931; a quiet masterpiece. Read on Radio 4. **Also a Persephone Classic**
68. **The Expendable Man** by Dorothy B Hughes A 1963 thriller about a young doctor in Arizona which encapsulates the social, racial and moral tensions of the time. By the author of *In a Lonely Place*. Afterword: Dominic Power
69. **Journal of Katherine Mansfield** The husband of the great short story writer (cf. *The Montana Stories*, PB No. 25) assembled this Journal from unposted letters, scraps of writing etc: a unique portrait.
70. **Plats du Jour** by Patience Gray and Primrose Boyd A 1957 cookery book which was a bestseller at the

time and a pioneering work for British cooks. The line drawings and the endpapers are by David Gentleman.

71. *The Shuttle* by Frances Hodgson Burnett A 1907 page-turner about an American heiress married to an English aristocrat, whose beautiful and enterprising sister sets out to rescue her. Preface: Anne Sebba

72. *House-Bound* by Winifred Peck This 1942 novel describes an Edinburgh woman deciding, radically, to run her house without help and do her own cooking; the war is in the background and foreground. Afterword: Penelope Fitzgerald

73. *The Young Pretenders* by Edith Henrietta Fowler An 1895 novel for adults and children about 5-year-old Babs, who lives with her uncle and aunt and has not yet learnt to dissemble. Preface: Charlotte Mitchell

74. *The Closed Door and Other Stories* by Dorothy Whipple Stories drawn from the three collections published during the author's lifetime. Five were read on BBC R4.

75. *On the Other Side: Letters to my Children from Germany 1940–46* by Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg. Written in Hamburg but not sent, the letters provide a crucial counterpoint to *Few Eggs and No Oranges*, PB No. 9. Preface: Ruth Evans

76. *The Crowded Street* by Winifred Holtby A 1924 novel about Muriel's attempts to escape from small-town Yorkshire, and her rescue by Delia, alias Vera Brittain. Preface: Marion Shaw

77. *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting* by Penelope Mortimer 1958 novel about the 'captive wives' of the pre-war women's lib era, bored and lonely in suburbia. Preface: Valerie Grove

78. *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914–39* by Nicola Beauman A mixture of literary criticism and historical evocation, first published in 1983, about the women writers of the inter-war period.

79. *Round About a Pound a Week* by Maud Pember Reeves Working-class life in Lambeth in the early C20th: witty, readable, poignant and fascinating – and still relevant today. Preface: Polly Toynbee

80. *The Country Housewife's Book* by Lucy H Yates A useful 1934 book on topics such as the storeroom and larder, garden produce, and game.

81. *Miss Buncle's Book* by DE Stevenson A woman writes a novel, as 'John Smith', about the village she lives in. A delightful and funny 1934 book by an author whose work sold in millions. Preface: Aline Templeton

82. *Amours de Voyage* by Arthur Hugh Clough A novel in verse, set in Rome in 1849, funny, beautiful, profound, and very modern in tone. Preface: Julian Barnes

83. *Making Conversation* by Christine Longford An amusing, unusual 1931 novel about a girl growing up which is in the vein of *Cold Comfort Farm* and PB No. 38 *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*. Preface: Rachel Billington

84. *A New System of Domestic Cookery* by Mrs Rundell 1816 facsimile edition of an 1806 cookbook: long, detailed and fascinating. Preface: Janet Morgan

85. *High Wages* by Dorothy Whipple Another novel by Persephone's bestselling writer: about a girl setting up a dress shop just before WW1. Preface: Jane Brocket

86. *To Bed with Grand Music* by Marghanita Laski A couple are

separated by the war. She is serially unfaithful, a quite new take on 'women in wartime'. Preface: Juliet Gardiner

87. *Dimanche and Other Stories* by Irène Némirovsky Ten short stories by the author of *Suite Française*, written between 1934 and 1942. 'Luminous, extraordinary, stunning' said the reviewers.

88. *Still Missing* by Beth Gutcheon A 1981 novel about a woman whose six-year-old son sets off on his own for school and does not return. But his mother never gives up hope...

89. *The Mystery of Mrs Blencarrow* by Mrs Oliphant Two 1880s novellas about women shockingly, and secretly, abandoned by their husbands, that were favourites of Penelope Fitzgerald. Afterword: Merryn Williams

90. *The Winds of Heaven* by Monica Dickens 1955 novel by the author of *Mariana* about a widow with three rather unsympathetic daughters who finds happiness in the end. Afterword: AS Byatt

91. *Miss Buncle Married* by DE Stevenson A very enjoyable sequel to *Miss Buncle's Book* (PB No. 81): Miss Buncle moves to a new village. Afterword: Fiona Bevan

92. *Midsummer Night in the Workhouse* by Diana Athill 'Funny, engaging and unexpected' (*Paris Review*): 1950s stories by the editor and memoir writer. Preface: author, who also read six of the stories as a *Persephone Audiobook*.

93. *The Sack of Bath* by Adam Fergusson A 1973 polemic, with photographs, raging at the destruction of Bath's C18th artisan terraced housing. Preface: author

94. *No Surrender* by Constance Maud A fascinating and path-

breaking 1911 suffragette novel about a mill girl and her aristocratic friend. Preface: Lydia Fellgett

95. Greenbanks by Dorothy Whipple 1932 novel by our most popular author about a family and, in particular, the happy relationship between a grandmother and granddaughter. Afterword: Charles Lock

96. Dinners for Beginners by Rachel and Margaret Ryan A 1934 cookery book for the novice cook explaining everything in exacting detail: eye-opening and useful.

97. Harriet by Elizabeth Jenkins A brilliant but disquieting 1934 novel about the 1877 murder of Harriet Staunton. Afterword: Rachel Cooke

98. A Writer's Diary by Virginia Woolf Extracts from the diaries, covering the years 1918–41, selected by Leonard Woolf in 1953 in order to show his late wife in the act of writing. Preface: Lyndall Gordon

99. Patience by John Coates A hilarious 1953 novel about a 'happily married' Catholic mother of three in St John's Wood who falls 'improperly in love'. Preface: Maureen Lipman

100. The Persephone Book of Short Stories Thirty stories, ten by 'our' authors, ten from the last decade's *Biannuals* and ten that are newly reprinted. A Persephone bestseller.

101. Heat Lightning by Helen Hull A young married woman spends a sultry and revelatory week with her family in small-town Michigan; a 1932 Book-of-the-Month Club Selection. Preface: Patricia McClelland Miller

102. The Exiles Return by Elisabeth de Waal A novel, written in the late 1950s but never published. Five exiles return to Vienna after the war. A meditation on 'going back' and a love story. Preface: Edmund de Waal

103. The Squire by Enid Bagnold In 1938 a woman gives birth to her fifth child: a rare novel about the process of birth. Preface: Anne Sebba

104. The Two Mrs Abbotts by DE Stevenson This 'Miss Buncl' book, published in 1943, is about Barbara Abbott, as she now is, and the 'young' Mrs Abbott, keeping the home fires burning during the war.

