Recent biographical writing

The Factual/Fictional Rapport

(Part 2)

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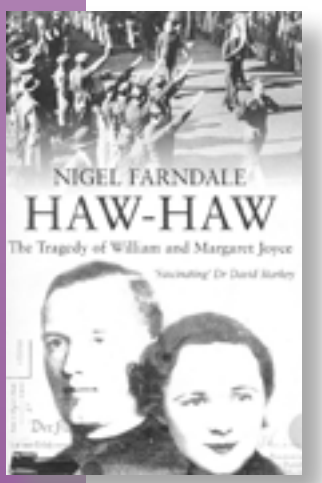
Part one of this two-part biographical article (see **CL** p.10, Sept/Oct, 2006) dealt first with artists (following the triumph of Frances Spurling's biography of Henri Matisse), and then concentrated on literary figures in biography, autobiography and fictional adaptation. Not to leave out other major art forms, this section will deal with figures from the worlds of theatre and music who have recently been the subject of biographies.

The Welsh poet and priest RS Thomas once claimed that 'all we need to know about a writer's life is in the work. The rest is gossip'. This could presumably be extended to the other arts, and gossip may not infrequently be the driving force behind popular interest in a famous life. Certainly it is true of modern-day celebrities, especially film stars, but on a more serious plane I think it is true to say that well-researched biography can enhance one's insight into the works and achievements of a given individual.

In the case of Mozart, for example, Jane Glover's **Mozart's women: his family, his friends, his music** casts light on the influences surrounding him. Besides the remarkable women in his immediate family - his mother Maria Anna and talented musician sister 'Nannerl' - his marriage to Constance Weber took him into the heart of another musical family with three of the four daughters being talented professional singers. Not surprisingly some of Mozart's greatest operatic roles are for women and Glover shows for whom and how these roles were written.



As this year's 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth approached, the bookshops began to feature more and more tributes to what Glover calls 'the greatest musical genius the world has ever known'. Her particular approach to the subject is given an added dimension through her detailed knowledge of all the women important to Mozart. Especially interesting is his relationship to his sister whose career declined to the point of extinction as his gained momentum, his infatuation with the singer Aloysia Weber, before marrying her sister Constanze, and, most notably, his collaboration with various expert women musicians.

The fortunes of a music festival rather than a musician come into focus with Brigette Hamann's **Winifred Wagner: a life at the heart of Hitler's Bayreuth**. An English girl orphaned and sent into the care of relatives in Berlin, Winifred (born in 1897) met the Bayreuth set through her guardians and had no conflict of loyalty in 1914. In 1915 she married Richard Wagner's portly and much older son, Siegfried (1869-1930), living at first in the shadow of her mother-in-law, Cosima, whose nationalism and anti-Semitism were aggravated by Germany's defeat in 1918. Along with her associates Winifred was an early admirer of Hitler. When she was widowed in 1930 she took control of the Bayreuth Festival which increasingly became a Nazi showpiece, and which was in fact paid for by the party during World War II. The audience, too, was often made up of Nazi officials or military men, not always appreciative of the taxingly long outpourings of the Master!

Though Hitler was a friend of Winifred's, even letting her son Wieland off military service, when her daughter Friedelind fled to Switzerland and from there to America where she denounced Hitler and his cohorts, he ceased to trust Winifred and distanced himself from her. Nevertheless she continued to run the festival up to 1944 and despite her vociferous endorsement of anti-Semitism she hated outright cruelty. Paradoxically, during her denazification process she was able to call on several Jews to testify that she had helped them out of difficulties with the Nazi race laws. Yet when evidence emerged of the terrible atrocities committed in pursuit of 'the final solution' she refused to blame the Nazi leaders, pinning the guilt on underlings.

No doubt the Irish-American William Joyce was equally adept at juggling unpleasant truths when he took to broadcasting Nazi propaganda from Berlin. In **Haw-Haw: the tragedy of William and Margaret Joyce** Nigel Farndale shows how Joyce rationalised his position, seeing himself not as a support for Hitler but as a defence against Communism. In the end, because he had held a British passport, he was tried for treason and executed. His wife, Margaret, was not

prosecuted but was protected, Farndale speculates, by a deal struck between her husband and the spymaster Maxwell Knight. This could perhaps fall into the gossip category that RS Thomas so despises.

