THE REAL READER'S QUARTERLY

Slightly Foxed

NO.64 WINTER 2019

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'Accepting an Invitation'

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Seren Bell was brought up deep in the Devonshire countryside and now lives in the beautiful Wye valley on the Welsh borders. Her work, in pen, ink and crayon, is concerned with the animals that are part of our rural heritage and reflects her love for them and the landscape in which she walks every day. More of her work can be seen at www.fossegallery.com.

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From the Editors

Was there ever a moment when a good book seemed more essential? And not just because Christmas and the annual search for presents has come round again. Comfort, instruction, amusement, escape, a new perspective – whatever it is you're looking for as a steadier in unnerving times, it's all there in books.

This winter's new Slightly Foxed Edition is certainly a lifter of spirits and an escape route to what feels like a freer and more straightforward world. Following on from his childhood memoir *Boy*, which we published in the autumn, *Going Solo* (see p. 13) is Roald Dahl's invigorating and often very amusing account of working for Shell in the country then called Tanganyika, travelling the dirt roads to visit the eccentric expatriates who literally kept the machinery of Empire running. The second half of the book takes on a somewhat darker tone, as war breaks out and Dahl drives the 600 miles to Nairobi to enlist as a fighter pilot and subsequently take part in the RAF's heroic defence of Greece. It's a young man's story, bold, stomach-churning and brilliantly told, all overlaid with Dahl's irrepressible determination, optimism and humour.

At this time of year we don't need to remind you that the winter *Slightly Foxed* catalogue is full of ideas for presents to suit all tastes, not to mention our traditional literary Christmas crossword. But we would like to draw your attention to something rather special this year: the Slightly Foxed Revolving Bookcase. Made to order in oak or ash at Dominic and Arabella Parish's Wardour Workshops in Wiltshire, and designed to hold around 90 Slightly Foxed Editions or books of similar size, it is an elegant modern take on the tradi-

tional revolving bookcases which were so much a feature of Victorian and Edwardian homes; and it's both useful and decorative. Inevitably an original piece like this comes at a price, but if you do happen to be on the lookout for a very special present for someone bookish, or even a special (and very practical) treat for yourself, you would be supporting real craftsmen and commissioning something truly lasting.

And while we're on the subject of independent businesses, we've said it before and we'll say it again: please this Christmas, if you can, support your local bookshop. We've recently learned of the demise of one of our favourites – Wenlock Books in the lovely Shropshire town of Much Wenlock – which had been there for 30 years, largely killed off by the online giant. Small really is beautiful, we believe.

It's almost a year now since we started the *Slightly Foxed* podcasts. After initial nerves about exposing ourselves on air (Hazel still fears she sounds like recordings of the Queen *circa* 1950), we're enjoying this new way of being in touch. We've learned from some fascinating guests about a range of subjects, from the art of biography to the history of garden writing, and judging from the letters and press mentions we've received, many people look forward to these monthly glimpses of life here at *SF*. We're already lining up a selection of interesting guests for the coming year. We do hope you'll join us.

Meantime we send you our very best wishes for a peaceful Christmas and an optimistic 2020.

GAIL PIRKIS & HAZEL WOOD

Accepting an Invitation

DAISY HAY

My grandfather Jack Mackenzie-Stuart was a man of immense learning and eclectic tastes. He collected eighteenth-century French drawings, loved jazz and hated opera. He gave me hardback editions of *The Oxford Book of English Verse* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and on my eighth birthday offered me a £10 bribe to learn by heart sonnets by Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Keats. He took me to the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford to teach me about perspective in front of Uccello's *The Hunt in the Forest* and he kept a video of *Meet Me in St Louis* in his study for family emergencies.

The Christmas I was 11 he gave me an audio cassette of Joyce Grenfell reading her autobiography, *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure*. I didn't know who Joyce Grenfell was and showed it to my mother in some puzzlement. She wondered aloud if he'd meant to give me a cassette of Joyce Grenfell performing her monologues. I was already a fan of Flanders and Swann – whose recordings my grandfather had given me a year earlier – so this seemed possible. Monologues or no monologues, the post-Christmas car journey from Edinburgh back to Oxford was still six hours long and the time had to be filled somehow. So I slotted the first tape into my Walkman and heard Joyce's crisp tones saying this:

> The background to my mother is light. All the rooms she lived in were light. Pale rooms with notes of strong colour: geranium-

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Joyce Grenfell, *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure* (1976) is out of print but we can obtain second-hand copies.

> pink, 'lipstick'-red, chalk-blue, saffron-yellow. No top lighting; pools of light from lamps with wide white shades painted pink inside, to her order; pools of light on tables. Low bowls of massed, solid-coloured flowers: geraniums, primroses, gardenias, roses.

Joyce took me all the way from Edinburgh to Oxford that Christmas. In the process she also transported me to 1920s Cliveden and wartime London and across the Middle East. I found half her references incomprehensible, but it didn't seem to matter. By the time we got home I was a paid-up devotee.