105. Diary of a Provincial Lady by EM Delafield One of the funniest books ever written: a 1930 novel, written as a diary, about everyday family life. Illustrated by Arthur Watts. Afterword: Nicola Beauman

106. Into the Whirlwind by Eugenia Ginzburg A Russian woman is arrested in 1937 and sent to the Gulag. Filmed as *Within the Whirlwind* with Emily Watson. Afterword: Rodric Braithwaite

107. Wilfred and Eileen by Jonathan Smith A 1976 novel, based on fact, set in the years 1913–15. Wilfred, badly wounded in France, is rescued by his wife. A 4-part television serial in 1981. Afterword: author

108. The Happy Tree by Rosalind Murray A 1926 novel about the devastating effect of WW1 on the young, in particular a young married woman living in London during the war years. Preface: Charlotte Mitchell

109. The Country Life Cookery Book by Ambrose Heath A 1937 cookbook, organised by month (and thus by excellent seasonal recipes) illustrated with a dozen beautiful wood engravings by Eric Ravilious. Preface: Simon Hopkinson.

110. Because of the Lockwoods by Dorothy Whipple A 1949 novel: the Hunters are patronised by the wealthy Lockwoods but Thea Hunter begins to question their integrity. Preface: Harriet Evans

111. London War Notes by Mollie Panter-Downes These extraordinary 'Letters from London', describing everyday life in WW2, were written for *The New Yorker* and then collected in one volume in 1971. Preface: David Kynaston

112. Vain Shadow by Jane Hervey A Waugh-ish black comedy written in the 1950s but not published until 1963 about the days after the death of a patriarch in a large country house and the effect on his family. Preface: Celia Robertson

113. Greengates by RC Sherriff A 1936 novel about retirement: Mr Baldwin realises the truth of 'for better for worse but not for lunch' but finds a new life by moving to 'metroland'. Preface: Juliet Gardiner

114. Gardeners' Choice by Evelyn Dunbar and Charles Mahoney Two artist friends collaborated over the text and drawings of this rare and delightful 1937 gardening book. Preface: Edward Bawden, Afterword: Christopher Campbell-Howes

115. Maman, What Are We Called Now? by Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar The author kept a diary in July and August 1944: an unparalleled insight into the last days of the Occupation in Paris. Photographs: Thérèse Bonney. Preface: Caroline Moorehead

116. A Lady and Her Husband by Amber Reeves A 1914 novel about a woman who realises that the girls in her husband's chain of tea shops are underpaid – and does something about it. Preface: Samantha Ellis

117. The Godwits Fly by Robin Hyde A semi-autobiographical, lyrically written 1938 novel about a girl's rather fraught childhood by this major New Zealand writer. Preface: Ann Thwaite

118. Every Good Deed and Other Stories by Dorothy Whipple

A 1944 novella and nine short stories written between 1931 and 1961 which display the author's 'wonderful power of taking quite ordinary people in quite unromantic surroundings and making them live.'

119. Long Live Great Bardfield: The Autobiography of Tirzah Garwood

A touching, funny and perceptive memoir which has many wood engravings by the author, and photographs (eg. of Tirzah's husband Eric Ravilious). Preface: Anne Ullmann

120. Madame Solario by Gladys

Huntington This superb 1956 novel in the Henry James/Edith Wharton tradition is set on Lake Como in 1906; published anonymously and with undertones of incest, it was a *succès de scandale*. Afterword: Alison Adburgham

121. Effi Briest by Theodor Fontane

An 1895 classic of European literature by the great German novelist: neglected in the UK yet on a par with *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. Afterword: Charlie Lee-Potter

122. Earth and High Heaven by Gwethalyn Graham

A 1944 Canadian bestselling novel about a young woman falling in love with a Jewish man and her father's, and Canada's, upsetting and reprehensible anti-semitism. Preface: Emily Rhodes

123. Emmeline by Judith Rossner

A 1980 novel, set in the 1840s, about a 13-year-old girl working in the mills at Lowell; she is seduced, and tragedy ensues: a subtle, and unusual feminist statement. Preface: Lucy Ellmann

124. The Journey Home and Other Stories by Malachi Whitaker

Four volumes of these startling stories came out in the early 1930s; we

reprint twenty of them. Preface: Philip Hensher. Afterword: Valerie Waterhouse

125. Guard Your Daughters by Diana

Tutton A 1953 novel written in a light, very readable style which has dark undertones: four sisters living in the country have to defer to their demanding mother.

126. Despised and Rejected by Rose

Allatini A pioneering 1918 novel about a gay conscientious objector and his friendship with a young woman who also opposes the war. Afterword: Jonathan Cutbill

127. Young Anne by Dorothy

Whipple A quasi-autobiographical, extremely readable novel, her first (1927), about a young girl growing up. Preface: Lucy Mangan

128. Tory Heaven by Marghanita

Laski A dark 1948 satire about a Britain under Tory rule with everyone divided up (by the As) into A, B, C, D, and E. Preface: David Kynaston

129. The Call by Edith Ayrton

Zangwill A 1924 novel about a young woman scientist (based on Hertha Ayrton) who gives up her work for 'the cause' ie. to be a suffragette. Preface: Elizabeth Day

130. National Provincial by Lettice

Cooper A 1938 novel about politics in Leeds in 1935–6, surprisingly page-turning despite its often serious subject matter. Preface: Rachel Reeves

131. Milton Place by Elisabeth de

Waal A novel set in a large house in the English countryside just after the war. A young woman from Vienna changes everything. Preface: Victor de Waal, Afterword: Peter Stansky

132. The Second Persephone Book of Short Stories

Another volume (to follow our hugely successful

first volume, PB No. 100) of thirty stories by women writers.

133. Expiation by Elizabeth von

Arnim Previously omitted from the von Arnim oeuvre, a 1929 novel by the author of *Vera* about marriage and deception – we think it's her best book. Preface: Valerie Grove

134. A Room of One's Own by

Virginia Woolf Based on the path-breaking 1929 lectures given at Cambridge. Preface: Clara Jones

135. One Woman's Year by Stella

Martin Currey Recipes, poems, observations, woodcuts: a delightful 1953 pot pourri.

136. The Oppermanns by Lion

Feuchtwanger Written to alert the world to the horrors of fascism, an unforgettable novel about a Jewish family in Berlin from 1932–3. Foreword Richard J Evans

137. English Climate: Wartime Stories by Sylvia Townsend Warner

Twenty-two short stories set from 1940 to 1946, few previously reprinted. Preface: Lydia Fellgett

138. The New Magdalen by Wilkie

Collins An 1873 'sensation novel' by the great C19th novelist about a 'fallen woman' and society's attitude to her. Preface: James Bobin

139. Random Commentary by

Dorothy Whipple A 'writer's diary' (cf. Virginia Woolf's diary PB No. 98) covering the years 1925–45, selected by the author herself in 1965.