Acting is a profession that has always attracted gossip and the story of Mary Robinson (±1758-1800) is no exception. Known popularly as Perdita, a nickname acquired from her role in an abbreviated **Winter's tale**, she caught the fancy of the Prince of Wales who styled himself as Floriziel. Although she had been married at 15, her husband turned a blind eye to lovers bearing gifts, especially to one as powerful as the future George IV. The press was avid for news of the affair which annoyed the King who persuaded the prince to break off the relationship after only a year.

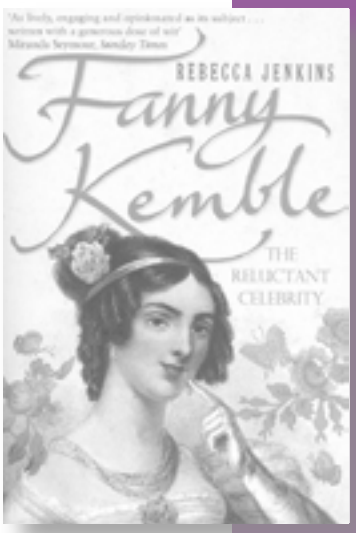
This was not to be the beautiful Mary's last affair and she also achieved considerable acclaim as an actress trained by Garrick. The **Town and Country Magazine** awarded her rather grudging praise as follows: 'If she was not remarkably excellent as an actress, she was at least so happy as never to be remarkably deficient in any part she attempted; she seldom played without applause.'

Sadly, however, her acting career ended suddenly at 26 with a mysterious illness that left her semi-paralysed from the waist down.

All three of her present biographers (see Bibliography: Hester Davenport, Paula Byrne and Sarah Gristwood), show with admiration how courageously Mary Robinson faced this disaster by becoming a writer of some note. Both as a novelist and essayist she was advised and assisted in her new career by her friendships with William Godwin and Samuel Taylor Coleridge. Now fallen into oblivion, her best works concerned the subject of women's role in society and the double standards that afflicted her sex. Possibly renewed interest in the works may be stimulated by the almost simultaneous appearance of these three biographies, likened by the critic Sarah Burton to a London bus, for ages none appears then suddenly three come along at once! (**Spectator**, 22 January 2005).

Nell Gwyn (1650-87) is another actress with royal connections, though perhaps more usually associated with orange selling than the stage. Her most recent biographer is Charles Beauclerk, heir to the Dukedom of St Albans which was created for one of Nell's two sons by Charles II, who also bestowed on them the surname Beauclerk.

Now his descendant traces Nell's ascent from her mother's bawdy house in Covent Garden, to orange girl to star comedienne at Drury Lane and royal mistress. He also suggests that Charles II's interest in the theatre was 'strongly connected with his fascination and compassion for women', related in turn to his own exile and feeling for the underdog. He was attracted, too, by her lovely face and by what Aphra Behn described as her talent for putting 'the whole world into good humour'. Her sincerity must also have warmed Charles's heart, eliciting from her biographer the conviction that she loved the King for himself, not for the wealth and status he could confer, and that the two had enjoyed a friendship unique in the annals of royal love affairs.



Fanny Kemble (1809-93) was not so fortunate in her admirers, as Rebecca Jenkins shows in **Fanny Kemble: a reluctant celebrity**. At 20 she made her Covent Garden debut to immediate acclaim, but though the Kembles were a famous and respected theatrical family, Fanny felt her profession tainted her social reputation. In addition, Covent Garden went bankrupt in 1832 at which Fanny and her father left for America where she was a great success. She preferred 'splendour and sumptuousness', however, and in 1834 accepted the proposal of the wealthy Pierce Butler.