This summer I found my grandfather's edition of *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure* sitting on the bookshelves of his study. He has been dead for eighteen years now, but his books remain undisturbed in the house he loved and I found Joyce sitting between a three-volume treatise on legal history and a copy of Nancy Mitford's *The Sun King*. Reading (rather than listening) for the first time, I'm no longer surprised that the audiobook made such an impression on me. When Joyce started writing radio reviews for the *Observer* in 1937 the paper's editor, J. L. Garvin, told her approvingly that she had 'the flick of the wrist in writing'. He was absolutely right. Her writing style is as clipped and precise as her accent and she has the knack in *Requests the Pleasure* of capturing people with a few brisk strokes. Her mother shimmers in pink sitting-rooms; her father is 'a confidence-restorer . . . a big man who stood firm'. Her powerful aunt Nancy Astor strides through the pages dressed in golf clothes and chewing gum. Joyce writes of Aunt Nancy with gratitude and affection but skewers her all the same with a single sentence: 'She rarely listened, she only told.'

Joyce Grenfell was born in 1910. *Requests the Pleasure* was published in 1976 and takes her as far as the opening of her first solo show in 1954. Her story begins in a world of Edwardian nannies and awkward adolescent girls, affecting fashions she has fun in gently ridiculing. 'I see us now,' she writes of herself and her friends,

> our peculiar Twenties figures forced flat by bust-bodices, made from lengths of stout satin ribbon twelve inches wide . . . We do not use rouge or eye-pencil, but have discovered Tangee lipstick that is supposed to take on our own natural colour, but which stains our lips light purple. Our face-powder is no longer pink but honey-beige. We compare notes about this, and about deodorants that don't make us itch and hair-removers that do the job but smell horrible, of rotting vegetation.

This passage epitomizes one of the particular charms of *Requests the Pleasure*, namely that Joyce understands that people live in bodies and that biographies that fail to take account of this don't fully animate their subjects. With her eye firmly on the absurd details of living she is able to bring to life grand ceremonies and set pieces. The first time she wears her hair up in public she is at the Paris opera house and the sound of falling hairpins punctuates the evening's music. When she gets married the square neck of the dress she has set her heart on in the face of maternal opposition fails to sit flat, 'but after all it was my wedding and I knew what I wanted'.

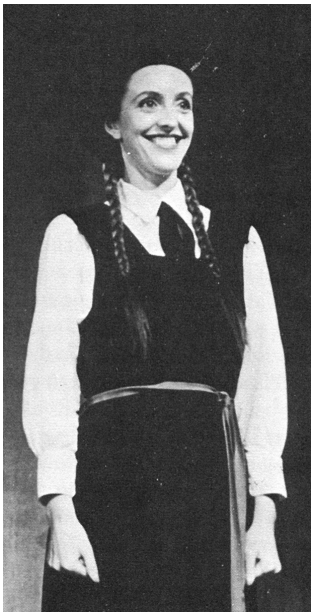
Although Joyce had plenty of grand relations, money after her marriage at 19 to Reggie Grenfell was tight. They lived in a cottage on the Cliveden estate, lent by formidable Aunt Nancy in exchange for Joyce's services as substitute stay-at-home daughter. Radio reviewing thus provided a valuable additional income of £10 a week. She writes happily of remembering her disbelief that someone was prepared to pay her for doing the two things she liked best: writing and listening to the radio. In January 1939 she was invited to dinner by the radio producer Stephen Potter and after dinner she gave a spoof

Women's Institute lecture on 'Useful and Acceptable Gifts'. One of her fellow guests was the theatrical director Herbert Farjeon who was sufficiently impressed by what he'd heard to cajole Joyce into appearing as a guest in his next West End revue.

Joyce tells the story of her theatrical debut as a series of happy accidents. This allows her to present herself as a fortunate amateur, marvelling at the strange subculture of the stage. Her biographer Janie Hampton has sensitively debunked the serendipity of her debut, revealing that in reality Joyce was highly focused and ambitious in her pursuit of wider recognition. The story of the accidental performer isn't disingenuous though. Instead it's one of the ways Joyce takes her reader into her confidence, so that you feel she is talking just to you. Her writing style is deceptively familiar and she shows herself at work. 'My mind goes blank when I read descriptions of people's looks,' she confesses. 'I just cannot see those dancing eyes and mouths too wide for beauty that novelists used to give their tousle-headed heroines.'

Joyce performed in the West End until the Blitz shut down the London theatres. On the day war broke out she had been handed two evacuees as she left the house for the theatre where she performed in front of a minute audience who made 'as much noise as they could; in fact they worked harder than we did'. For a period she combined voluntary nursing at the Red Cross hospital installed at Cliveden with performing and radio reviewing, before being called up to join the Entertainments National Service Association, or ENSA. The longest and best section of *Requests the Pleasure* tells the story of Joyce's war service with ENSA. Between January 1944 and March 1945 she travelled with the pianist Viola Tunnard to fourteen countries on two separate tours. Their brief was to entertain troops in hospitals and units in hard-to-reach places that could not be served by larger companies. They performed in North Africa, Malta, Italy, Iraq and India, contending with battlefields, overwhelmed casualty stations, errant mice and bad pianos.