140. The Rector's Daughter by

F M Mayor A 'beloved classic, first published in 1924, about the daughter of the rectory and an unrequited love affair.

141. The Deepening Stream by

Dorothy Canfield Fisher A classic of American literature (though neglected in the US) about the entrancing Matey in France in WW1.

‘THE CHEAP HOLIDAY AND WHAT AUNT JOANNA THOUGHT ABOUT IT’

The little aunt sat and dreamed, while Cousin Paul and his wife gave the family a picturesque account of the wonderful holiday they had spent in Germany. ‘Most enjoyable time I ever had,’ boomed Cousin Paul. ‘Hotels excellent, if you know your way about; cooking perfect –’

‘And all dirt cheap!’ supplemented Cousin Mary, who regarded herself as existing primarily for the purpose of supplementing Cousin Paul. ‘A five-course dinner, wine, coffee and liqueurs – for 4½d. Just fancy!’

The family, in unison, fancied. Gratified at the effect already made, Cousin Paul proceeded to embroider. ‘For about a halfpenny you could travel to all the places worth visiting in the *Umgebung* – I should say, the neighbourhood,’ he explained; and the family, applauding, noted with clannish pride that Cousin Paul had returned home a linguist.

‘Yes,’ chimed Cousin Mary, ‘and we travelled right from the south of Germany to Hamburg – or was it Dresden, Paul? – for *eight pence*. Only think!’

The family only thought. Cousin Paul appeared to be making calculations. ‘No, my dear,’ he corrected; ‘that was on

the way out. Coming back, the mark had slumped again, and owing to my forethought in not taking return tickets it cost us only five-point-three pence.’ He turned to the silent aunt, anxious that no one should be excluded from the approving chorus. ‘How’s that for a holiday, Aunt Joanna?’ he roared at her jovially.

The little aunt jumped. She had been in the family – though not of it – for upwards of sixty years, but she had never quite got used to being roared at. ‘It sounds to me very mathematical, dear,’ she said, with her conciliatory smile. ‘I never could do sums, so perhaps it is a good thing my travelling days are over.’

But Cousin Paul, who had never asked questions for the dull purpose of getting them answered, had already forgotten her, and was embarking on a florid description of the purchases he had made.

‘I didn’t want the things; but your Cousin Mary – well you know what women are!’ said Cousin Paul, though, whatever might be said of those to whom this remark was addressed, this was certainly not one of the things that Paul knew.

‘Well, dear, everything was so

cheap,’ simpered Cousin Mary, who had listened so long to Paul’s definition of women that it had now begun to fit her nicely. ‘You couldn’t expect any true woman to resist a fur coat – oh, but a *ravishing* fur coat, girls! – that was going for a few shillings. It would have been simply *wicked*, wouldn’t it, Aunt Joanna?’ Fortunately, Aunt Joanna was not really expected to unravel this ethical problem.

The little old aunt never knitted; and it is possible that Satan, in his search for idle hands, saw Aunt Joanna’s folded in her lap, and was consequently, responsible for the excursion her spirit took in the next few minutes. But it may have been equally ascribable to a passage in the letter that lay in the under-pocket of her grey alpaca gown.

‘We have had nothing but a little weak cabbage soup for days,’ wrote Freda, the professor’s wife. ‘Everything is now sold except poor Mamachen’s fur coat, which we were trying to keep because of her rheumatism: for alas! We can no more buy fuel or warm under-clothing...’

Suddenly Aunt Joanna was looking in at the neat Berlin apartment where she had spent such happy holidays in the past.

But the great carved sideboard was gone; so was the stuffed sofa on which the favoured visitor was invited to sit. The round polished table and solid oak chairs were no longer to be seen, nor the black clock, nor the handsome crimson carpet. A gaunt old lady sat on a stool in the corner of the room, and moaned as if in great pain. At the window, a man with despair in his eyes, his frame bent and shrunken, stood looking hopelessly out. As Freda stole from the room with the fur coat over her arm, Aunt Joanna saw that even the wedding ring was gone from her thin finger.

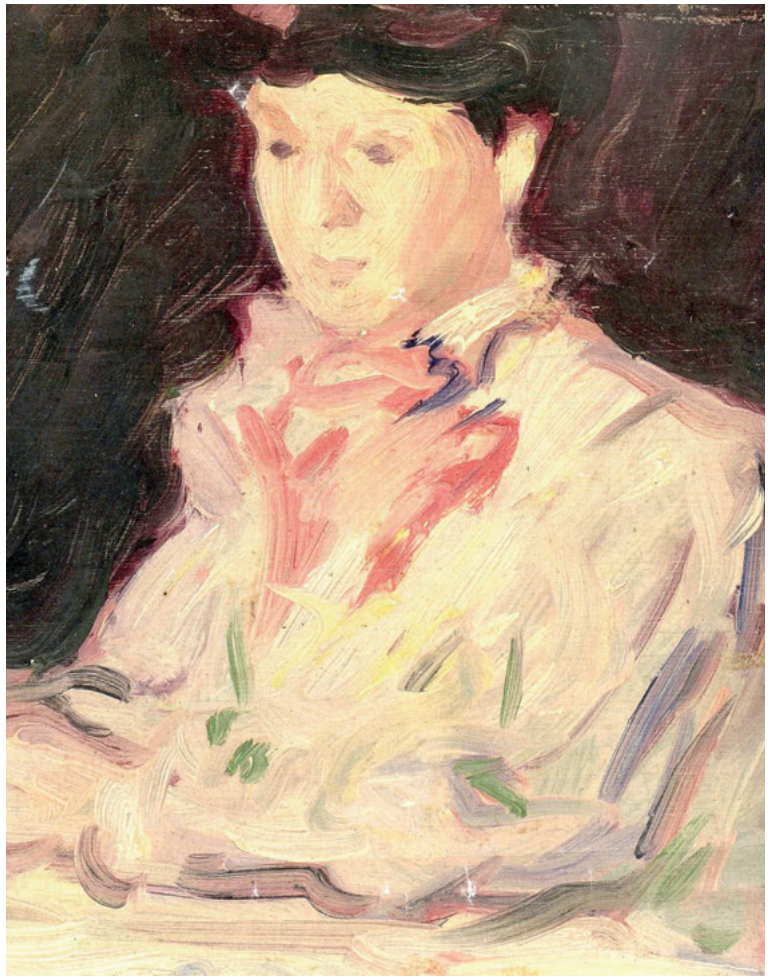
Up from the street below, in a voice strangely like Cousin Mary's, floated the gay remark of the passing tourist: 'After that enormous lunch I simply can't face tea yet awhile. Let's go and buy that diamond ring instead!'

'Don't you believe it,' Cousin Paul was saying, as Aunt Joanna's spirit wandered back again into the family circle. 'There's plenty of everything in Germany. Haven't I seen it with my own eyes?'

'Shops filled with luxuries,' chorused his wife. 'Furniture, clothes, jewels – well, they must come from *somewhere*, mustn't they?'

