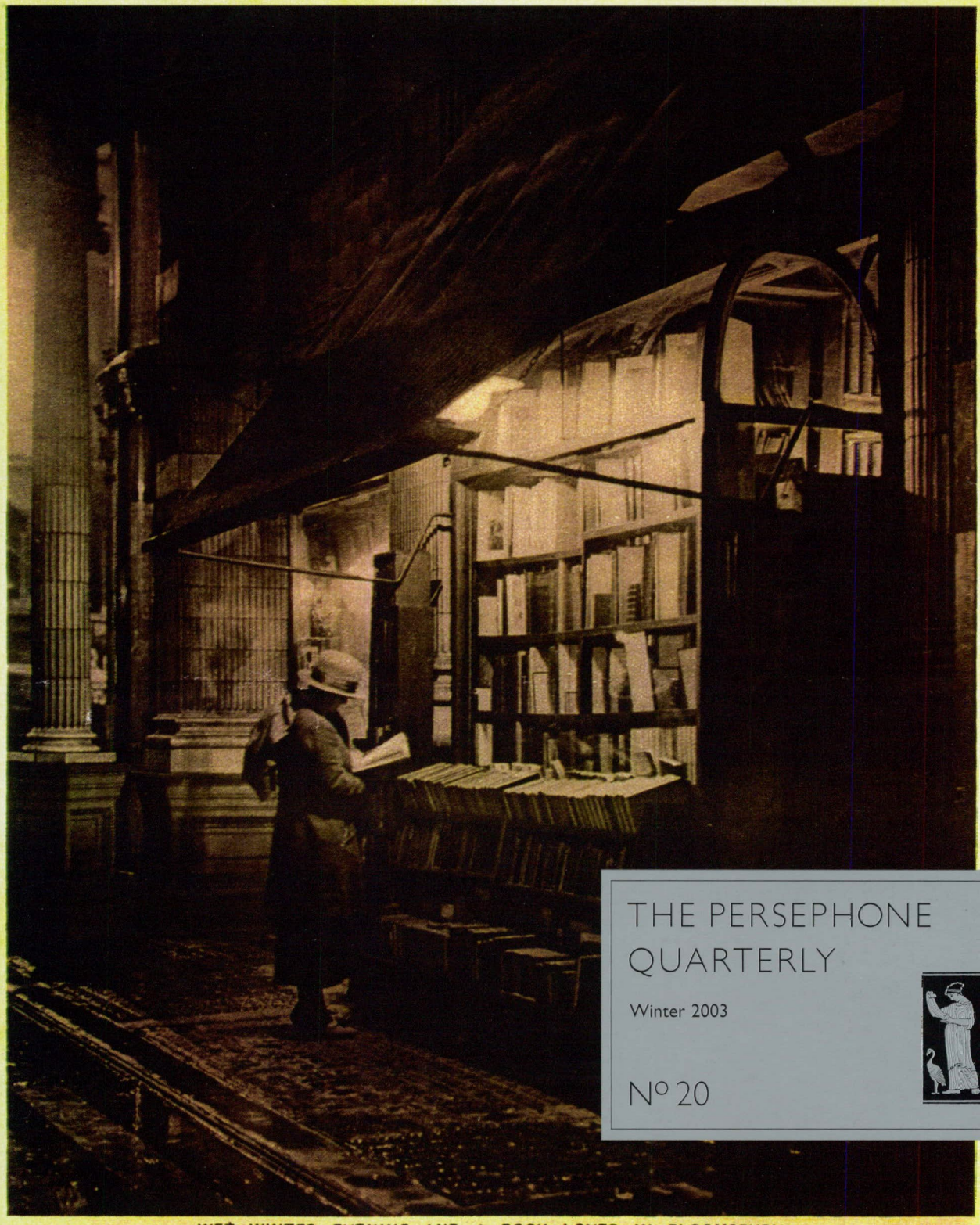


THE PERSEPHONE QUARTERLY

Winter 2003

N° 20

WET WINTER EVENING AND A BOOK LOVER IN BLOOMSBURY Fincham

The first turning to the left in Southampton Row is quaint Sicilian Avenue, which forms the base of a triangle whose other sides are Southampton Row and Vernon Place, a continuation of Hart Street, Bloomsbury. A certain classical effect is suggested by an architrave at either end and some fluted pillars covered in stained tiling. The lamp under the blind of the little bookshop throws a yellow glow on the faded backs of many books, and half-opened volumes which show, here and there, a countenance or a landscape portrayed in the fashion of other days.

OUR WINTER 2003 BOOKS

A 1933 linen furniture fabric designed by Bernard Adeney

Persephone Book No. 46 is by an author who is well-known for her books for children but not known at all as a writer for adults. But, in contrast to Frances Hodgson Burnett, Richmal Crompton and Noel Streatfeild, she only wrote one adult novel; and she never thought of herself as a novelist, publishing ***Miss Ranskill Comes Home*** (1946) under her married name, Barbara Bower, rather than under the name by which she was by then famous – Barbara Euphan Todd, the author of the Worzel Gummidge books.

This was partly as a homage to her husband, Commander Bower, who had died during the war, and partly because the tone of the book is so different from the Worzel Gummidge books, being a satire, and a very unusual one, on the 'war effort'. It describes a middle-aged woman who goes on a cruise in 1939, is swept overboard and lives as a castaway on a desert island for three and a half years. But she is not alone, since she finds another castaway there. He has just died as the novel begins: the 'carpenter' is the only truly good, truly saintly person whom we are to encounter, apart from Miss Ranskill herself.

