# The Royal 'We'

*Rosalind Brunt*

Julie Burchill, *Diana*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London 1998, 256pp; £20 cloth; £6.99 paperback.

*Lèse-majesté* is not what it was. In 1957, after the New Elizabethan Age ushered in by the Coronation of Elizabeth II had received a severe jolt of realism from the Suez Crisis, the new Queen, her style of reigning, and the monarchy itself came in for their first serious criticism. A number of commentators, ranging from the Conservative peer Lord Altringham to the then socialist playwright John Osborne, noted the hierarchical narrowness of the new Court and its exclusive connections with aristocratic and plutocratic pursuits. They called for a more in-touch and popular monarchy, or, in Osborne's case, for its complete extinction, because it had become 'the gold filling in a mouthful of decay'. But what was picked up by the still-deferential press and conveyed to its readers as a matter for huge public indignation were the comments about the Queen's limited education, the snobbish advice she received, her 'pain in the neck' speaking voice and her persona 'of a priggish schoolgirl, captain of the hockey team'. Hereafter, what was recalled was not any of the critics' reforming ideas, but the sheer effrontery of 'personal attacks' against Her Majesty, who was, after all 'above politics' and could not of course 'answer back for herself' - and Altringham and Osborne, along with the Marquis of Londonderry and the maverick journalist and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge stood publicly damned as both dangerously subversive and Angry Young-ish Men.[1]

Forty years on, and Julie Burchill comes to announce The Age of Diana. With the death of Princess Diana in 1997, she states in the Foreword to her new book:

> The Age of Diana has not ended but has rather just begun. Frozen forever at the height of her beauty, compassion and power by death, she will be the mourner at every royal wedding and the blushing bride at every Coronation. We'll never forget her - and neither will they. The queen is dead - long live the Queen (p9).

With this rallying cry, *lèse-majesté* is let rip. As Queen Diana becomes the book's unblemished heroine, 'Her in all her Herness, not her HRHness. Her, just her'. In Burchill's Epilogue summary (p236), she is presented as the undisputed standard whereby the Windsor family and their ilk, always excepting Diana's sons, are judged and found totally lacking. Against Diana, who combined both sweetness of character with loveliness of appearance,

1. This episode is well summarised in Roland Flamini, *Sovereign*, Corgi, London 1992, pp232-240.

who offered us a possible 'third way' between 'pleasure seeking and piety, between self-obsession and self-denial' and 'was the philosopher-statesman needed by a century worn out and bled dry by clever men with no instinct' (p227), members of the royal family are only and always 'cold', described throughout in negative terms, with the most venom reserved for ex-husband Charles, who is repeatedly labelled 'third-rate', a 'hollow man', 'bogus intellectual' and 'sex addict'.

Just as goodness and beauty go together in this narrative, so do villainy and ugliness. The Windsors are perforce 'stunted' and 'malformed', Charles' physical appearance is constantly mocked: 'But then, up against him, a two-toed sloth would have looked wonderful' (p195); while his mistress, Camilla Parker-Bowles, is 'leathery' and 'hard/boot/horse-faced'. And while Burchill has some very pertinent remarks about the importance of 'blood' and 'breeding' for aristocratic continuity, she comes eerily close to genetic atavism and racism herself by constantly evoking the pure Englishness of Diana: 'She was so ENGLISH and how very sexy that word is ... INN - the dark deep interior - glishhhh - the lush glide to a lip-smacking finish' (p157) as against the 'gothic', 'gloomy' Germanness of the Windsors which contains the 'bad blood of a billion Battenbergs, Hanovers and Saxe-Coburg-Gothas'.

To this contrapuntal tempo, the story of Diana is told from birth to death, with each chapter in her life given a song title. Added to the sharp Diana-Windsor opposition is a 'we' who is the author herself and by extension, 'us, the besotted English'. 'We' are frequently invoked as a chorus of Diana-partisans who clearly recognised from the moment of the wedding 'that perhaps the country belonged more to her people already - and by extension to all of us English commoners - than it did to the cold, remote Saxe-Coburg-Gothas, with their dry eyes and their supreme stage management' (p14).

'Perhaps', 'probably' and 'it seems' are regular get-out terms in a text composed mainly of rhetorical assertion and the speculative élan of every type of metaphorical allusion. But Burchill's persuasiveness has never derived from patient analysis and the testing of evidence. Proud to call herself a 'hack', she excels in the journalistic gauging of cultural climates, the adept tuning in to public moods. It was she, after all, who coined the expression 'People's Princess' that Tony Blair adopted on the day of Diana's death - a description she used in a 1992 article presciently entitled: 'Di Hard: The Pop Princess'.[2] And one of the reasons why Burchill, unlike the commentators of forty years ago, has incurred no public censure for the rubbishing of the Windsors in this book is that it does forcefully articulate one aspect of the public mood in the immediate aftermath of Diana's death: the anger towards the royal family that was vividly displayed in many of the written tributes and posters left as 'shrines' to the Princess.