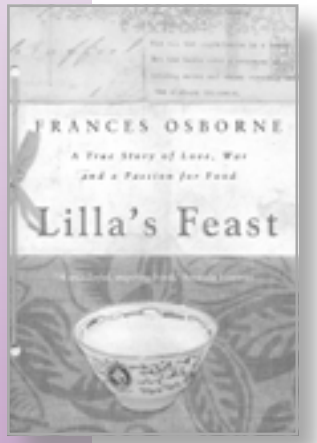
Jenkins gives a very brief account of Fanny's life after this but it is just as interesting as her stage career. Butler was the heir of his father's enormous wealth, Southern plantations and 638 slaves. When she learnt the source of her husband's wealth she was shocked and later kept a detailed account of the horrors she witnessed on the slave-worked properties owned by Butler.

In 1848 the couple were divorced and Fanny returned to a more genteel aspect of the stage, giving readings from Shakespeare. Meanwhile Butler gambled away his fortune and held the largest sale of slaves ever recorded in America. On her return to Britain Fanny was worried by the support she found among the aristocracy for the Southern cause and was persuaded to publish her journals, thus making an important contribution to the anti-Slavery movement: 'I have sometimes been haunted with the idea that it was an imperative duty, knowing what I know, and having seen what I have seen, to do all that lies in my power to show the dangers and the evils of this frightful institution.'

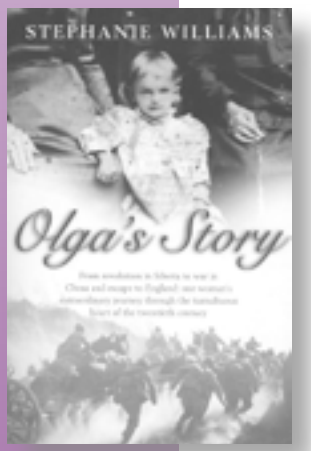
Celebrity of another kind awaited Isabella Mayson when at 19 she married 24-year-old Samuel Beeton, a publisher and editor. She thus became the famous Mrs Beeton whose cooking and household tips have influenced generations of women. But, far from being the universal mother figure of popular imagination, Isabella began to write her famous **Book of household management** (which was published by her husband in parts from 1859) when she was 21. She died, in fact, after the birth of her fourth son in 1865 at only 29.

This surprising story is admirably told by Kathryn Hughes in **The short life and long times of Mrs Beeton**. She reveals that Mrs Beeton's recipes and advice were not the result of long domestic experience but (as Elizabeth David first noticed) consisted of borrowings from several real cooks. A cut-and-paste job, in other words, giving the impression of matronly wisdom ranging over all domestic areas from

nourishment and thrift to propriety and household management. Aided by her husband, Mrs Beeton also devised **The English woman's domestic magazine** in a format still popular today.

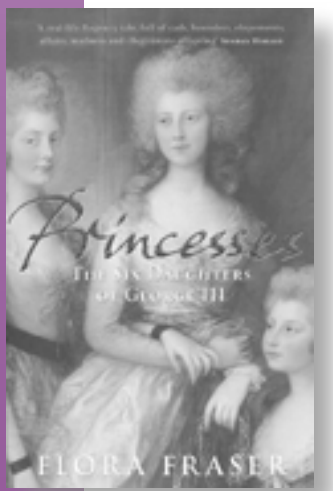


Lilla's feast by Frances Osborne is also partially about cooking which was a passion of the eponymous subject. The book is virtually a history of British imperial rule in China and to a lesser extent India, following the postings of Lilla's three husbands and other family members. With the invasion of China by Japan in 1937 and later the attack on Pearl Harbour, all allied nationals were interned by the Japanese. This lasted almost three years in near-starvation conditions and it was here, paradoxically, that Lilla began to dream up new recipes of which she kept a record. After the war Lilla's brother helped her by illustrating her cookbook of the feasts which helped her to survive the hardships of internment.



Along similar lines is **Olga's story** by Stephanie Williams which also relates the courage of an unknown but nevertheless fascinating woman. Whereas Lilla was born in Northern China in 1882 and lived a full century, Olga Yunter was born in Southern Siberia in 1900. Her childhood occurred against the background of the China trade (tea, silk, gold and furs) and nomadic tribes. When she turned 17 she joined her brothers in their hopeless fight against the Bolsheviks and was subsequently forced to flee to China.