In 1943 she is rescued by a destroyer and although kindly looked after by those on board (whom we can imagine very like the three in the beautiful William Dring painting reproduced on p12) they explain curiously little to her about what has been happening in the world; so that when she arrives at 'Hartmouth' (Portsmouth) she has no idea what she will encounter.

What she does find is an England gone apparently mad, where she cannot buy clothes without something called 'coupons', where her schoolfriend Marjorie is only interested in her war work (which might have included making camouflage nets, as in the painting on the opposite page) and yet where it is still thought impossibly uncivilised to walk barefoot, be late for meals or eat one's butter ration all at once. The object of Barbara Euphan Todd's satire is the cruelty and egoism of people who have found an absorbing new interest during the war years but have lost their compassion for or even curiosity in others.

Published only a year after the end of the war, and deeply critical both of the people that Miss Ranskill encounters and of the peculiar rituals they have established, this cannot have been – and was not – a popular book in England at the time. (We are reminded that although ***William - an Englishman*** won the Prix Femina-Vie Heureuse, it was not reviewed and not read, and indeed it would be another ten years before the reading public would be ready for any books about the First World War.)

But ***Miss Ranskill Comes Home*** was very popular in America, where it was serialised in the *Saturday Evening Post* ('one of the finest stories we have read in a long time') and approvingly reviewed: 'sombre, satiric, often bitter, a mixture of realism and romanticism, the book approaches a modern morality play... it is a subtle and unsparing criticism of our times, written with great skill, charm and originality.'

The only reviewer who appreciated it here was Rosamond Lehmann, which is how Wendy Pollard, who is about to publish a critical book about her, discovered ***Miss Ranskill*** and told us about it. Rosamond Lehmann wrote in *The Listener* in July 1946: 'This novel is a work of great originality, and delightfully readable, a blend of fantasy, satire and romantic comedy. Miss Ranskill is very nice, the friends and relations she meets on her return are perfectly awful. The picture is simplified by a caricaturist's eye, but is near enough the knuckle to make one squirm and groan as one smiles. Miss Ranskill's old school chum is as unnerving as a portrait by Joyce Grenfell. The carpenter remains a living figure and symbol in Miss Ranskill's heart; he and his remembered words are tellingly employed to point the contrast between the uncorrupted human values of their idyllic companionship and the self-importance, self-righteousness, prudery and pettiness of the bourgeois society to which she has returned. Mrs Bower has great gifts. She has written a very entertaining novel, less light than it seems.'

We hope that ***Miss Ranskill Comes Home*** is the perfect Boxing Day book, when we like to think of Persephone readers curled up on a sofa reading a novel and being waited on by others. But our other Winter

'Convalescent nurses making camouflage nets' by Evelyn Dunbar p35 of War through Artists' Eyes edited by Eric Newton in the autumn of 1944

1932 advertisment for the Aga

book, ***Good Food on the Aga*** by Ambrose Heath, illustrated by Edward Bawden, is, we fear, going to be used a great deal by most of us during the Christmas season, as we do not stray very far from the stove and in this case from the Aga.

It came out in 1933, four years after the Aga was first sold in Britain (having been invented by a Swede who had lost his sight); the Aga will next year have been a part of British life for seventy-five years. Nevertheless, although ***Good Food on the Aga*** is the perfect present for those with an Aga, it can easily be used by those without, since only the first part, about forty pages, is specifically about Aga cooking ('The Aga Cooker, its Management and Scope'); the second part, organised into months, has a list of food in season at the beginning of each section followed by very easy-to-follow recipes suitable for any kind of cooker. This book is therefore indispensable for any cook with an Aga, might convert some Persephone readers who have not yet succumbed but is usable by anyone.

This is the third cookery book we have done and we are pleased to say they form a delightful trio (and would make a wonderful present) – a book about classic English cookery, a book of essays by the Jekyll of housekeeping and now a cookery book specifically for Aga users. All three take us back to a time when knowledge of what food was in season was an essential part of every cook's equipment – when the technique of riddling the Aga was a vital part of daily life.

OUR REVIEWERS WRITE

The Blank Wall was described by Philip Oakes in the *Literary Review* as 'clearly a book with a lasting appeal. What it applauds is a woman's determination to protect her family, come what may. Strong reader identification perhaps, or just good, civilised writing. Congratulations to Persephone Books for brushing off the latest layer of dust. Good housekeeping, good publishing.' And the *Daily Telegraph* wrote: 'The mix of the everyday and the extraordinary is deft... A most welcome return to print.'

In its review of ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** the *Independent on Sunday* commented: 'At her best Frances Towers's prose style is a shimmering marvel, and few writers can so deftly and economically delineate not only the outside but the inside of a character. Her women have layers, and the writer penetrates deep into the core, into the parts of the soul that are barely consciously acknowledged... 'Don Juan and the Lily', 'Spade Man from over the Water' and 'Strings in Hollow Shells' are marvels, novels in miniature. Watch out for the quiet little woman in the corner in Towers's stories. There's always more going on there than you can possibly fathom.' The ***Guardian*** noted: 'Her social range may not be wide, but her descriptions are exquisite and her tone poised between the wry and the romantic.' And *Best of British* magazine ran a feature about us in which it called the stories in ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** 'elusive, unsettling, almost Gothic – and beautifully written.'

Plays International wrote about ***Manja***: 'This magnificent novel... effortlessly connects individual lives to social currents...Gravely sardonic, in a manner not dissimilar to Odon von Horvath, this utterly compelling chronicle reads splendidly in Kate Phillips' translation.'