2. Julie Burchill, *Sex and Sensibility*, Grafton, London 1992, pp233-245.

But it's become clear since the extraordinary week between Diana's death and her funeral that, just as it was rather an oversimplification to describe the mass of responses in terms of 'a nation united in grief', so it can't be

assumed with quite the reckless brio that Burchill asserts in her embrace of 'us' the English that the two overriding reactions then and since were simply loathing of the Windsors and a corresponding adoration of the Princess. Burchill tells readers that Diana herself 'used the word "perspicacious" to describe me.' And yes, her comments on key photographs of the Diana Age are particularly telling, and her interpretations of the Princess's upbringing, her ill health and her emergence as a celebrity are by turns poignantly acute and devastatingly camp.

But Burchill's passionate republicanism is surprisingly absent here. Unlike the commentators of the 1950s, she declines to hitch her invective onto any wider picture of the monarchy. Because this book lacks any coherent perspective beyond a heavily idealised 'Diana', it blunts its own shockability - and *lèse-majesté* without republican clout is reduced to the glib tactics of hit-and-run.

# THE POLITICS OF MOURNING

*Feona Attwood*

Beatrix Campbell, *Diana Princess of Wales: How Sexual Politics Shook The Monarchy*, The Women's Press, London 1998, 259pp; £7.99 paperback.

This book, 'the first feminist analysis of the life and death of Diana, Princess of Wales' (according to the press release), is Beatrix Campbell's attempt to put sexual politics firmly back at the centre of debates about Diana. This is particularly welcome at the end of a year in which the radical potential of Diana's unscheduled public mourning appears to have fizzled out against the backdrop of the royal family's rehabilitation. Campbell retells the story of the monarchy as a series of grim, Gothic tales peopled by 'pointless Princes', cynical patriarchs, sacrificed women and abandoned children. 'These people', notes Campbell have got "love" and "hate" tattooed on their tiaras' (p99). In this comparison of the 'real' royals with the Royal Holy Family enshrined for its subjects as an ideal, and of their customs with the more enlightened practices of civil society, Campbell makes one of her main points. By ideal and actual contemporary standards the royals live frigid lives of dysfunction, repetition and alienation, and the tradition that they represent is something we might be ready to reject.

It was the entry of Diana into the charmless circle of the royal family, Campbell maintains, which exposed the chasm between royalty and its subjects. For the monarchy Diana was merely the latest in a long line of sacrificial victims, the means of its own material and symbolic reproduction. For the tabloids she was a fascinating object, to be pursued and uncovered. For the public she became an object of intense curiosity, as 'the embodiment of an ideal and its impossibility' (p134). The gaze to which Diana was subjected may have been cruel and misogynistic, but it inadvertently let the light in, exposing what had been hidden. Campbell's claim is that we can only make sense of Diana's life, death and mourning by refusing the separation of private and public, personal and political. The tabloids opened up a Pandora's box in which the monarchy, along with traditional ideals of family, femininity and romantic love became the object of intense public scrutiny. Diana's own determination to make sense of her experiences and to speak about them in public took this process much further. It invited and drew not merely voyeurism, but identification, empathy, connection. Diana herself was transformed by contextualising her experiences within the discourses of feminism and humanitarianism; she became a survivor whose testimony connected her to the people beyond the Palace walls; an

advocate, humanitarian, political. Finally, in the event of her death, it was public understanding of Diana's life within a structure that abused, attacked and finally killed her which 'ignited ... republican sentiment' (p3) and turned Diana's mourners into a political crowd.

It is Campbell's attempt to make sense of Diana and her public as political which makes this book important - an attempt already and too easily caricatured. Mark Steel, in a witty response to this book, criticises what he sees as a feminism which appears to have abandoned class politics and collective action for a fascination with signs and symbols, with rich women and their glamorous suffering, a fascination which only ends up 'with the idolisation of a modern Marie-Antoinette' and mistakes the only lesson to be learnt from the death of Diana - 'Don't get in the car if the driver's pissed'[1] - for politics.

1. Mark Steel, *Guardian*, 17.6.98, p19.

But Campbell's project here is to pursue the feminist attempt to re-imagine what is and might constitute 'the political' - a project which continues to be important in a culture where traditional politics appears irrelevant, unattractive and uninteresting to most of its people. As she shows, it is precisely the radical refusal to define politics narrowly that has transformed the landscape of Britain at the end of the twentieth century - a refusal which has also highlighted an increasing lack of fit between traditional political languages and practices and the needs, concerns and modes of expression of the majority. As Campbell admits, 'a mood doth not a movement make' (p252). But that the public mood did not become a movement Campbell sees as the failure of parliamentary and party politics; a failure to connect with the people and with the debates which have become a vital part of social and political transformation, debates about the rights of women and children, about families, about sexual pleasure and the ownership of women's bodies, about health, love and happiness.