Olga's life was one of war and revolution, exile and travel across continents which, like Lilla's adventures, offer a sweeping panorama of a convulsive period in history. Taken together these stories of two obscure women create an extraordinarily far-ranging perspective on some of the most momentous events of the twentieth century seen, not through the eyes of some eminent historian, but through the experiences of ordinary, unassuming people.



Another adventurous life is related by Jane Robinson in **Mary Seacole: the charismatic black nurse who became a heroine of the Crimea**. Born in Kingston in 1805 of a mixed Creole and Scottish couple, Mary's memoir, **Wonderful adventures of Mrs Seacole in many lands** was popular during the years following its publication in 1857, but after her death in 1881 she dropped into oblivion. Then a century later in 1984 her memoir was republished by The Falling Wall Press with an informative introduction and she was once more restored to prominence, especially in multicultural history courses and as a role model for young black women.

Mary learnt about the properties of herbs and other healing remedies from her Creole mother whom she describes as 'an admirable doctress, in high repute' and who ran a boarding house in Kingston where she nursed sick army and navy officers and their wives. An adventurous soul, Mary travelled to London twice and around the Caribbean before her marriage in 1836. After the death of her husband in 1844 she returned to nursing, extending her experience with the cholera and yellow fever epidemics in Jamaica and Panama.

When Mary heard of the suffering in the Crimea she applied to both the Army and Florence Nightingale committees but was turned down - probably, as she surmised, because of her 'somewhat duskier skin'. Not to be dissuaded, she went independently to the Crimea, meeting Florence Nightingale in Scutari who was happy to assist her. Mary set up a 'British Hotel' near Balaclava where she cared for convalescent officers. She also started a canteen and all-purpose store for soldiers. In addition she prepared medicines to provide free treatment for sick and wounded other ranks. Her reputation and popularity rapidly grew and after the war when she attended a dinner to honour the Guards regiment (**The Times** reported), her 'appearance awakened the most rapturous enthusiasm. The soldiers not only cheered her, but chaired her around the garden'. Bankrupt by her philanthropy, however, Mary Seacole had to wait until 1867 before a trust was set up to provide for her until her death.

Royalty and members of powerful dynasties do not necessarily have to lead adventurous lives or even achieve very much to attract public interest. In fact the chronicles of such personages - whether distinguished or not - are the mainstay of many professional biographers and there has certainly been no shortage in recent years. Among the most outstanding is a group biography by Flora Fraser entitled **Princesses: the six daughters of George III**, in which she covers the period from 1766 when Charlotte, the Princess Royal was born, to the death in 1857 of Mary, the last surviving sibling.

The result is a lively family saga full of fascinating detail. A brief example is the visit of Augusta and Elizabeth with younger brother Ernest to their Great Aunt Amelia (daughter of George II) in 1773. The children were four, three and two respectively and Fraser quotes this vivid description by Lady Mary Coke: 'They were all dressed in the clothes they had for the King's birthday and the two princesses had a great many diamonds. They came in a coach of the Queen's with six long-tailed horses, four footmen, and a great many guards…the whole apartment above stairs [was] open for

them to play in, and a long table in the great room covered with all sorts of fruit, biscuits, et cetera of which they ate very heartily.'

Although Fraser concentrates on the six girls, their eight brothers also figure to some extent in the narrative. This huge family was further augmented by the numerous offspring of the siblings in whom the three unmarried princesses took an affectionate interest. These included the ten illegitimate children of William, Duke of Clarence (later William IV) by the actress Dora Jordan.

William's older brother, George, Prince of Wales (later Regent and subsequently George IV), was coerced into marrying Princess Caroline of Brunswick in 1795 despite his earlier morganatic union with Mrs Fitzherbert. The story of George's disgust at all aspects of his new bride is the subject of another biography by Flora Fraser: **The unruly Queen: the life of Queen Caroline**, first published in 1996 and reissued in 2004. Shortly after this re-issue Jane Robins's biography, **Rebel Queen: the trial of Caroline**, appeared covering substantially the same ground. Both biographies are highly readable and often amusing in their depiction of a stormy, not to say vituperative marriage.