Lettice Delmer, according to *Home & Family*, 'is a novel in verse – but don't let that put you off. You'll be so gripped after the first few pages that you won't even notice, and later you'll recall how clever and poetic it is. It won't be easy to forget the tragic heroine, just as it's difficult to forget Hardy's Tess.'

Nottingham County Lit admired ***The Priory***, 'the third Whipple novel to be republished by Persephone Books. Her sharp eye for detail and the nuances of family relationships together with her wry wit are a delight.'

For 'A Little Light Reading' in the *Sunday Times* Helen Dunmore chose ***The Wise Virgins***. 'It's a passionate, cuttingly truthful story of a love affair between two people struggling against the prejudices of their time and place. Leonard Woolf 's writing is almost unbearably honest as he describes Harry, full of "desire. waiting and excitement", yet unable to rouse any answering feeling in Camilla.'

Finally, the excellent website bookslut.com posted a review of ***Someone at a Distance***: 'Whipple weaves a story that is everything of which a serious reader might dream. It is not only entertaining material, but is also a social commentary. Whipple manages to convey a lesson, or at least an observation, about the damage one's actions can do if one does not consider them carefully; she does so without "preaching", and allows the reader to draw their own conclusions. Her gift to her readers, though, is not her "moral" but her story, and the way it envelops them in the most mundane and the most extraordinary sorts of ways. "It is a great gift to take an ordinary tale and make it extraordinary reading," Nina Bawden says in her Preface,and this describes Whipple's writing to a tee.'

WEEKEND AT NEWNHAM

It was under a clear and sunny September sky that one hundred Persephone readers gathered in Cambridge, to walk the same corridors and share the same rooms as Amy Levy and Sylvia Plath and eat in the dining hall where, in 1928, Virginia Woolf gave one of the lectures that became *A Room of One's Own*: the first ***Persephone Conference*** was held to commemorate this event.

Saturday morning began with Henrietta Twycross-Martin talking about that Persephone stalwart, ***Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day***, as well as the other novels by Winifred Watson: her work was 'more feminine than feminist' but does contain feminist messages, promoting companionate marriage as an ideal and arguing for financial independence for women.

Elaine Showalter discussed *A Room of One's Own* and the key images she herself takes from it: that the room is a symbolic space for female contemplation not isolation, and that, perhaps surprisingly, it stresses the importance of more materialist needs: good food, and financial independence. Elaine also brought out the negative aspects of the 'room' as an image of seclusion and suicide, such as that suffered by 'Judith Shakespeare'. But the greatest strength of the book is that each generation of feminists reads it differently, as an enduring text with unending interpretations.

Clough Hall

Clough Hall, Newnham College © K J Lewis 2003

Lyndall Gordon continued the discussion of *Room* and its attitudes towards the true nature of women and fiction. She talked of women's writing often being seen as encroaching on male 'territory', and of the male bias in both history and fiction, where 'important' works are still large, fact-filled tomes and history consists of the Crusades and discussions in the House of Commons. Woolf was concerned with women, alone and together, and how female creativity differs from male creativity, and is elusive: 'all half lights and profound shadows.'

On Saturday afternoon Jenny Hartley talked about the evolution of the Reading Group, using photographs that ranged from a frieze on Burgos Cathedral showing the Apostles turning to each other to talk about a book, to the five pound note which, unknown to most of us, shows Elizabeth Fry with a prison reading group, to eighteenth-century female spinners who employed someone to read aloud to them, ending with the modern reading group.

In the evening a magnificent dinner was held in homage to the (notoriously less nice) meal described by Virginia Woolf: pumpkin soup, *boeuf* Wellington

(a defiantly masculine dish) and prune fool (recipe by Jane Grigson, who was at Newnham). Afterwards Katharine Whitehorn talked about male and female differences – men not having the ability to listen and empathise as women do – and whether this will ever change, thereby allowing women to be fully integrated into the male-structured workplace.

Sunday morning began with Anne Sebba's talk on women and fact (rather than fiction), giving an overview of women reporters and their continuing fight against sexism (women had problems obtaining accreditation even in the 1960s). A firm believer that women do see and report stories differently, Anne showed how they often cover the real humanitarian stories behind war more sympathetically than men.

Pamela Norris's talk took the revolutionary step of comparing the position of the 12th century nun Héloïse with the 20th century poet Sylvia Plath, united by 'doomed love' and by the age-old conflict between love and work. Héloïse was strangely modern in her attitude towards a love union ('Love is preferable to wedlock') while Plath was groomed for and desperate to conform to the norm of dutiful wife and mother.

Next Julia Neuberger gave an overview of the history of Jewish female writers in England from Grace Aguilar to Amy Levy to Betty Miller, writing as outsiders from the point of view of sex, ethnicity and religion. Julia talked eloquently and passionately of the difficulty of portraying their situation as Jewish women, and the frequently ambivalent attitude in their works towards anti-semitism, given their need to be accepted by their readers.

Baroness Onora O'Neill, our host as Principal of Newnham, then spoke about equality versus exclusion, arguing that to fight for perfect equality is ill-advised, if not impossible, whereas to fight against exclusion is a necessary cause, and one argued by Virginia Woolf. Pointing out that to fight for equal income for all would mean a society of no incentives, and to fight for equal upbringing for all might logically lead to the abolition of the family unit, Onora O'Neill then went on to look at the practical difficulties of striving for equality: employing 'fairness' and fighting against 'exclusion' can take us further than fighting for equality.