'I am an observant man,' resumed Cousin Paul, whose knowledge of women was only equalled by his knowledge of himself; 'and you may take my word for it, there's no more distress in Germany – than there is in this country!'

'God help the poor souls!'



At the Dining Table' (detail) by John Duncan Fergusson (1874-1961), sold at Bonhams in 2011

was the quite amazing remark that came from the spot in the family circle where Aunt Joanna appeared to be sitting. It was, however, so incredible a remark that those who heard it at once attributed it to their excited imagination.

'And to think,' was Cousin Mary's parting observation when the visitors took leave, 'that we very nearly went to Belgium, where the mark, or whatever it is

hasn't slumped at all! Wouldn't that have been *tragic*?'

No doubt it was a sense of awful tragedy happily averted that made the little old Aunt relapse suddenly into hysterical laughter. The family charitably attributed it to her customary eccentricity.

This story by Evelyn Sharp appeared in the Daily Herald on 6 August 1923. It was reprinted in the biography of Evelyn Sharp by Angela John.

LEHMANN VERSUS WHIPPLE

In 2015 a competition was launched by Persephone in which contestants were invited to submit an essay on one of their authors, *wrote Sally Oxland, librarian at the Bromley House Library, Nottingham*. The response was pleasing but ‘our one disappointment was that there were only two essays about Dorothy Whipple. However, this is not a bit surprising – the only reason she is not as well-known as, say, Barbara Pym is that she is so very difficult to write about, as we have discovered over the years.’

DW’s books have been championed by Persephone since 1999: and have consistently been among their bestsellers, so disappointment about the comparatively weak representation of DW in the competition is understandable; despite her popularity with their readers, it is clear Persephone recognised there was something about her writing that made it difficult to explain what was so appealing about her work.

In her introduction to the Virago edition of *The Weather in the Streets* Carmen Callil of Virago wrote: ‘Rosamond Lehmann had produced the bible for women of my generation... most of us, if not married – or even if we were – were inadequately in love in one way or another, with married men, men who didn’t want to marry, men who might

marry us but didn’t know when.’ Clearly, identification with the story and with its heroine, Olivia Curtis, were defining factors in the success of its content. Callil went on to describe the book as ‘our *Bridget Jones’s Diary*’. This is surprising: Olivia’s happy-go-lucky bohemian lifestyle, and choice of unsuitable men, may have a certain superficial similarity to Bridget’s, but the intensely wrought story of misplaced love and off-hand betrayal is totally unlike the zeitgeisty breeziness of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* entries.

The Weather in the Streets also possessed the other high standard required by Callil – that of its prose. Rosamond Lehmann’s language is described as ‘enchanting’ and as possessing ‘a vivid lyricism that was unique to her’. So, if DW’s prose and content were not like those of Rosamond Lehmann, what *were* they like? To find out we need to compare two passages. The first is from *Invitation to the Waltz* (1932), which features a private ball, taking place during a country house weekend, hosted by the local aristocracy. The anticipation of this dance, and its actual occasion, take up most of the book in language that is atmospheric, full of imagery, and vividly lyrical. ‘Now the evening was at the flood, racing from room to room. Now the fortunate sailed with it, serene – doubt, fear allayed. Now if

failure threatened, failure was confirmed. From now on could be but a declension for such as faltered and fell aside, caught and borne down by inauspicious currents, stranded upon islands, empty arid salt.’ It is the sort of fine writing that makes you stop a moment to experience the effect of the rhythms and harmonies of the words and images themselves.

In the second passage, taken from the opening chapter of *They Were Sisters* (1943) the scene is the ballroom of Blackpool Tower, at a very public dance, open to anyone who can pay the price of the entrance fee. The young men here are salesmen and local government workers, not officers and gentlemen huntsmen. The story’s central character, Lucy, watches her younger sister Vera dance: ‘In a few moments, the orchestra struck up a tune nobody seemed to know. Nobody went out on to the floor, until suddenly Vera and Tony Carter skimmed out into the middle and began to dance. Everybody watched, fascinated. No other dancers appeared on the floor. They had danced together a great deal, Lucy knew, and this must have been a dance they had practised. They were perfect partners, but no one looked much at Tony. It was Vera who held all eyes. Lucy would never forget how she looked that day. “The day Vera danced,” they would say long afterwards.’ The prose here

is unadorned, with no flourishes of poetic language, metaphor, or simile. The nearest it comes to vivid lyricism is the use of the word: 'skimmed'. But the richness of the passage lies in its narrative drive, created through the characterisations of Lucy, the loving, motherly sister, and Vera, the flamboyant, headstrong one.

In the following passage we read the description of the house in which Kate and Olivia live: 'You see rooms crowded with ponderous cupboards, sideboards, tables, photographs in silver frames, profusely strewn... These walls contain a world. Here is continuity spinning a web from room to room, from year to year.' The language in this passage slips from actual description of a house into something more eternal and timeless, the house becomes a metaphor for the society in which the sisters live. By contrast, here is DW's description of Lucy's house, set in a village in the south Midlands: 'The house was a little old stone house with the date "1612" over the door and Colley Weston slates on the roof. All the garden was behind, with an orchard at the side where Lucy and William kept bees and hens. There was no more garden than two strips of lawn each side of the cobbled path, but it was all that was needed, because the house was perfectly set, or so Lucy considered, on a small green away from the rest of the village, with the church to the left.' The house is old but it is not the family's ancestral home,

and its history is not the focus of the passage. It is quite simply the home of Lucy and William, and the description serves to emphasise Lucy's contentment with the domestic range of her life.

Dorothy Whipple considered herself to be better at characterisation than narrative, stating 'I don't like having to concoct plots, I like doing people', and in the passages quoted the absence of linguistic fireworks is extremely effective in establishing the characters of Lucy, Vera and even William. This is where they live; this is how they live; this is what they are like. And, while DW is modest about her plotting skills, her stories are real page-turners. The strength of the characterisation, built on a foundation of carefully chosen, but apparently artless language, makes us want to know how their story turns out.

So, what had made DW's books so popular in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, but caused them to languish largely unread through the next three decades, until their resurrection by Persephone? The novelist Harriet Evans addresses this enigma in her preface to *Because of the Lockwoods*: 'The world of literary London, for want of a better expression, is today perhaps more sexist and snobbish (especially geographically snobbish), almost unbelievably, than it was when DW was writing and the cultural tide of opinion is, these days,

against her.' And fellow novelist Celia Brayfield argues in her afterword to *They Were Sisters* that it was prejudice against the middle ground, prevalent in certain areas of literary criticism, which has shadowed the reputation of domestic writers such as DW. She begins her piece by saying: 'In discussing English writing, the word "middle" is a term of abuse. If a phenomenon can be described as middle-class, middle-brow, or mid-life, let alone pertaining to the Mid-lands, its significance is immediately denied.'