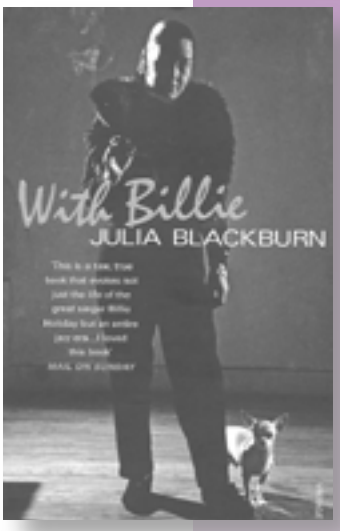
Other recent biographies of ruling families are too numerous to list, though two particularly noteworthy books seem to demand mention. Caroline P Murphy's **The pope's daughter** tells the dramatic tale of Felice della Rovere, daughter of Pope Julius II (1443-1513). She was married at the age of 14 and widowed two years later, but in 1506, aged 23, she married Gian Giordano Orsini. Gradually Felice took over the running of the estates, buying new land and becoming over the years one of the most powerful women of her day.

Another strong woman was Elena, mother of the Russian ruler who eventually became known as Ivan the Terrible. In her book of that name Isabel de Madariaga shows how Elena ruled as Regent from 1533 until her death in 1537, after which the princes and nobles seized control. Only in 1547 was Ivan able to assert his authority, becoming the first sovereign to be styled Tsar (as opposed to Grand Prince). Ivan's reign was marked by what he called 'sacred violence', deepening paranoia and megalomania. De Magariaga concludes her judicious and thorough biography with this biblical paraphrase: 'He is Lucifer, the star of the morning, who wanted to be God and was expelled from the Heavens.'

As mentioned in Part I, autobiography is a rich vein of biographical writing, at time offering insights not available to an outsider. Equally, however, it can misrepresent or disguise the truth and may fall into the gossipy mode so contemptuously dismissed by RS Thomas above. This could apply to the celebrity autobiography (as it often does to the celebrity biography), but in the case of Lauren Bacall's **By myself and then some** the gossip seekers would be sorely disappointed. Frequently referring to her husband, Humphrey Bogart, she tends to dwell on his final illness, death dominating the last part of her memoir as she recounts the demise of others close to her.

Death is also in effect the main focus of Alison Smith's memoir **Name all the animals** as she struggles to come to terms with the loss of a beloved brother. Despite the intensely personal nature of this memoir it is written in such a way as to draw in the reader, giving it a symbolic resonance which encompasses not just this particular grief but bereavement in general.

Mama Afrika: the Miriam Makeba story is much more upbeat and is published with a wonderful selection of photographs, making it an attractive coffee table book. It is interesting to compare Miriam Makeba's steady upward mobility to the triumphant status of 'Mama Afrika' with the sad story of Billy Holiday. Though equally if not more talented, her biographer, Julia Blackburn, shows how insecurity and exploitation dogged Holiday throughout her short life (1915-59). Despite the influence her jazz interpretation of popular songs exerted and the many top musicians with whom she worked, **With Billie** is a chronicle of abuse, manipulation and drug addiction. Her autobiography published in 1956, **Lady sings the blues**, is clearly a semi-fabricated attempt to patch over the dark areas of her sad life.



Dark areas also haunt the autobiographical writings of Waris Dirie who as a successful model worked on campaigns for such famous brands as Revlon and Levi's. But the campaign nearest to her heart has always been the abolition of female circumcision.

Since her revelation ten years ago that she herself was circumcised at the age of five, she has worked untiringly to end this savage practice which affects nearly two million girls every year. One in four, including a sister of Dirie's, do not survive the unanaesthetised shock, unsterilised implements and the infection which often follows.