Detouring through history to see how it might have been, Campbell tells the story of Queen Caroline, another 'sacrificial lamb', given in 1814 to the then Prince of Wales. Caroline's story is the story of Diana with one significant difference. The popular and political support that Caroline drew marked an encounter between popular and political cultures in which a new political language which could admit and interrogate public issues and personal values was forged, between republican politics and a 'people' which, for once, included women and their 'woes'. It is the potential of this encounter between popular fascination with a Princess and 'politics' that Campbell glimpses in the mourning of Diana; an encounter from which it was not the people but the politicians who slid away.

It is the ambition of this book that accounts for both its weaknesses and its strengths. In her determination to include everything - a history of the monarchy and its subjects, biographies of both Charles and Diana, an overview of changes in modern British society and the influence of

feminism there, a discussion of the media and a critique of traditional politics - Campbell tells a sometimes scrappy, clumsy tale. More seriously perhaps, there is a tendency to over-simplify; the royals emerge as two-dimensional villains while civil society is sometimes portrayed as a paradise of equality and enlightenment. Campbell raises complicated and difficult questions about the personal, popular and political climate which she cannot hope to answer so simply. But in raising them, and in insisting on their relevance to us as individuals, subjects and citizens, she has established a challenging framework for future discussions of Diana and her aftermath.

# Fantastic Subject

*Christine Clegg*

Mandy Merck (ed), *After Diana: Irreverent Elegies*, Verso, London 1998, 231pp; £10.00 paperback.

In the wake of Diana's death, the gathering of the crowds and the sheer volume of the expressions of grief gave rise to commentaries of concern about society, democracy, modernity, idolatry, the future of the monarchy and so on. The subject of Diana seemed to lead everywhere and anywhere, and the innumerable and various publications on her life and death continue to flow in. Mandy Merck's collection brings together a number of articles, many of which (including the lyric poem by Jean Baudrillard) have appeared elsewhere. There are new essays here, notably Dorothy Thompson on the historical connections between the reaction to Diana's death, and the public demonstration of grief at the death of Princess Charlotte in 1817; Françoise Gaillard on the celebrity effect in popular culture; and, outstandingly, Naomi Segal's analysis of the Diana touch and the fluidity of gender.

The introduction suggests that the key themes to emerge from the articles are, broadly, the 'authoritarian populism' previously identified by Stuart Hall in relation to Thatcherism, and 'conservative modernisation'. There is also a third theme which in many ways is the most interesting aspect of the introduction, and provides a different narrative focus for readings of the collection. This is the place of fantasy in the life of Diana's 'subjects' and the symptomatic relation to the pathology of royal fascination. Here, Merck turns to the history of psychoanalysis and to exemplary cases of patients who suffered from delusions of being loved by royalty. The idea of fantasy floats between many of the essays and is vital to any consideration of who 'the people' gathered in the name of Diana were, and, more urgently, perhaps, what they might have wanted.

Ross McKibbin concludes his essay on Mass-Observation with the sense that there was something infantile about the 'intensity' of admiration for Diana. Something not quite grown-up because not in touch with reality, and because not grown-up not yet part of the nation. Dorothy Thompson suggests that it is precisely such a sense of exclusion which may have been the occasion for the 'public manifestation of grief'. For Sarah Benton, recording events around her North London home, that manifestation of (something like) sympathy briefly promised entry to the world of neighbourhood, and seemed to resonate as a potential for transforming 'what public discourse should be about'. Françoise Gaillard imagines the grief as a great pool that comes to stand in for an absent social bond. In

this sense, Diana represents a place in which we 'lodge our affects.' As Naomi Segal suggests, though, inasmuch as we could never get enough of what we wanted, Diana was in position as a loving mother/therapist figure endlessly subject to (and subjecting us to) an insatiable kind of transference love.

As psychoanalysis tells us transference love is never simply an illusion, neither is it guaranteed. The Diana effect plainly did not work for (or on) everybody as this collection makes clear. Elizabeth Wilson, for example, writes from the side of reason and restraint in the face of something uncontained and unmanageable about the whole affair - 'more rubbish than I have ever read in my life before'. This position is virulently upheld in 'Diarrhoea', Glen Newey's bilious (philosophical) rejection of all things Diana. Such is Newey's stomach-churning reaction, that the popular culture to which Diana was so strongly affiliated is taken to be an effective emetic of philosophy. No delusions here then.