DW herself was all of these middle things, and her stories were set against just such a background. Yet her books faced head-on the dark side of life within that society. They were not simply the cosy, smug records of the self-satisfied and the respectable, although a peaceful, loving, settled life was always seen as the desirable way of living. Instead, adultery, domestic abuse, coercive control, alcoholism, cruelty to children (and, in a heart-rending episode, to dogs as well) all featured in her stories.

I am now very aware how hard it is to write about DW's books. All you really want to do is to re-tell the stories – and she has already done that, a million times better than anyone else could.

This article, in a longer version, first appeared on the Bromley House Library Nottingham website in January 2021.

LAURA GRENFELL IN WW2

Early in lockdown I found my mother's (very intermittent) diaries and became hooked on the diary she started briefly in May 1940, *Geordie Fergusson wrote to us*. She, then Laura Grenfell, was 20, and events must have seemed interesting enough to record.

Adding her typed letters, sent as carbon copies to her six older siblings, I began to transcribe them and e-mail them each day to my mother's nieces and nephews, their children and mine, and my mother's surviving sister. Reading them on the same date, 80 years on, her optimism about the BEF's progress (until Dunkirk) and that France would hold out, even if the front line was rather west of where it had been in the First World War (until the Armistice was announced), is fascinating: she did not know how the story would end. Her account of the fates of a brother and brother-in-law in France, one coming back in high spirits, the other reported, eventually, as a POW combines the dramatic and matter of fact. This combination continues through 1940, not least as the Blitz brought the front line to her doorstep.

She was at the centre of a family of eccentrics, working as a private secretary to Lady Reading, founder and Director of the WVS. On duty and off, she met fascinating characters. One was Virginia Graham, whose *Consider the Years*, a book

of evocative and witty verse was republished by Persephone. My mother's letters and diaries are straight from the world of those poems: brave and high-spirited, curious and wry, and ready to be amused by anything – even things that are grim. Her days are spent in the same places, with the same people – the fierce Miss Maxse, her friend (and Virginia's) Maria Brassey – and doing the same things described in the poems.

*My thoughts are centred now on
strange concerns.*

*No longer do I find my spirit
yearns*

*To talk of theatres, or art, or
books,*

*Or love affairs, or other people's
cooks.*

*Dead as the dust of ancient
dreams they lie,*

And cannot comfort me, or edify.

*My conversation burgeoned forth
and flowered*

*From Bach to Matthew Smith and
Noel Coward;*

*I did not seek a restless bed afraid
I had forgotten to inform Miss*

Wade

*That through some misdemeanour
unforeseen*

*Some forty cups were gone from
the canteen.*

*And now it seems, whatever may
befall,*

*My life, my soul, my heart, my
hands, my all*

*Are linked with sausage-rolls and
wool and gauze,*

*Bound with old saucepans to the
common cause.*

Virginia Graham worked with my mother in the WVS but was ten years older. Their friendship probably came via my mother's sister-in-law, Joyce Grenfell, Virginia's closest friend, fellow Christian Scientist and lifelong correspondent.

My mother's job mixed conventional private secretary activity and practical fieldwork. Her first mention of Virginia (now Thesiger) came in a letter of 25 May 1940 when Belgium and France were reeling from invasion and refugees were pouring into London.

'I went off to meet refugees last Sunday, and my goodness we had a picnic. Three trains came in, the last arriving at 9. The refugees were put in Alexandra Palace (what a view there is from there) and then having got there they were supposed to have supper and then bed down. Before any of this could be done they all had to be registered, medically examined and I don't know what all. Of course just as it started getting dark, with no possibility of blacking out as the whole building is glass, we suddenly realised that there were not enough beds. So in the half light, always growing darker, we had to unload a lorry of stretcher beds, carry them miles and miles stumbling over goodness knows what, and try and erect them among a swarming mass

of humanity. There were about six hurricane lights which made the scene very eerie. Quite unaccountably after the hardest half hour to an hours work that I have ever done, a peace and quiet fell on the building which was most welcome. Mary Brassey and I had been up there along with a lot of other miscellaneous people. I was staying with Virginia Thesiger (as I am again this weekend) and Maria and I got back at midnight and fell on a cold supper that had been left out for us like wolves.'

And on 12 June, my mother reported that she and Virginia had had brief parts in a Ministry of Information propaganda movie. She told her sisters:

'If a film comes your way called "Britannia was a Woman" you must go to it (it is only a ten minute feature) as right at the very end I feature in it. I am very hurt that the beautiful solo which I posed for with such anguish has been cut out, just my luck, but there is still a flash of Virginia Graham and two other females standing on a roof. You probably won't even know it was me as although I was expecting it, it happened so quickly and I was so appalled by the idea of that awful apparition being me that I hardly saw it myself.'

My mother stayed a friend of Virginia's after the war. Traces of that friendship surround me today. When my mother married in 1950 my parents bought a house in

Ayrshire. They eventually settled there after eight years as military nomads, gradually doing it up and adding useful things like electricity. When the house was becoming habitable but lacked much furniture, my mother had a letter from Virginia saying that she had just cleared her late half-sister Kitty's flat, taken what she wanted, and the rest was in a Pickfords 'pantechnicon' on its way to our house. She wanted no argument: anything my parents didn't want could go to a local auction house or wherever they liked. It was remarkable generosity and included some charming pictures and pieces of furniture I have known all my life and still have.



I discovered an odd item in a cupboard some years ago: a Game Book, a ledger of mass slaughter of pheasants and partridges in the late 1890s and early 1900s. It included a grotesque entry during the Anglo-Boer War of "one Boer, wounded". Thanks to Google, I worked out that this had

belonged to Kitty's father, who had died in 1906, but this grim entry reads like one of the "Ruthless Rhymes" written by Virginia's own father, Harry Graham. Traces of her father's splendidly dark humour appear even in Virginia's poems on WVS office routine:

This is the darkest hour of my drab little life!

You remember that letter full of important enclosures for Miss Maxse?

Well, it's disappeared! Plainly speaking, I have lost it, and I intend to go straight out and lie down in front of a taxi.

If only I thought she would strike me savagely across the face with some blunt instrument!

But she will be kind, I know, and my heart will break in two.

Very well then, it is lost, and I will pay the supreme penalty.

Every folly, we are told, is bought at a price;

and doubtless when they are dragging the static water troughs for my body,

you will be sorry – it will not be at all nice.

I am going now, my friend, here is my wrist-watch and my badge, here is a piece of snow-white hair to wear round your neck in a locket,

and here, as a matter of fact, is Miss Maxse's letter,

which some great fool must have put in my overcoat pocket!

This could be straight from one of my mother's letters. They bring back a world of brave fun in a terrifying time.

EM DELL & THE TOSH HORSE

Despite being widely read and of significance in popular culture, writes David Tanner, Ethel M Dell's work is generally ignored or forgotten, was lampooned by fellow novelists and vilified in contemporary discourse. Her work remains largely over-shadowed by the voices of her contemporaries. Yet as a romantic novelist she reached a mass reading audience: her first title, *The Way of an Eagle* (1912), underwent 34 impressions in its first four years, 42 by 1920, and at the peak of her popularity she earned about £25,000 a year (£4 million in today's values).