Overcoming the odds heavily stacked against her, Dirie has made a success of her life since she left her native Somalia at 13 to escape an arranged marriage. She went on from modelling to become special ambassador to the United Nations and now has her own foundation in Vienna where she presently lives. Far from being depressed at all she has

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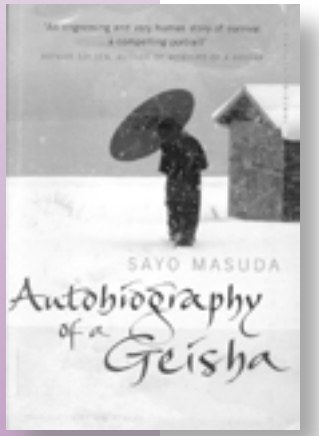
witnessed, Dirie remains full of life, hope and drive, continuing to believe that, in her own words, 'I must be involved until something is done. Until then, I will keep on making a lot of trouble and a lot of noise.'

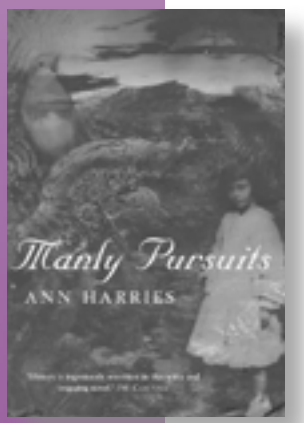
Cruelty also had a place in the childhood of Sayo Masudo. In **Autobiography of a Geisha** she gives an account of her indenture to a geisha house at the age of ten, having little understanding at the time of what was happening to her. Contrary to the romantised picture of geisha life painted by Arthur Golden in his popular 1997 novel **Memoirs of a Geisha**, Masuda describes a life closer to that of a slave than a pampered courtesan.



The world in which Masuda found herself lay not at the plush end of the market, but the harsh sex-for-sale lower end, devoid of rich and indulgent patrons and lacking in elegance and finesse. Unwanted pregnancies and venereal disease are ever present dreads and in one searing episode Masuda gives a grim account of a slow death by syphilis. Anything less like the present Hollywood version of Golden's book would be hard to imagine.

Of the many semi-biographical, semi-fictional treatments of real-life people and events, **The boy who loved Anne Frank** by Ellen Feldman is an outstanding example. This genre (often called faction) is particularly popular at present and Feldman gives an extra, imaginative dimension to the well-known tragedy of the Frank family.

Just before the eight people hiding in the secret annex were betrayed and arrested by the Nazis, Peter van Pels confided to Anne that if he got out alive, he would totally reinvent himself as a non-Jew. To quote Anne's diary entry of 16 February, 1944, 'He (Peter) said that after the war he'd make sure nobody would know he was Jewish.'



Sadly this was not to be as Peter perished in Mauthausen concentration camp on 5 May, 1945, just three days before it was liberated. The idea of his reinvention, however, took root in Ellen Feldman's mind and in **The boy who loved Anne Frank** she tells the imaginary story of what might have happened had Peter (referred to as van Daan in Anne's diary) been able to carry out his idea.

In this vision of a happier future it takes Peter a year to get to New York and we learn of what he regards as his stroke of great luck in retrospect. In the customs shed where the documents of new immigrants are processed his Certificate of Identity gives no indication of his religion. 'Not one of the chosen people', the official mutters as he reads Peter's documents. With that amazing piece of information Peter realises two things: one, that he can pass as gentile and, secondly, that America is anything but free of anti-Semitism. 'I must have processed a hundred immigrants this morning', the official continues, 'and you're the first one I might let marry my sister.'

So Peter enters America 'as one of the people not chosen', but with some of his illusions about his new country already shattered. Nor is this the only example of religious prejudice he encounters, but it does not prevent him from clinging to his belief that he can discard his past, living forwards only and without ever looking back. Nevertheless, echoes from the past constantly intrude on the present, despite the happy and prosperous life he constructs for himself, his wife and two daughters.

These echoes reach a silent crescendo once Anne's diary is translated and published in English. When Peter notices his wife reading **The diary of a young girl** his voice disappears and he is totally unable to speak at all, and later only in a whisper. Questions from the doctor his wife insists he consults serve to stir up disturbing, often horrific memories. His denial of his former life begins to fragment, and this theme of identity and the importance of the past become central to Feldman's deeply moving novel.