For anyone interested in cultural studies this collection will prove valuable. More than anything else, I think, the book locates the Diana affair in a wider and continuing debate about what constitutes a suitable subject for serious academic reflection. Indeed, what the book bears witness to, both in the editorial perspective and in the range of positions it represents, are the discontinuities and the contradictions between the ways in which we understand the worlds 'we' inhabit - intellectually and on the streets.

# NAOMI MITCHISON

## *Elizabeth Maslen*

Jenni Calder, *The Nine Lives of Naomi Mitchison*, Virago, London 1997, 340pp; £20.00 cloth.

Naomi Mitchison, whose life spans the twentieth century, and who died this year, in her one hundred and second year, fully merits the nine lives claimed for her in the title of Jenni Calder's biography. Not only has she been, for over seven decades, a prolific writer of fiction (including books for children and science fiction), poetry, plays, and nonfictional books, essays, and articles covering a vast range of topics, but she has played an active role in a formidable number of causes. She has, for instance, championed many women's issues, crucially that of birth control in the interwar years, when she also helped many refugees fleeing fascism, as well as those victimised for their socialism in Austria, as her *Vienna Diary* testifies; she has explored the plight of share-croppers in the United States, and questioned imperialism at home; she has supported socialism, while often criticising the Labour Party and on many occasions lending her voice to the Scottish Nationalists; she has fought for many causes in Scotland (she was a county councillor for East Kintyre for many years, and a member of the Advisory Panel on the Highland and Islands from its inception to its demise in 1965); and she has been closely involved in African issues, especially with the Bakgatla people of Bechuanaland (later Botswana) and South Africa, who made her a member and 'mother' of their tribe; she has farmed the estate at Carradale, and actively participated in the fishing of the village's fleet of boats.

It takes a complex personality to engage so passionately with such a wide range of concerns, and indeed Naomi Mitchison is complex, often exhibiting a mass of contradictions. As a person, she emerges from the pages of Jenni Calder's biography as imperious, sensitive, whole-hearted about issues that fire her imagination, fond of real-life dramas, often yielding to an urge to outrage, yet easily hurt and desperately in need of love and reassurance. She has had, says Calder, 'a profound need to give, to help, sometimes to interfere, but never to hold herself aloof from the hurly burly of human exchange' (pp173-4); her life has always been a 'mixture of vivid idealism and practicality' (p191).

Calder's research into people, places, published and unpublished material is wonderfully rich in fleshing out this extraordinary woman. She rightly acknowledges Jill Benton's warmly affectionate pioneering biography, but her own work gives much greater insight into Mitchison's complexity.[1] Calder marries the public and the private deftly, handling

1. Jill Benton, *Naomi Mitchison: a Biography*, Harper Collins, Pandora Press, London 1990.

sensitive issues (pre-eminently, Mitchison's numerous sexual liaisons, both consummated and more or less platonic) sympathetically and perceptively, usually giving just enough on characters and issues impinging on her subject to enrich our understanding of her life without digressing (and the roll-call of friendships alone must have tempted digression, since many of them are major personalities of the twentieth century in their own right). She shows the growth of Mitchison's socialist convictions alongside her radical approach to sex and sexuality; Naomi and Dick practised open marriage and yet, despite frequent emotional crises, remained secure in their marriage. One of the delights of this biography is that it does not follow the prevailing fashion of digging for dirt. Calder does not set out to reduce her subject to a ragbag of mean motives behind every generous impulse (and Mitchison has been very generous to many people and causes). The biography does not, on the other hand, whitewash Mitchison's difficult nature, which could indeed have been a candidate for vilification in less scrupulous hands. But what Calder ultimately offers is a celebration, an apologia for a life: her approach is to get under Mitchison's skin and explore the ways in which her mind, emotions, and physical vitality seem to work. And what Calder stresses is the intimate connection between all Mitchison's experiences. As Calder says when addressing a key moment early in the Second World War: 'as always, the varying strands of Naomi's life were woven together. Pain and disappointment in one area affected everything else. The shock of losing the baby spread through all her concerns and activities' (pp160-1). And indeed, given their impact on her perception of the events surrounding them, it is good to see the loss of her nine-year-old eldest child, Geoff, in 1930, and of her last day-old baby sensitively acknowledged. A number of recent critics only record her five surviving children, but Calder shows how devastating these two deaths were to Mitchison, affecting not only her perception of herself as a woman but finding their way into her fiction.