A delightful talk on Gwen Raverat's Cambridge childhood followed, as Anne Harvey wove a tale of turn-of-the-century Cambridge and an atmosphere of 'tea-parties, boat-races and May week picnics in tight-bodiced silk dresses' overtook the room. Described by Virginia as 'all Cambridge, all Darwin, solidity, integrity, force and sense', Gwen Raverat was a much-loved Bloomsbury figure who, in *Period Piece*, described Newnham Grange with its romantic associations and Aunt Etty, who was always 'going away to rest, in case she might be tired later on in the day'.

Charlie Lee-Potter ended the weekend with a further discussion of women and fiction, arguing against Louise de Salvo's reconstruction of Woolf's unfinished novel *Melambrosia*, and for a writer's intellectual freedom to choose whether or not to publish a book. She pointed out the large number of women on this year's Booker shortlist, ending her talk by discussing the sexism women writers still have to face (one journalist dismissed this year's Booker shortlist as 'girly').

Finally Nicola Beauman took the floor to talk about Persephone Books, and there was a spirited discussion about participants' favourite and least-favourite titles – and about how many they owned! The response to the weekend was overwhelmingly positive: readers found it 'stimulating', 'thought-provoking', 'uplifting', 'magical', 'an idyll' – and we look forward to seeing some of them next year, when we hope the weather will be equally magical.

LIST OF PERSEPHONE BOOKS

William - an Englishman by Cicely Hamilton: A prize-winning 1919 novel about the effect of the First World War on William, a socialist clerk, and Griselda, a suffragette.

Someone at a Distance by Dorothy Whipple: 'A very good novel indeed' (*Spectator*), first published in 1953, about an Englishman's tragic destruction of his formerly happy marriage.

Mariana by Monica Dickens: First published in 1940, this famous author's first novel is a delightful description of a young girl's life in the 1930s.

Fidelity by Susan Glaspell: A 1915 novel by a Pulitzer-winning author that brilliantly describes the effects when a girl in Iowa runs off with a married man.

An Interrupted Life by Etty Hillesum: From 1941-3 a young woman living in Amsterdam, 'the Anne Frank for grown-ups', wrote diaries and letters which are among the great documents of our time.

The Victorian Chaise-longue by Marghanita Laski: A 'little jewel of horror' about a woman lying on a chaise-longue in the 1950s and waking up frozen in another's body 80 years before.

The Home-Maker by Dorothy Canfield Fisher: Carol Shields described this unforgettable, ahead-of-its-time book as 'a remarkable and brave 1924 novel about being a house–husband.'

Good Evening, Mrs Craven: the Wartime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes: Superbly written short stories, first published in *The New Yorker* from 1938-44.

Few Eggs and No Oranges by Vere Hodgson: A 600-page diary, written from 1940-45 in Notting Hill Gate, full of acute observation and humour.

Good Things in England by Florence White: This collection of English recipes was published in 1932; it inspired many, including Elizabeth David.

Julian Grenfell by Nicholas Mosley: A portrait of the First World War poet, and of his mother Ettie Desborough, by one of our foremost writers.

It's Hard to be Hip over Thirty and Other Tragedies of Married Life by Judith Viorst: Funny, wise and weary poems about marriage, children and reality, first published in 1968.

Consequences by EM Delafield: A searing and funny novel about an Edwardian girl who enters a convent because she fails to catch a husband; by the author of *The Diary of a Provincial Lady.*

Farewell Leicester Square by Betty Miller: An atmospheric 1935 novel by Jonathan Miller's mother about a young Jewish film-director and 'the discreet discrimination of the bourgeoisie' (*Guardian*).

Tell It to a Stranger by Elizabeth Berridge: 1947 short stories described by AN Wilson as 'beautifully crafted', which were twice in the *Evening Standard* bestseller list.

Saplings by Noel Streatfeild: An adult novel by the well-known author of *Ballet Shoes,* about what happens to a family during the Second World War; to be a 10- part serial on 'Woman's Hour'.

Marjory Fleming by Oriel Malet: A novel based on the real life of the Scottish child prodigy who lived from 1803-11. A French translation was published by Editions Autrement in 2002.

Every Eye by Isobel English: An unusual 1956 novel about a girl travelling to Spain, highly praised by Muriel Spark: it will be an afternoon play on R4 adapted by Micheline Wandor.

They Knew Mr Knight by Dorothy Whipple: An absorbing 1934 novel about a family man driven into committing fraud, who goes to prison; a 1943 film.

A Woman's Place by Ruth Adam: A survey of women's lives in the twentieth century, very readably written by a novelist-historian: full of unique insights.

Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day by Winifred Watson: A delightful 1938 novel about a governess and the night-club singer who employs her; Persephone's bestseller, recently re-read on R4's 'Book at Bedtime'.

Consider the Years by Virginia Graham: Sharp, funny WWII poems by Joyce Grenfell's best friend and collaborator; a favourite of Maureen Lipman (who read *Miss Pettigrew* on R4).

Reuben Sachs by Amy Levy: A short, fierce 1880s satire on the London Jewish community by 'the Jewish Jane Austen', greatly admired by Oscar Wilde.

Family Roundabout by Richmal Crompton: By the author of the *William* books, this 1948 novel for adult readers is about two families watched over by very different matriarchs.

The Montana Stories by Katherine Mansfield: Collects together the short stories written during the author's last year, with a detailed publisher's note and contemporary illustrations.