In 1922 Rebecca West wrote about reading *Charles Rex* by 'a writer named Miss Ethel M Dell, who has received every sort of acclamation save only the morning stars singing together; and I doubt if one worries about the lack of super-terrestrial recognition when one can sell nearly half-a-million copies of a single novel. And in every line that is written about Charles Rex one hears the thudding, thundering hooves of a certain steed at full gallop; of the true Tosh-horse... Miss Dell is a queen. She rides the Tosh-horse hell-for-leather.' And in 1936, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, George Orwell portrays the typical Dell reader as being neither well-educated nor sophisticated. While in 'In Defence of the Novel' he castigates the 'lazily eulogistic book reviewer' as 'sinking his

standards to a depth at which, say, Ethel M Dell's *The Way of an Eagle* is a fairly good book.'

Fisher Unwin's multiple attempts to sharpen *The Way of an Eagle* by reducing the original manuscript from 300,000 to 90,000 words shows considerable patience, no doubt brought about by a realisation of the commercial opportunity demonstrated by the huge sales of short stories Dell wrote for magazines, and by her success in the USA. Her sales were secured by a combination of the marketability of her work in a time of social hardship and demographic change, through targeted regional press advertising, the focus on magazines and changes in popular reading patterns; also the expansion of the film industry in the 1920s was fundamental to Dell's marketing and played an important part in increasing her reader franchise. In 1926, Iris Barry stated that the 'one thing never to be lost sight of in considering the cinema is that it exists for the purpose of pleasing women. Three out of every four cinema audiences are women.' The large run of successful film tie-ins of Dell's work in the early inter-war period helped to boost her renown in the lending libraries where, as George Orwell noted, 'you see people's real tastes, not their pretended ones: people buy books for mixed motives of precision or display but they then borrow the books

that they really want to read.' Her establishment in film and popular culture contributed to the popularity of her work in the twopenny libraries which sprang up in newsagents and tobacconists throughout the 1930s to cater for a working-class readership, further anchoring Dell's name to a lowbrow reading public. While WH Smith's house magazine, surveying their monthly trade, stated that Dell's work 'stood out in the popular fiction and new edition categories.'

Ethel M Dell's stories sold well in spite of her reclusiveness and avoidance of celebrity culture. There is an interesting parallel to be made here with Georgette Heyer (twenty years younger) who grew up reading her novels. She too was known to consider that personal publicity did not help sales and was intensely private, rarely giving interviews. However, in a revealing comment from 1955, Georgette Heyer made the link to Dell's standpoint succinctly: 'There seems to be a pathetic belief today in the power of personal publicity over sales. I don't share it, and before you assume how mistaken I am, I beg you to consider the case of the late Ethel M Dell, about whom the public knew nothing, and whose colossal sales we should all of us be glad to have had.'

The full text of this piece by David Tanner came out in 2016 in 'The Book World' (Brill). He has since written Dell's biography.

OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

‘England 1943: on war-leave, Hilary learns that his wife in France is dead and their toddler has been smuggled to safety somewhere near Paris. So begins Hilary’s long search for his son, traced eventually to a bleak orphanage where forty children sleep in iron beds in a cold dormitory, no pictures, no toys. Will Hilary recognise his son? Will there be an instinctive bond? He meets a delightful, malnourished little boy who is overcome with gratitude when this stranger takes him for walks and buys him his first ever gift – some warm gloves. But is he Hilary’s son? You will be on tenterhooks throughout *Little Boy Lost*, until the final sentence when you will certainly burst into copious tears. Heartbreaking.’
Val Hennessy *Daily Mail*

‘When the Royal Society of Abyssinia discovered The Hopkins Manuscript two years ago in the ruins of Notting Hill it was hoped that some valuable light would at last be thrown on the final, tragic days of London.’ Now that’s an opening line. Western Europe’s civilisations are dead, their lands deserted and drear; this volume is all that remains. And how did the world end? The moon fell on it.

The premise sounds laughable. The science is laughable. (The beautiful Persephone edition includes an afterword by the eminent physicist George Gamow, who gently demolishes

the book’s entire theoretical foundation.) And yet RC Sherriff’s novel, like all great speculative fiction, rests not on its plausibility, but on the glimpses it shows us of our own face.

The novel’s framing device is fabulous. A magnificently disparaging preface, written eight centuries hence by a snooty Abyssinian scholar, informs the reader that, due to the narrator’s breath-taking self-regard, the book – practically the last remaining British document, barring a KEEP OFF THE GRASS sign and a stone reading PECKHAM 3 MILES – is “almost valueless to the scientist and historian”.

This aspect is precisely what sets *The Hopkins Manuscript* apart from most apocalyptic fiction: it’s (frequently) a comedy. To the great pantheon of puffed-up British idiots, from Pooter to Partridge, we can add Edgar Hopkins, 53, a retired maths teacher in deepest Hampshire with little interest in anything but poultry breeding. And yet, due to his chance membership of the British Lunar Society, he is among the first people let in on the secret that the world will shortly end.

Not that he notices at first. When the looming collision is first announced, his dominant emotion is relief that nobody will ask him to stump up for the society’s expensive telescope. He then informs the reader that he got the 9.18 train home, cleverly

avoiding a delay at Basingstoke and catching up on the latest *Poultry Times*.

When the news eventually sinks in – the moon will hit Earth in seven months – he invests in a china factory, reasoning that after it lands, everyone will need new crockery. There is honesty in the spectacle of a character doing his utmost to avoid an unpleasant fact, but we are unquestionably witnessing the end of days through the eyes of a fool.

And what a fool! Hopkins is a glorious obsessive. Even as the end of the world nears, he gives a lengthy account of his ignominious treatment at the Widgeley Poultry Show. Yet Sherriff declines to make his narrator irredeemable. Hopkins is really nothing but a hobbit. He spends the final minutes before the impact tidying his garden; as he leaves his home for the last time, he makes sure to pack his slippers. The pathos leavens his pomposity.

The book crackles with juxtapositions of the everyday and the extraordinary. By the time Hopkins starts describing the apocalyptic years he has lived through, London’s population numbers in the hundreds; his neighbour has moved in to the National Gallery, where she warms herself by burning the Dutch masterpieces she dislikes. The night before the very cataclysm, Hopkins’s village plays a cricket match lit by the swollen moon in the sky. Some details are

quite pathetically poignant: as the doomed villagers troop into their inadequate dugout, the vicar brings his gramophone.

The Hopkins Manuscript was published in April 1939, and clearly foreshadows the coming war: the bunkers being dug for all, the conversion of the Underground into deep-level shelters, the fears of chemical asphyxiation, the cheery “Business as usual” signs on businesses. (One sign that the end is truly nigh comes when even Londoners start smiling at each other.)