Given the richness and diversity of Mitchison's life, Calder's critique of her writing is inevitably concise; this is, after all, a biography rather than a literary biography. However, what is there is invariably perceptive, if rather more weighted to the light Mitchison's writing throws on her life than analysed in a literary frame of reference. There are references to ways in which Mitchison and her writing were perceived as they were published: *The Corn King and the Spring Queen*, published in 1931, led Winifred Holtby, for instance, to assert that Mitchison was 'of the calibre of which Nobel prize-winners are made' (p11). Yet she was often belittled personally in the 1930s, famously by Q.D. Leavis who attacked her for her upper-class background and what Leavis saw as her inevitably blinkered view of other classes. Calder also cites *The Star*, for instance, referring to her 'in a condescending tone' as 'a very interesting, pretty, and aggressive little person' (p100) (which is a lot more polite than Virginia Woolf's slighting reference to 'the rather fat ... greyfaced intense Naomi').[2] A particularly

2. Quoted in Gill Plain, *Women's Fiction of the Second World War: Gender, Power and Resistance*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh 1996, p142.

valuable point to which Calder draws attention is the savage reception given to Mitchison's book of essays, commissioned by Victor Gollancz, *The Outline for Boys and Girls and their Parents* (1932), which 'was attempting to draw attention to what were, in Naomi's view, "the good parts of civilisation" and how they could be built on'. The essays accorded with her belief in the need for what she calls 'communion' which she sees as necessarily 'compatible ... with science, with consciousness of our own psychology, with the freedom which knowledge brings' (p106). But both she and Gollancz 'underestimated the force of the establishment' and despite the support of such figures as George Bernard Shaw, Rebecca West, and C.E.M. Joad, the book sold badly (it was seen by the establishment, Calder notes, as undermining 'traditional Christian values' and approving 'developments in communist Russia' (p106)). Since much of what this volume promotes is also central to Mitchison's next and most contentious novel, *We Have Been Warned*, the nervousness of her usually supportive publishers is partially explained.

Mitchison's writing has always raised contentious issues and received mixed responses over the years. For instance, *The Conquered* (1923) is now regarded, by most critics, as not one of Mitchison's best works, yet Calder rightly reminds us that it was well regarded when it came out. E.M. Forster called it 'moving and beautiful' while 'it was recommended reading for Classical students at Oxford and Cambridge, and there was a school edition in 1926' (p63). Calder rightly shows how Mitchison used historical fiction to illuminate current issues, both social and political issues of her time, and issues which were profoundly personal to her. The novel *We Have Been Warned* proved difficult to publish precisely because it was Mitchison's first attempt to fictionalise contemporary life in a contemporary setting; the sexual adventures, the explorations of sexuality which were acceptable to a readership of the 1930s when placed in the far past of ancient Greece or ancient Rome became shocking when transplanted into the present, regardless of the fact that homosexuality, abortion and the question of sexual freedom for women were being debated and practised in the 1930s. It is not for nothing that Mitchison uses the past as a means of debating sensitive issues of the present; this was a common method used by writers under tyrannical East European regimes to evade censorship - and Mitchison used it skilfully to evade the socially acceptable limitations of her age. Despite Lukács's reservations about using historical settings to debate current issues,[3] the great strength of the historical novel in Mitchison's hands is to offer sensitive material to a wide audience under the guise of entertainment. Calder rightly comments on her subject's ability to bring her historical characters vividly to life as if they were contemporaries of her readers, while placing them in well-researched historical settings. Her ancient Greece is richly present for us, just as the Second World War gives us arguably her best historical novel, *The Bull Calves*, set in the Scotland of the second half of the eighteenth century. The language (skilfully evoking the differences

3. Janet Montefiore, *Men and Women Writers of the 1930s: the Dangerous Flood of History*, Routledge, London 1996, pp147-51.

between Highland and Lowland idioms), the characters, the structuring of this novel are enthralling, as is the meticulously reconstructed setting. Calder rightly points to Mitchison's closeness to her female protagonist; but the closeness never spoils the artistic control. Much of what Mitchison felt for and against this war, much of what she felt about issues of femininity, and most of all what she feels about Scottish issues comes to life in this humane, compassionate and wise novel.

This admirably researched and sympathetic biography is particularly well timed. It was published in time to celebrate Naomi Mitchison's centenary, and it also coincides with renewed interest in the writings of Mitchison and her contemporaries. Jill Benton's pioneering biography offers some useful comments on Mitchison's work, while a number of other writers have studied her literary output in depth, setting it in the context of her time and alongside the works of such contemporaries as Virginia Woolf, Rebecca West, and Storm Jameson. Gill Plain explores Mitchison's fiction of the 1930s and 1940s, analysing Mitchison's own interest in and reservations about Jung, and viewing her through the lens of later feminist theories; Janet Montefiore examines a range of her work in depth, particularly praising *The Bull Calves*; and most recently Phyllis Lassner looks at Mitchison's work from a transatlantic perspective, and offers in the process an interesting defence of the much maligned *We Have Been Warned*.[4]

But in the end, what is so impressive about Naomi Mitchison, and what Jenni Calder demonstrates so admirably in her immensely readable biography, is that Mitchison has always been a woman of action as well as a writer, her hands in the soil or on the tiller throughout her richly varied life - she has fully participated in the many matters which have laid claim to her considerable talents. She has made impressive contributions to socialist debate, to women's issues, to the victims of fascist oppression in Europe, to the people of Botswana, to Carradale and to Scotland. She is indeed someone who has lived her century generously and to the full.