Brook Evans by Susan Glaspell: A moving and unusual novel, written in the same year as *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, about the enduring effect of a love affair on three generations of a family.

The Children who lived in a Barn by Eleanor Graham: Jacqueline Wilson contributes the preface to this 1938 classic about five children fending for themselves; starring the unforgettable hay-box. . .

Little Boy Lost by Marghanita Laski: This unputdownable novel about a father's search for his son in post-war France was chosen by the *Guardian*'s Nicholas Lezard as a 2001 paperback choice; it was a R4 'Book at Bedtime' last year.

The Making of a Marchioness by Frances Hodgson Burnett: A wonderfully entertaining 1901 novel about a woman who becomes a marchioness, and the ensuing melodrama.

Kitchen Essays by Agnes Jekyll: Witty and useful essays about cooking, with recipes, published first in *The Times* from 1921-22.

A House in the Country by Jocelyn Playfair: An unusual and very readable 1944 novel about the effect of the Second World War on a group of people seeking refuge in the country.

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

The Far Cry by Emma Smith: A beautifully written and evocative 1949 novel about a young girl's passage to India at the time of Partition; a great favourite.

Minnie's Room: The Peacetime Stories of Mollie Panter-Downes 1947-65: Second volume of short stories first published in *The New Yorker* and previously unknown in the UK.

Greenery Street by Denis Mackail**:** A funny and delightful 1925 novel about a young couple's first year of married life in a (real) street in Chelsea.

Lettice Delmer by Susan Miles**:** An unforgettable novel in verse describing a young girl's spiritual journey in the 1920s, much praised by TS Eliot.

The Runaway by Elizabeth Anna Hart: A witty and charming 1872 novel for children, illustrated with over sixty woodcuts by Gwen Raverat**.**

Cheerful Weather for the Wedding by Julia Strachey: A funny and quirky 1932 novella by a niece of Lytton Strachey, admired by Virginia Woolf.

Manja by Anna Gmeyner: A 1938 German novel, newly translated, about five children conceived on the same night in 1920 and their lives until 1933.

The Priory by Dorothy Whipple: The third novel we have published by this wonderful writer, about successive generations of a family and their servants living in a large country house before WWII

The Blank Wall by Elisabeth Sanxay Holding, 'the top suspense writer of them all' (Raymond Chandler). In this 1949 psychological thriller a mother shields her daughter from a blackmailer.

Hostages to Fortune by Elizabeth Cambridge: 'deals with domesticity without being in the least bit cosy' writes Harriet Lane about this remarkable fictional portrait of a doctor's family in rural Oxfordshire in the 1920s.

The Wise Virgins by Leonard Woolf: begun on his honeymoon in 1912, this is a wise, witty, sardonic novel contrasting the bohemian Virginia and Vanessa with Gwen, the girl next door in 'Richstead'.

Tea with Mr Rochester by Frances Towers: 1949 short stories, broadcast on Radio 4 in 2003. They are magical, elusive, unsettling and beautifully written.

THE CAROL

a ghost story for the winter by Frances Bellerby, from the collection Come to an End (1939)

With a deep contented sigh he lay back in the chair. How good it was to be here again, in this small square room that had been his own ever since prep school days. He looked around with pleasure, his eyes resting in friendliness, reminiscently, on the many photographs – chiefly games and House groups – the two tasselled caps, the boxing-gloves, the fishing-rod. And he smiled at the books; some of them had been there since first the room had become his; he simply hadn't thought of throwing them out, and now, after all that had happened, it was pleasant indeed to see them still there. After all that had happened – Idly he read titles: *Peter the Whaler*, *King Solomon's Mines*, *The Three Musketeers*, *British Birds*, *Sam*. Ah, *Sam*! He had bought that sixpenny paper-covered- book at the station bookstall on his way home from school one day, as a gift for his young sister because he had been specially beastly to her. He had wanted to ease his mind without actually saying he was sorry, and had succeeded perfectly. Good Lord, it seemed like yesterday! But it must really be years ago. Years ago. Simply ages. Now just *how* long ago would it be? – Oh, he couldn't be bothered to work it out, he felt too slack and vague. Never mind. Nothing mattered at the moment, except the fact that it was good to be here, and to find everything just the same. But of course it would be. Trust them to leave his things exactly as he had!

In the corner was James's basket, provided for him as a newly weaned pup, but never used by him. From the first night he had won the contest about sleeping on his master's bed. He had simply yelled until lifted up on the bed, and then, when deceptively soothed and sleepy he had been lifted down, again he had yelled and yelled. The basket, however, had stayed there, and two tortoises, Timothy and Titus, had spent several winters in it under leaves – James. Why, even James must be elderly by now. How old would he be? – Odd that his own master couldn't remember, but anyway, the old chap must certainly be getting on.

Through the open window at his side came the scent of mown grass. He turned his head to the window, and saw roses in the garden, and lupins, and flowers on the pink horse-chestnut. He thought: Oh, it's June! It's not often I've been here in June. Not once since I went to Clifton, what with term-time and then the war. He got up and leant from the window, observing with a thrill of delight the blossomed rhododendrons above the bank of the little lane which bordered the garden, and the brilliant colours in the bank itself – deep pink, and blue, and white, and yellow, were splashed over the tangle of grass and weed, and in the sunshine the spangled colours burned. He heard a cuckoo, agitated: 'Cu-*cuck*-oo, cu-*uck*-oo'; and a blackbird scolded furiously, as though at a cat.