At the book’s core lies the message that the real enemy is not the moon; it is ourselves. The nationalism and militarism of the age filter through not before the crash, but – spoiler alert – after it, after two fragile years of recovery. They find expression in the odious politician Major Jagger, one of the “ignorant, unscrupulous adventurers” urging his countrymen into war, destroying the fragile “United States of Europe” to restore the glories of the British Empire. Readers in 1939 can hardly fail to have been reminded of other European leaders spoiling for a fight to protect the honour of the fatherland. Sherriff had seen Europe smashed once before – he spent four years in the trenches – and his dread of it happening again shines through.

What a weird and brilliant talent he had. *Hopkins* wasn’t Sherriff’s first sci-fi outing; he had already written the screenplay for HG Wells’s *The Invisible Man*. Today he’s remembered

principally for his play about the First World War, *Journey’s End*, but he seems to have written whatever he pleased. (His first novel, *The Fortnight in September*, concerns a family going to Bognor for a fortnight. That’s it. It’s riveting.) *Hopkins*, however, was his finest hour.’ Andrew Hunter Murray in *The Times*

‘F or decades, Dorothy Whipple’s books – eight novels, two volumes of autobiography, a novella and a plethora of short stories – lay out of print. Thanks to Persephone Books, however, almost all of Whipple’s work is now available again. The latest of her books to be reissued is *Random Commentary*, first published in 1966. It is an assortment “Compiled from note-books and journals kept from 1925 onwards”, as the original subtitle has it.

We first meet Whipple in the mid-1920s. After her first love was killed during the First World War, she marries her employer, Henry Whipple, the director of education for Blackburn. She also struggles to establish herself as a writer, failing to sell a short story for five years. Modesty regarding her writing abilities and gentle wit suffuse these diaries. Whipple repeatedly berates herself for not working hard enough. Procrastinating, staring out of the window, or poking the fire – anything but writing: “When I have time to work, I don’t want to. When I haven’t time, I want to”. Whipple begins new

drafts before finishing previous versions. Working on one book, she always wants to be working on another; “shaping and polishing” is her favourite part of the writing process. When her first novel, *Young Anne* (1927), is accepted for publication, the relief is palpable: “I’m not lost any more”.

Domestic life, meanwhile, is getting in the way: “I was desperate, thinking of my story and the steak that should go into the oven”. Everyday life plays out against the backdrop of impending war; an author “crushed by the horror of it” is left wondering if she should write at all. Always looking forward and making the best of things, however, Whipple understands that the fact she has time to write makes her better off than many women.

A snapshot is provided here, too, of the contemporary publishing world – of David Higham setting up his agency and Michael Joseph founding his imprint, both in 1935. One of the first books Joseph commissioned was Whipple’s first volume of autobiography, *The Other Day* (1936). We also meet the inimitable Miss Head of Hearst Magazines, who must herself be worthy of a screenplay, and who published some of Whipple’s work. There is a humour and kindness to such vignettes in *Random Commentary* that make it a deeply beguiling account of a writer’s life.’ Ellen Rossiter in the *Times Literary Supplement*

THE WOMEN'S PAGE

Being a journalist, like Stella Martin (later Currey) on the *Bristol Times*, writes Sarah Lonsdale, offered women a unique opportunity to access the public sphere but that access meant submitting to editors' prejudices, producing advertiser-friendly copy for women's magazines and the newspaper women's pages. Yet women journalists often produced subversively feminist or literary texts from the heart of the consumer journalism machine, subtly resisting the market- and advertising-driven media apparatus that sought to create the image of women who (as one women's page editor wrote in 1933) 'were interested solely in knitting jumpers, in caring for their complexions, in looking after babies, in cooking, in a "good" murder and in silly stories about weddings'.

Of course not all articles

encouraged consumerism. Readers of the *Manchester Guardian* women's page, established by Madeline Linford in 1922, would have found articles by Ray Strachey, Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain on issues including sub-standard housing, the development of radio, and unchaperoned women being ejected from restaurants. They were still, however, on a separate page and in a separate sphere. Later Madeline Linford would say of her typical reader: 'I saw her as an aloof, rigid and highly critical figure, a kind of Big Sister, vigilant for lapses in taste, dignity and literary English. She was also cultured and educated, but expected not to be at work when she read the page, sitting down to it with her mid-morning cup of coffee.'

Below the pleasant, chatty tone and feminine subject

matter almost every column by Stella Martin Currey is, in fact, a criticism of women's journalism and of the deliberate creation of texts that provoke anxiety and often quite irrational behaviour in women readers. She criticises the custom of women's magazines and newspaper women's pages of creating anxiety in women, and she invokes the idea that their work of becoming the ideal woman is never done, that their lives must be an endless quest for perfection and that they must buy the media and the expensive remedies that the newspapers peddle, thereby creating a vicious circle of anxiety and consumerism that never ends. [In this context, could PB No. 135 *One Woman's Year* be seen as a subversive text?]

Taken from Rebel Women Between the Wars: Fearless Writers and Adventurers (2020) by Sarah Lonsdale



detail from *Washing Day 1911* Harold Gilman (1876-1919)

SAPPHISM AND SEDITION

The essay by Deborah Cohler has the sub-title 'Producing Female Homosexuality in Great War Britain (like the piece on p. 8, its language may be a bit too academic for most of us, but it's worth persevering). Cohler argues that: Through discursive associations with male homosexual representation and in opposition to discourses of home front nationalism, varying models of female homosexuality emerged in public discourse during the Great War. On the home front, discourses of nationalism aligned male homosexuality with sedition and femininity, at the same time as women were encouraged to illustrate their patriotism by adopting a maternal femininity and in the expression of masculine cultural attributes.

The wartime scapegoating of homosexual men took two forms, one domestic and the other xenophobic. The first form was the early twentieth century belief that England's elite class had been corrupted and compromised by internal homosexual decadence (in the figure of Oscar Wilde) before the war and had resulted in wartime military and political degeneration. The second form argued that wartime British male homosexuality had been imported from the decadent and tricky Germans. This rhetoric served to incite patriotic fervour for the war both at home and abroad with notions of cleansing Britain of its foreign

contaminants, protecting both the nation and its allies from further infection.

The position of women within this discourse is a curious one. On the one hand they are a class to be protected from heterosexual violation by a conquering army. But the Great War also produced new representational possibilities of female same-sex desire, which included an increasing dissemination of sexological texts throughout England; growing cultural discomfort with bourgeois romantic friendships; the notoriety of homosexual male representations after the Wilde trial; and militant women's violent pre-war agitation for women's suffrage.

Despised and Rejected, PB No. 126, illustrates, through the character of Antoinette, how female homosexuality emerged narratively through the negotiation of effeminate male homosexual pacifism and patriotic female masculinity. It illustrates the complex relations between home front nationalism, wartime sexual transformation and pacifist resistance in Great War Britain. These domains – homosexual representation and pacifism – are mutually constituted in the world of the novel, where male homosexuality is structurally equivalent to pacifism. When it ends, the imprisoned Dennis, the main character, is rejected by most of his family for refusing military conscription and not for gross

indecencies.