4. Gill Plain, *op. cit.*, pp139-65; Montefiore, *op.cit.*, pp163-68; Phyllis Lassner, *British Women Writers of World War II: Battlegrounds of their Own* ,Macmillan, London 1998, pp69-85.

# FLORA TRISTAN

*Máire F. Cross*

Susan Grogan, *Flora Tristan: Life Stories*, Routledge, London 1997, 280pp; £45.00 cloth.

'Flora Tristan was beautiful'. To the opening words of Grogan's biography could be added: 'Her story is amazing'. She had romantic and tragic origins. She was born in Paris in 1803 of a Spanish-Peruvian father and Parisian mother who had failed to have their marriage authenticated in Spain. Little is known of her childhood save that her father died intestate when she was very young and the bulk of his property was confiscated as a result of the Napoleonic wars. Married to her employer, André Chazal in 1821, she bore him three children but the marriage was a disaster and although she left her husband definitively in 1825 she could not escape from the consequences of the Restoration Monarchy's decision to abolish divorce. Little is known of how she survived economically during this difficult time because Tristan subsequently deliberately kept hidden all her personal papers and circumstances. As a wronged husband who had all the rights over his wife and children in the eyes of the Napoleonic *Code Civil*, Chazal's pursuit of her is documented in various archives investigated by Grogan. The couple enlisted the help of lawyers to settle their differences and allocate parental rights over their children to little effect; the marital dispute culminated in tragedy when an enraged and embittered Chazal attempted assassination on 10 September 1838, when Tristan was seriously wounded. After Chazal's sentence to hard labour and life imprisonment, Tristan, by now fully recovered and having gained a certain notoriety through the trial, continued her literary career as an independent woman. She had begun with the publication of a brochure (*De la necessité de faire bon accueil aux femmes étrangères*, 1835), a travel book (*Les périgrinations d'une paria,* 1837) and a novel (*Méphis*, 1838). Although she had failed in her attempt to gain recognition as a rightful heir from her father's close wealthy and influential family, by travelling alone to Peru she gained invaluable experience and henceforth was able to earn her living as a writer, producing another travel book on London (*Promenades dans Londres*, 1840). By then she was anxious to play a part in the construction of a new social order and began to campaign more directly for socialism by first publishing a programme for direct action in a book (*Union Ouvrière*, 1843) and then touring towns of provincial France to publicise her work and set up workers' organisations. This campaign ended abruptly with her death in Bordeaux in 1844. The later part of her life as a writer is more thoroughly documented because of her contact

with workers and other socialists, and because she kept a journal which was published posthumously as *Le Tour de France* (1973). Even so there are gaps in this period where Tristan seems to have gone to ground - in the winter of 1843 for instance. Since her death the biography of Flora Tristan has often been related beginning with one by her Lyons disciple, Eléonore Blanc, in 1845. Through her public actions she achieved a political reputation and her ideas gained attention for a brief moment but the impact of her actions dimmed and her brand of associationist socialism was overtaken by the events of the revolution of 1848, the setting up of the Second Republic, its subsequent demise with the suppression of political opposition by the Second Empire, by the prominence of scientific socialism and its dismissal of the utopians. Some of her ideas came into sharper focus in the twentieth century with the growth of the history of feminism.

One might wonder what new story can be told about this early nineteenth-century utopian socialist. No new substantial primary sources have come to light recently to fill in the intriguing gaps in her personal circumstances. Little is known of how she acquired her literary skills. Nevertheless, thanks to more advanced methods in textual analysis Grogan suggests that new questions can be asked in this post-structuralist era, thus enabling us to undertake a new exploration of what it means to be a woman author. Although this is no compensation for gap-filling facts, her analysis is a very useful contribution to Tristan studies. The many myths or stories surrounding the roles of this character come under very close scrutiny. In doing so Grogan tackles an important feature of history in postmodern times, namely the place of the biography. What is revelatory is the measuring of fact and speculation in the telling of Flora Tristan's life story in other biographies. Set against a thorough critique of the limitations of critical biography and also the limitations of post-modern feminist analysis which lays great emphasis on the gender functioning of the individual within networks of social power, this fresh narration maintains Flora Tristan the person as the central hub, but provides an illuminating set of angles in twelve chapters.