Shivering slightly, he drew back into the room. In spite of the blazing sun the winds seemed to him rather cold.

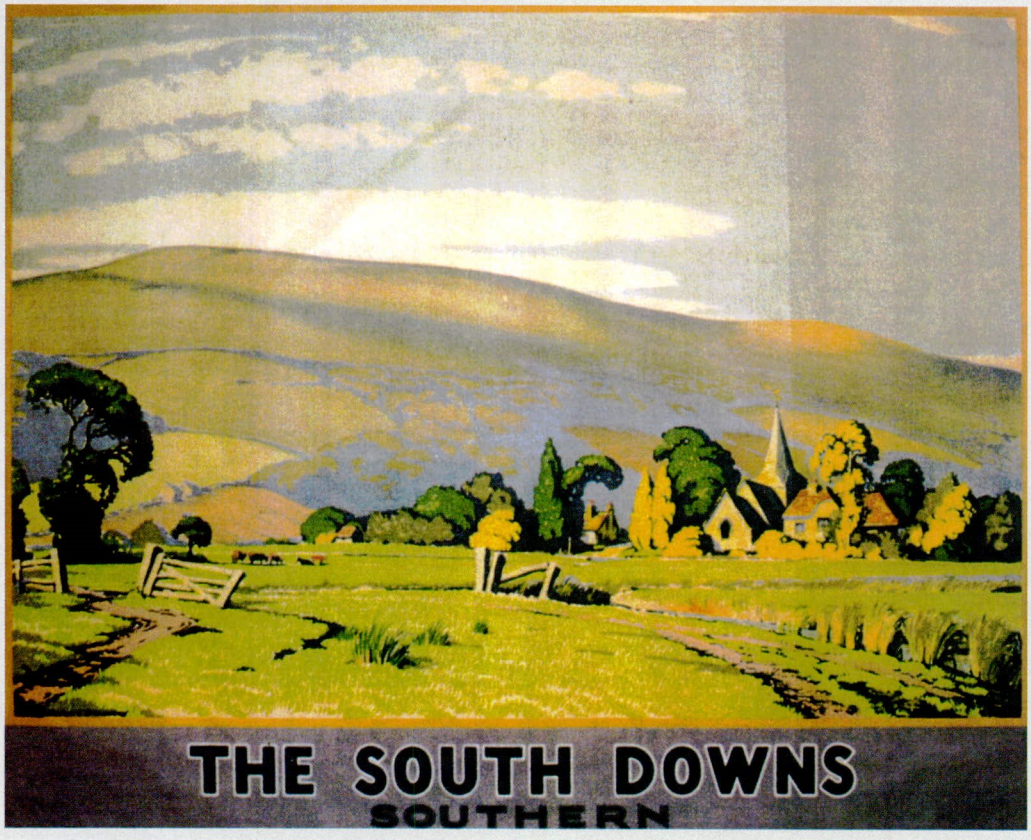
He thought: Soon I must go and find Mother and the rest of them – and old James. However, he felt curiously tired, so he let himself drop once more into the worn deep chair. There, content and restful, he found himself whistling. What was it? Oh yes, that old carol! He used to whistle it till the whole household had it on the brain and besought him

to start something else. He'd learnt it his first term at prep school, and always it had been connected in his mind with this room, then newly and proudly his; a Study. Funny that it had never quite gone out of his head, all these years –

He whistled softly, getting, as ever, much dclight from the ancient tune. And then he thought with a smile: That'll bring James scratching at the door! And he remembered how as a small boy he used to enter the house every evening, back from school, whistling that carol, and how the cocker puppy would hurtle along the slippery passage to meet him, frantically slithering and scuffling. But James did not come now. And after a minute or two, still whistling, he rose and strolled idly about, looking at the photographs and things, and thinking that presently he really would go and find the folk.

Observing a photograph which he did not remember, he went close to see what it was. It hung over the bed, and beneath it hung the old snapshot of James. To his amused suprise the photograph was of himself in uniform. Vaguely, he remembered having it taken. Funny old Mater to put that in my room! he thought, much entertained. Then, noticing written words at the foot of the photograph, he read: 'Killed in Action at Givenchy, Aged 18, August 8th, 1915.' This gave him a tremendous shock –

So when his mother, hearing, as she often did, the softly whistled carol, ran upstairs and opened the door to look in, the room was, as usual, empty.



a 1946 poster by Walter E Spradbery hanging in the Persephone Bookshop

FOR GOODNESS SAKE
by Virginia Graham

This is the month when charity suffereth long,
This is the time for the Great White Elephant Stall,
For the home-made jam on acres of trestle table,
For the doily, the painted tray, the crochet shawl.

For the Christmas cards designed by someone's nephew,
For hangers covered in crêpe by someone's aunt,
For the ripening pheasant lying among the apples,
The beads, the dusters and the potted plant.

This is the month of desperate disbursement,
This the hour of the amateur tycoon;
This is the day we send a cake in the morning
And buy it back again in the afternoon.

Look at us please! Mark how we here do stand
Laden with aprons, ash-trays, fruit and flowers:
For we have come to your bazaar, my friends,
So to ensure that you will come to ours.

Oh, that we could agree to banish ever
The raffia bags, the bath salts and the soaps,
To sit, far far away from pickled peaches,
Sending each other cheques in envelopes.

On HMS Torbay 1943 by William Dring; its crew might have rescued Miss Ranskill.