Throughout the book the author draws on and quotes from real documents, especially the diary itself. When Anne's writing is turned into a play and later a film, Peter is incensed by liberties taken with the truth. He particularly objects to the misrepresentation of his father, and of Fritz Pfeffer, making a clown of this dignified man who was in hiding with them - all in the interests of commercial appeal. The actual unfolding of the disputes surrounding Otto Frank and the diary become intimately woven into Peter's personal struggle with the truth, with his feelings of guilt and with the long and ghastly shadow cast by the Holocaust.

Prejudice is also a key theme in **No place for a lady** by Ann Harries, along with the status of women. Set in South Africa during the Anglo-Boer war, the horrors of that conflict are vividly depicted. Despite the ironical title, a group of women are central to the narrative. From Sarah, the beautiful English nurse, Louise her vivacious fellow-nurse and the indefatigable Emily Hobhouse, to her lesser female figures, Harries delineates character superbly bringing each one fully alive.

The weakness in the book is Sarah's rather unbelievable love affair, but for the rest **No place for a lady** fully lives up to the high standard of the earlier South African saga, **Manly pursuits** (1999). JM Coetzee encapsulates the recent novel concisely when he says, 'History is ingeniously rewritten in this witty and engaging novel', as does the **Daily Telegraph** quotation on the cover: 'This beautifully written evocation of the colonial past synthesises a wealth of historical research into an old-fashioned, exciting, readable novel.'

Also adept at synthesising historical research and exciting stories is Philippa Gregory who recently visited South Africa. Her many historical novels centre mainly on the Tudor period, the most recent being **The constant princess**. Here the youngest daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536), was betrothed at the age of three to Arthur, Prince of Wales. The two were married

in 1501 only to have Arthur die six months later. Soon afterwards Catherine was betrothed to Henry, Arthur's brother, when he was only eleven. They were married following Henry's accession to the throne in 1509.

The marriage was legitimised by the assumption that the union with Arthur had been unconsummated, but Gregory paints a picture of young lovers, depicting Catherine deeply in love with her first husband. She remains constant in this emotion and emerges in Gregory's reading far more sympathetically than in other versions of her life. Her suffering and humiliation at Henry's treatment of her are moving, especially if we recall that the marriage lasted for 18 years during which she lost six babies. Only Mary Tudor survived, and the rest, in the popular phrase, is history, this time literally.

Another Prince of Wales is a protagonist in Laurie Graham's wittily titled **Gone with the Windsors**. Narrated, if somewhat unreliably, through the diary of Maybell Brumby, who, like Wallis Simpson, is from Baltimore. Full of racy gossip, the diary is also a source of amusement with its many gaffes: 'We're to visit the Dardanelle's…I really don't recall them. One meets so many people.' There are also examples of Wallis's realistic materialism such as, 'Kissing your hand may make you feel very good, but a diamond bracelet lasts for ever.' And, of course 'one can never be too thin or too rich'.

The premise of the book is that Wallis was not really after a title but rather 'a jewel encrusted retirement'. Instead she finds the prince truly in love with her and ends in what Graham dubs 'a tedious cul-de-sac'. The depressing finale of this momentous romance is the subject of Rose Tremain's short story in **The darkness of Wallis Simpson**. Visualising her last phase from Wallis's own point of view, Tremain depicts a sad scene with the ailing and elderly Duchess virtually the prisoner of her avaricious lawyer.

The story of another love affair forms the background to **Nelson's daughter** by Miranda Hearn. Living in a lonely farmhouse near Calais is Horatia, the secret daughter of Lord Nelson and his mistress Emma Hamilton. But while the passion of the two famous lovers ends in sadness, Horatia survives to learn the truth of her parentage. Nelson, posing as her loving godfather, wrote many affectionate letters to Horatia which she must have treasured as a group of them were included in the exhibition at the Greenwich Naval Museum marking the bicentenary of Trafalgar last year.

Long as this two-part article is, it barely scratches the surface of the literally hundreds of biographical works published in the last couple of years. So much for the demise of the book which seems to have been a somewhat premature prediction. Biographies in all fields of endeavour appear regularly and even the lives of seemingly obscure people can, in the right hands, make fascinating reading. The current upsurge in the popularity of biography seems set to be sustained indefinitely, especially if the genre continues to attract such masterly writers as many of those exemplified in the bibliography that follows.

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