In her introductory critique of biography and memory, Grogan leaves no stone unturned as she sets out to distinguish the historical figure from the real person. There are even myths about her neglect; she compares Tristan's very powerful construction of her own story remembered, forgotten and retrieved in parallel to the subsequent development and diversity of socialism and feminism. Grogan has chosen a thematic rather than the conventional chronological approach. There are ten roles ascribed to Tristan, many by herself, a fact which, claims Grogan, gives a special meaning to the term biography. They are examined in ten chapters: slave and pariah, traveller, woman author, social scientist, socialist, mother of the workers, lover of humanity, the first strong woman, melodramatic hero, saving woman. In the final

chapter Grogan describes how the Tristan legend was created, even on her deathbed. Workers began using her cherished message without her sanction; they used her name also to construct her legacy but in a very specific historical context.

The work provides a useful insight for the non-specialist and specialist into several aspects of French history as well as to one woman's story. Together with the artistic and literary world of mid-nineteenth-century France, gender roles, archival availability, political considerations and movements with which Tristan was closely associated are explained in the background, thus adding multiple layers to the story-telling. All quotes are in English. All bibliographical references are included in the chapter endnotes. A chronological appendix gives a good guide to the reader.

Throughout her life, Flora the victim of illegitimacy and a failed marriage, Flora the explorer of places as far apart as London and Peru, constantly reflected on the world beyond her personal experience. Her own oppression became part of a wider collective tale, her travels merely served to bring her further evidence of the sexual and economic exploitation of women and the lower classes, the people. Thus freeing herself from the gender restrictions of social convention, in a very short space of time the traveller observing people became a social scientist, a formidable author and political activist. Yet in many ways it is impossible to get to the bottom of Flora Tristan's story. Grogan warns us that we must not see Flora Tristan simply as a victim of oppression or a sacrificial martyr to the worthy cause of socialism. Nor must we take her self-image for granted. Grogan does not dismiss Tristan's own story however. Her search for the real Flora Tristan resorts to her opinions and passions as she sifts through her readily available printed works, her fragmentary letters and unfinished manuscripts as these remain the closest evidence, no matter how biased they are. Where at all possible she includes her findings from the archives consulted. She illustrates a truly remarkable facet of Tristan, namely her ability to express her innermost feelings in tune with the spirit of her time. On the one hand she was on an impossible mission to redeem the working class from ignorance and poverty, on the other she self-consciously recorded her efforts so that posterity could be her judge.

Grogan reminds us that it is impossible to distinguish truth from fable in Tristan's case as so much of the documentation of her circumstances was obliterated either by historical accident or deliberately by Tristan herself. Ironically her public story saved her private story from oblivion, and vice versa. Her artistic connections are inextricably linked to the transition from private to public: she does not mention that André Breton once purchased and published several of her letters as by that time she had a famous grandson, Paul Gaugin, born four years after her death.

Grogan's biography illustrates very clearly that one of the most intriguing

aspects of Flora Tristan's story is the numerous ways it can be manipulated. In the curious conjecture of remembering and forgetting Flora Tristan many myths have been created. Since the coming of age of feminist history Grogan claims it is time to take stock of Flora Tristan without categorising her into one of the many socialist camps, dismissing her as a prime case for psychiatric care or sanctifying her as a victim of oppression or indeed mother of feminist socialism. I would add that the interest in her lies in the sheer amount of ground she covered during her short career as a public figure and in the depth of her perception of her circumstances. She was a valuable storyteller, an important witness to her time. This account is a timely and beneficial reassessment of the many interpretations of the Tristan legacy which have built up since her death which will enhance her life story, ensure her a more prominent place in the collective memory of French history and add weight to the wisdom of her words.

# UNA MARSON

*Alison Donnell*

Delia Jarrett-Macauley, *The Life of Una Marson 1905-65*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1998, 242pp; £25 hardback.

When we think about the factors that contributed to the 'boom' of Caribbean Literature in the 1950s we would commonly bring to mind the emerging generation of nationalist writers based in the Caribbean itself (such as Roger Mais and Victor Stafford Reid in Jamaica). We might also think of the BBC programme, *Caribbean Voices*, which provided a much needed outlet, as well as a valuable source of income, for new writers and writings, and also, of course, of the talented community of male Caribbean writers (such as George Lamming) who had come to London, ironically the region's new literary centre. Yet, what is so commonly neglected in accounts of Caribbean literary history in the first half of the twentieth century is mention of Una Marson, a Jamaican woman whose experiences and achievements provided a link between all these major movements and figures. Indeed, even within specialist works, Marson's cultural activities, her journalism and even her own creative writing are seldom attended to. The absence of Una Marson from both literary and cultural histories is clearly lamentable. Marson was a woman of extraordinary creativity, energy and ambition, qualities which were never wasted upon self-indulgent pursuits but directed towards the great causes of her time: the advancement of black women's rights and representation; the struggle against colonialism; the strengthening of cultural and literary nationalism and the protection of Jamaican children.