FROM GOOD FOOD ON THE AGA

DECEMBER

The following recipes are given during this month:

OUR READERS WRITE

‘I’m afraid I didn’t take the advice of the critic who suggested reading a book of short stories slowly because I’ve just gulped down ***Tea with Mr Rochester*** over the weekend. I enjoyed it very much, the stories were all so unusual I felt I had to read quite slowly so as not to miss anything. The details were so important. I particularly enjoyed ‘Violet’, ‘The Little Willow’, ‘The Chosen and the Rejected’ and ‘Lucinda’. The touches of the supernatural in some of the stories were well-handled and not everything was spelled out, which is why I found myself re-reading bits, and I’m sure I will re-read the whole collection.’ LB, Australia

‘I have just finished ***The Carlyles at Home***, which I found quite fascinating in its detail, particularly as I have visited the house in Chelsea.’ RW, Newcastle

‘I loved ***Hostages to Fortune*** – what spare writing and how relevant it still seems today... Your books arrive like a little oasis.’ S C-T, Alton

‘***The Blank Wall*** is one of the best books I’ve read recently – it has incredible insight, really wonderful.’ M H-S, Witney

‘I read ***The Wise Virgins*** almost at a sitting. Wonderful, so intriguingly interesting about Virginia, Vanessa, the whole scene and such an excellent novel – so very much of the time.’ BB, Nethy Bridge

‘You were absolutely right about ***The Priory*** – a simply gorgeous read in the tradition of the great Victorians. Dorothy Whipple is just so clever with characters, very, very satisfying. I was also given ***Greenery Street***, a delightful upmarket *Diary of a Nobody*, and ***The Making of a Marchioness***, as well as having some very sharp insights into the Victorian marriage/cattle market, had all the readability and suspense of *Rebecca*.’ HC, London SE25

‘I found ***Few Eggs and No Oranges*** no cosy fireside read but a most moving record of triumphing in adversity by a courageous, compassionate, very intelligent middle-aged spinster whose love was for all living things.’ TF, Pangbourne

‘***Hostages to Fortune*** is one of the loveliest family novels I have ever read. And so authentic to the life of raising three children, in whatever decade.’ EH, USA

‘I decided to read ***The Runaway*** aloud to my seven year-old son, and we both found the story absolutely gripping. Every evening we raced on and when it came to an end, we felt quite flat. Even three weeks later my son was still imagining how the visit to Leslie Castle had gone, with Mr Clavering’s portly figure squeezed into his shooting plus fours. He even assured me he had spotted a little girl like Olga with her fair curly hair walking down the street! Thank you for introducing a book we would never have chanced upon in the library.’ JG, Oxford

‘I have much enjoyed the cassette of ***Cheerful Weather for the Wedding*** and can’t admire Miriam Margolyes’s many voices too much.’ MP, Hale

‘***Lettice Delmer*** is an amazing novel! It is remarkably rich in detail, and convincingly various in dialogue for such a short book, and this seems to be helped along by the economy of verse. It also struck me that being in verse made it all the more like a film – the quick cuts from scene to scene were managed in much the same way, and more efficiently than in prose fiction.’ JR, Santa Barbara

‘***Manja*** is a really gripping and unusual book which I think will be one my favourites.’ DM, Dover

‘I loved ***Someone at a Distance*** – there was such a sense of inevitability and the characters were described with such delicacy.’ RH, Coventry

TEA WITH MR ROCHESTER
by Charlotte Graves-Taylor

Second in an occasional series in which our readers write about books they particularly admire.

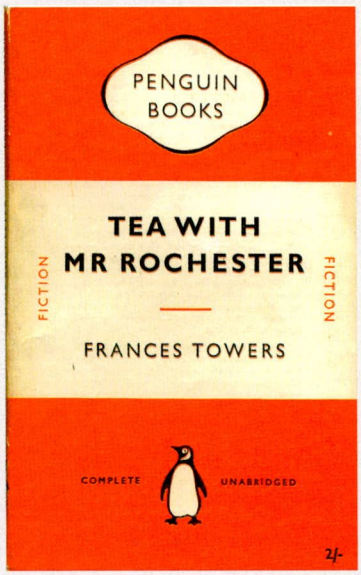
Some thirty years ago, in a second-hand bookshop in Bath, I found a 1952 Penguin entitled ***Tea with Mr Rochester***. The title attracted me because, like Prissy in the eponymous story, the first man in my life had been Mr Rochester: I read it with a sense of coming home.

Ever since, I have longed for this selection to be re-published. They are brilliant stories which ignited my interest in the short story genre and led to my lecturing on it. But no one seemed to have heard of Frances Towers – there was not a single reference to her in the critical literature of the Short Story. So I was delighted when Persephone Books announced this publication: no other writer is more deserving of the quietly distinguished grey covers and the unfailingly apt endpapers. Perhaps only Persephone Books would publish someone so gloriously unfashionable as Frances Towers: she is the antithesis of 'Chick-lit' with its attendant vulgarities. Among contemporary writers she does have something in common with Anita Brookner and Sally Vickers; but she is closer to Rose Macaulay, Elizabeth Taylor and Elizabeth Bowen (with whom she shares a talent for depicting children).

But Frances Towers has her own unique voice: quiet, introspective, very English; very much of a certain class and period; appreciative of beauty and unafraid of emotion. She has characteristics of both the two familiar categories of the genre: the 'well-told tale,' and the story that HE Bates described as 'an embellished hint of a life that lies outside it.' She expresses sentiment without sentimentality; she excels in the evocation of place, providing small details – a polished mahogany table, a vase of flowers – from which in our imagination we can furnish a whole room. Similarly with characterisation: a few slight strokes in a sketch are as informative as an oil painting.