The enmeshed relationships between gender, nationalism, and sexual identity are further entangled by both pacifists and male homosexuality being aligned with modern 'progress', rather than a pre-modern 'instinct' articulated by Dennis's patriotic father, who declares that 'if a man got no fight in him, he's unnatural, that's what I say, unnatural.' Lines are firmly drawn: modernists, pacifists, artists and homosexuals on one side; pre-modern (also characterised in the novel as 'Victorian') middle-class heterosexual men on the other.

Despised and Rejected was published in early 1918 and banned in October. Yet it was not banned for its immoral sexual content, rather, it was censored under the wartime Defence of the Realm regulations and was found 'likely to prejudice the recruiting, training, and discipline of persons in his Majesty's forces.' Antoinette was not mentioned at the trial because there were no legal prohibitions against female homosexuality in Britain. But the narrative structure of the novel's conclusion places her beside Dennis in the camp of pacifism, homosexuality and difference. *Despised and Rejected* establishes a narrative and thematic possibility for emergent lesbian identity through its mapping of sexuality in the cultural rhetoric of nationalism.

1929 PRAISE FOR EXPIATION

Expiation, PB No.133, is (we think) Elizabeth von Arnim's best book. But what is odd is that after its Spring 1929 publication it disappeared, was not reprinted and was rarely referred to, even in the three biographies. Here are some of the 1929 reviews, taken from the American Book Review Digest. They make it even more of a mystery that **Expiation** vanished from sight. Was it the title? Was the theme faintly shocking? Who knows? The Digest summarises the plot and then quotes from the reviews.

Ernest, dying, deals his plump and kindly Milly a cruel blow. For he leaves his fortune to a home for fallen women with the sinister comment, "My wife will know why." Milly does know why; years earlier she had Sinned, but it was long since over and done with. After the reading of the will, Ernest's relatives gather like harpies to pick poor Milly to pieces. Wistful and frightened, she tries to make expiation for her Sin. Her efforts make a tempest in the family teapot.'

Here is admirable material for comedy, and Elizabeth has made the most of it. Because she is so finished a craftsman, her climaxes are never fumbled. Each scene is better than one anticipates, funnier, more delectable. There is never, however, any hint of burlesque. **Expiaton** is a shrewd commentary on middle-class manners and morals. It is also,

incidentally, one of the best of Elizabeth's novels.' *Bookman*

From this collection of lustreless people and muted passions the author has built her story tightly, neatly, and faultlessly. The sentences are beautifully finished, delicately joined. Little passages of irony, bits of sarcasm, paragraphs of tremendous pathos are so cleverly welded that the passage from one to the other is imperceptible.' *NY Herald Tribune*

Expiation seems to us one of the wisest, most satiric and funniest of books. What little we have learned of the technique of novel writing tells us that, mechanically, Elizabeth von Arnim's story is delicately and beautifully adjusted. She has not only blended with perfect smoothness the past and present of her tale, but she has accomplished this so deftly that it seems simple and easy until you try it yourself. High craftsmanship is to us, however, only one of the minor beauties of **Expiation**. The book has an almost godlike quality of sympathy. It is a story of men and women that one of the more tender-hearted dwellers on Olympus might have written. It is funny – amazingly, persistently funny – because of its depth.' *NY Evening Post*

It is a very clever book written in the author's own delightful

style, full of delicate irony, and with many capitally done scenes.' *NY Times*

She has written with all her usual humour and charm, and portrayed the bumptious Botts with almost uncanny accuracy. She makes great fun of her characters, but they are still real for she seems able to temper satire with sympathy to the advantage of both.' *NY World*

Holding her pen gently but firmly, she continues to write novels made dramatic not by external events but by the play of character upon circumstance. Her strokes are pitilessly distinct, but without malice. She is at her wittiest, most urbane and most penetrating in this story of Milly who sinned and expiated her sin.' *Outlook*

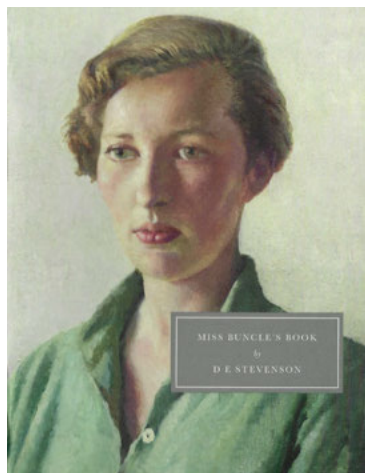
From her cold, sharp phrases that flick one's lips into a pucker, from her long parenthetical sentences with humorous twists in their middles, there emerges a highly diverting and essentially plausible comedy of manners that is none the less comic for the fact that its actors believe themselves engaged in a tragedy of morals.' *Saturday Review of Literature*

Expiation is both entrancing and incisive; it has the tingling derision of a restoration play only softened by compassion for a victim.' *Spectator*

FINALLY

So here we are, settled in Bath, where we have been since early May. Our wonderful removal men recreated Lamb's Conduit Street in Edgar Buildings over the space of two days and since then we have been adjusting to, and very much enjoying, our new surroundings. We miss London of course. And we very much miss Lydia and Emily who, sadly, felt the journey from South London to Bath was only occasionally possible. But for those of us who are settled here, who can complain about a walk to work that takes in the Royal Crescent and The Circus before turning down Gay Street and along to Edgar Buildings? And everyone has been so welcoming.

As well as PB Nos. 140 and 141, we have reissued two more Classics: *Miss Bunclie's Book* and *They Were Sisters*. Both are among our bestsellers (each has sold more than 17,000



copies) and many people, especially those who browse in bookshops rather than buy by mail order, prefer the visibility of the Classics. Something else new is the audiobook of *Someone at a Distance* by Dorothy Whipple, wonderfully read by Susan Wooldridge. Each of our audiobooks (*Someone*, *Good Evening*, *Miss P*, *Marchioness*, *Cheerful*, and *Midsummer Night*) can be downloaded from our website for £10.

The aftershocks of Brexit continue to preoccupy (and upset) us. On July 1st we stopped sending books abroad except in a box by courier. But from October 1st we are tentatively re-starting. We shall fill in the customs forms (one per book), work out the VAT payable (by us) etc etc. The

books will be sent free postage. But please look on the website, email or telephone for updated details of the cost of the book(s). Of course we still send boxes of 6 books for £35 to Europe, £50 to the USA and £65 to anywhere else, plus £5 for each additional book. All details on our website.

One of the joys of our new premises is the beautiful first floor, where we hoped to have events as soon as we were settled in. But sadly Covid has not gone away. And so we do not think we can yet announce a full programme of lunches with talks, film showings, a drink at 6 with a speaker (Wednesdays at Persephone), the book group. But if you would potentially like to attend our events (and this includes the book group) please email events@persephonebooks.co.uk and we shall write to you when we have some planned, which we hope will be very soon.