Joyce is careful to put her own service in the context of the greater sacrifices made by the soldiers and nursing staff she encountered, but despite the bleak conditions and suffering she describes she is always alive to the prospect of comedy. In India she and Viola find themselves announced as 'two well-known artistes who have been flown out from home to entertain the men in bed', to the great pleasure of a waiting ward of injured soldiers. Elsewhere she writes feelingly of the variety of plumbing arrangements in their digs. 'Both of us were put off by the absence of sitting equipment,' she recalls. 'We far preferred quite long walks across the desert to canvas-walled privies, open to the skies . . . usually arranged companionably in separate pairs.'



Joyce returned home in 1945 to join the cast of Noël Coward's new review, *Sigh No More*. From then on she became an increasingly well-known stage and radio performer, and she vividly evokes the theatrical world of post-war London, in which egos clash and fashions slowly change. She describes finding her voice as a writer and reveals the genesis of some of her best-known characters, including the harassed nursery teacher of 'George', who today remains her most famous creation. She writes of her mother's regret that her film appearances (principally as the hapless Ruby Gates in the St Trinian's series) were so resolutely gawky: couldn't she once, 'just for *once*, now and then, look a little less unglamorous'? Elsewhere she concedes disarmingly, 'I have never minded looking funny – when it was intentional.'

Reading *Joyce Grenfell Requests the Pleasure* this summer, the memory of my first acquaintance with her has been strong. I've heard the precise tones and emphases of her own reading in every line and I've realized what I didn't before, namely that her story offers a wonder-

fully detailed and idiosyncratic account of life between the wars in Britain. Her narrative is punctuated with well-known names, but above all it offers a vivid sense of what it was like to inhabit a body at a particular point in time. Some of the attitudes and sentiments feel dated now and Joyce is frank about the difficult experience of looking at her younger self and not entirely liking what she sees. Her liking for life is evident throughout though, and her autobiography offers an excellent introduction both to her own work and to the lost world in which she learnt her craft.

As well as Joyce's voice, on this rereading I've also heard in her story my grandfather's voice. While she was entertaining the troops in the Middle East he was defusing bombs and building bridges in Belgium and Holland as a young Royal Engineer. Like her he had to return to post-war Britain and work out how to make a meaningful life in a country that felt at once familiar and strange. I now realize why he thought I should listen to her story. She shows that it is possible to make a living doing the thing one likes most and also that there are interesting and extraordinary things to be found in the most unexpected places. I have my grandfather's wartime letters on my desk, and I see that in 1943, during a convalescence at a military hospital in Kent, he sent his mother a sketch of the ceiling frieze above his bed, simply because it was beautiful and interesting. No wonder he accepted the invitation to look at the world through Joyce Grenfell's sympathetic eyes with such pleasure. All these years later I am very glad he extended the invitation to me too.

DAISY HAY is currently writing about the eighteenth-century publisher Joseph Johnson, another figure who found interesting things in unexpected places and was generous and hospitable to all-comers. Her most recent book is *The Making of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein*.

A Master of Invention

HENRY JEFFREYS

We were fortunate, those of us who grew up in the 1980s. Almost every year there would be a new book by Roald Dahl which would be passed around at school and discussed with great seriousness. There were also playground arguments about his name: 'It's not Ronald, it's Roald! Don't you know anything?'

We lived in Dahl's world, my brother and I more literally than most children since we grew up a couple of miles from Gypsy House, his home in Great Missenden. As we drove past it my parents would always say: 'That's where Roald Dahl lives.' I think I used to doubt them. Could Dahl really live somewhere as prosaic as an ordinary house in rural Buckinghamshire? I liked to think he lived in a Willy Wonka-style factory turning out madcap books with the help of oompa loompas. I met him once at a charity event; he was sitting at a table looking very old and signing books.

When *Boy*, Dahl's memoir of his schooldays, was published in 1984 (see *SF* no. 63), it had a powerful effect on my class. It felt as if he was talking to us directly. When the sequel, *Going Solo*, appeared in 1986, I took it out of the school library and read it cover to cover in one sitting. *Going Solo* picks up where *Boy* left off, in 1936 with Dahl now an adult, sailing to East Africa to work for Shell.

The first thing that struck me when I reread it all these years later was how very like his stories his own life was. On the long voyage to Africa, the elderly couple who run around the boat naked or the man who pretends to have dandruff so nobody will suspect that he wears a wig seem to have stepped from the pages of Dahl's children's books. One can picture them drawn by Quentin Blake. The animals too: he