These characters inhabit a world between reality and dream – where so much of one's life is spent. Frances Towers conveys the significance of the things that nearly happen, or might have happened; and the often painful clash between them and what does happen. She celebrates dailiness with a joy and a sorrow that ring profoundly true.

It is difficult not to rush at these stories: but they should be read slowly, not more than one a day. Each, though immediately accessible, deserves concentration of thought and feeling. Each is like one of those exquisite Russian lacquer boxes, the delicately painted lid of which takes us, not into another world, but deeper into our own.



OUR **MARCH 2004** BOOKS

The New House by Lettice Cooper is set on one day in 1936 when a family is moving to somewhere smaller. They are abandoning 'Stone Hall' (which will remind every Persephone reader of ***The Priory***) and going to live in a house which is easier to manage. But of course the novel is about far more than this: it is about individual change (can Rhoda, the daughter left at home, ever make a life for herself?) and social change, but is also an extremely readable and beautifully written book in the Whipple tradition. The new Persephone Preface is by Jilly Cooper; her husband is Lettice Cooper's nephew Leo Cooper, whose suggestion it was that we reprint a novel by his aunt.

The Casino (1948) was brought into the office by the author's daughter, Cary Bazalgette, who has written a new Preface about her mother and her work. It consists of fifteen short stories first published by Margaret Bonham in various magazines during the 1930s and '40s. The quality of the writing is evident from the very first sentence and we are delighted that the BBC is to broadcast five of the stories in 2004. This is Persephone's sixth volume of short stories (the others are ***Good Evening, Mrs Craven, Tell It to a Stranger, The Montana Stories, Minnie's Room*** and ***Tea with Mr Rochester***) and we realise that they are not to everyone's taste. However, we are hoping to change that! The argument against short stories is that the reader has just got 'in' to it when they end. Our argument in favour of them is that busy people can read one or two and often get as much out of them as they would have out of reading a whole novel (a point well-argued in the three pieces we published about the short story in the September 2003 *Persephone Quarterly*.)

Rex Whistler illustration from Edith Olivier's 1943 Night Thoughts of a Country Landlady: Being the Pacific Experiences of Miss Emma Nightingale in Time of War. We can be sure that Miss Nightingale and Miss Ranskill would have been soul-mates; and that the Aga in the kitchen would have been carefully riddled before Miss Nightingale came upstairs to bed.

FINALLY

Persephone Books has been shortlisted for the British Book Design and Production Awards 2003 in the category Brand or Series Identity. The book chosen to represent our list was ***A House in the Country*** by Jocelyn Playfair; other shortlisted books are published by, among others, OUP and Harper Collins. The winner will be announced on 11th November.

The November Lunch will be on the 20th, when Kay Dunbar will talk about ***The Pleasures and Pains of running Literary Festivals***. There is no lunch in December but on the 11th from 4-6pm there will be a ***Persephone Book Group***. Mince pies and madeira will be served; the novel to be discussed, ***Miss Ranskill comes Home*** by Barbara Euphan Todd, will be sent free to participants. Both events cost £25.

The 22nd January lunch will offer Dorothy Whipple fans a chance to see the **film** of *They Were Sisters*, the fourth title by her we plan to publish (in 2005). On 25th February Valerie Grove will talk about '**Reading and Writing**'; and on 25th March Ysenda Maxtone Graham, author of the biography of her grandmother Jan Struther, will talk about her and **Mrs Miniver** – whose 'three new library books lay virginally on the fender-stool, their bright paper wrappers unsullied by subscriber's hand.' Lunches costs £25 and (except the film) last from 12.30-2.30; please phone to book a place.

The ***First Persephone Conference*** at Newnham was a great success and we are to hold a second next year. It will take place on the 18th and 19th September and will cost the same as this year, £275 including VAT. The theme is yet to be decided but is likely to focus on Persephone writers in response to the launch next year of the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, in which many of our authors feature. If you would like to attend please send a (refundable) deposit of £100.

Do not forget to listen to Micheline Wandor's dramatisation of ***Every Eye*** on Radio 4 in the first week of December or to the ten-part serialisation of ***Saplings*** on Woman's Hour from 5-16 January 2004 (repeated in the evening at 7.45). As we go to press we have been enjoying Susannah Harker, Romola Garai and Emilia Fox's beautiful readings of five stories from ***Tea with Mr Rochester***. (Some will remember Emilia Fox reading five of ***The Montana Stories*** in 2001.)

Persephone reader Lynne Hatwell has enterprisingly set up an on-line Persephone book discussion

group. The October book was ***William - an Englishman*** and the November discussion is about ***Mariana***. Anyone interested should visit http://uk.groups.yahoo.com/group/persephonites

The Guardian's 'Why I Love' column on 2nd October was about the Persephone Bookshop. It described our books very approvingly and said: 'Visiting this tiny shop is a delight to the senses, for bookworms and aesthetes alike.'

Alison Baverstock wrote about the Newnham weekend in *Publishing News*, suggesting several reasons why our readers like our books: ours is a list 'of extremely high quality which readers trust. And that trust is never betrayed, even for commercial advantage.'

Late opening for Christmas: we will be open on Thursday 11th December and Thursday 18th December until 8pm.

PERSEPHONE BOOKS
020 7242 9292

Printed by The Lavenham Press, Lavenham, Suffolk.
If we have failed to acknowledge something that appears in The Persephone Quarterly, please let us know.

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