Jarrett-Macauley's biography clearly does more than write Marson back into a literary history of the Caribbean, and rightly so. Marson's activities were more far-reaching and more global than such an inscription could register, and neither did she ever see herself as a writer in any narrow sense. Not only is the black British dimension of her life and career significant, but so too is the immense range of activities with which she was involved, as well as the genuinely striking list of individuals with whom she had extended contact: George Orwell, Langston Hughes, Winifred Holtby. Nevertheless, it is to Jarrett-Macauley's credit that she does not simply compose a life outwards from those few familiar moments and images of glory always associated with Marson: the BBC photo with Orwell and T. S. Eliot; her role as personal secretary to HIM Haile Selassie; or her founding of the Jamaican Save the Children Fund. Rather, this attentive biography traces a life in whole, recording both

the significant acts as yet unknown (as well as being the first female to edit and publish a Jamaican monthly, Marson's *The Cosmopolitan* was groundbreaking as a consciously woman-centred publication), and also the more complex and fragmented public and private lives that were lived in-between. In this way, the biography refuses to bundle Marson into a neat iconic package as 'the first black British feminist' or 'the first Caribbean woman poet of significance'. Indeed, while these well-worn labels, which pepper the standard two-paragraph tributes, have been useful in promoting this unacknowledged figure, they have also established a shorthand identity for Marson which, as this biography, with its full restoration of Marson's life and works proves, does not do her justice.

It says much about the oppressive structures operating in both Britain and the Caribbean that Jarrett-Macauley's careful and positive reconstruction of Marson's life could still easily be read as an archetypal narrative of the 'woman writer and worker' in the early part of this century. Her life does tell the story of a woman whose work was unpublished (Marson's unfinished autobiography is yet to find a publisher), unacknowledged (the *Caribbean Voices* programme is routinely attributed to Henry Swanzy alone) and unrewarded (Marson lived long periods of her life in both financial and emotional ruin). However, while her biographer does not shy away from the hardships and trials which Marson faced during her own life confronting both racist and sexist attitudes, neither does she allow Marson's life narrative to be a narrative of oppression. Although clearly inspired by admiration and an attachment to her subject, Jarrett-Macauley avoids a sentimental involvement with Marson's life (which has flawed previous biographical sketches) and her writing is informed by a wealth of material collected from interviews, correspondences and painstaking archival work. This approach is particularly valuable in relation to Marson's private life which was much more fraught and much harder to access than her public roles. Her troubled relationships with men and her fragile mental state have been hinted at many times, but Jarrett-Macauley is the first to thoroughly address these episodes and to situate them both within the wider social and cultural tensions that Marson had to contend with and as a symptom of a difficult personality which often led her into damaging conflicts with others. Indeed, although Jarrett-Macauley links Marson's own social situation as a middle-class Jamaican woman writer to that of Virginia Woolf's 'Angel in the House', she does not write her into history as an angel, but rather adopts a candid lens which makes her portrait both more credible and more readable. This combination of a well-sourced and detailed account which is lovingly executed seems to suggest that Jarrett-Macauley is aware that she may well be the only full biographer of Marson and that, therefore, it is her duty to represent this remarkable woman's life as completely, as honestly and as accurately as possible.

The fact that on Marson's return to Jamaica in 1945, 'everywhere

she went, huge crowds gathered as though she were royalty' (p169) and that a lunch in her honour organised by the Poetry League of Jamaica was attended by Edna Manley (a prominent sculptor and wife of Norman) and Roger Mais (a writer and radical), amongst others, speaks of a high profile, proper recognition and a wide audience within her lifetime. Her reversal of fortunes could hardly have been more dramatic. Although she brought the idea of literary groups, magazines and broadcasts to many of those individuals now most strongly associated with Caribbean Literature, her own role as both catalyst and campaigner has remained invisible until now. Given her immense wealth of contacts and her active role in a range of countries and organisations, Marson's disappearance from the history books is genuinely puzzling, even given the sparse and erratic recording of Caribbean cultural activity in the first half of the century. However, the lack of critical recognition for Marson's work is far less bewildering. While Jarrett-Macauley claims that: 'Only the canon and the curse of literary history that has concealed women writers of one generation from the next had separated Una from her African-Caribbean daughters' (p126), I would suggest that there are other factors which have influenced this 'separation'. Marson was 'a woman ahead of her time' (as an earlier biographer named her) in more than a clichéd fashion; her recognition of Africanity as a powerful source for black cross-cultural consciousness and her advocacy of women's rights and women's agency are testament to her insightful mind. Nevertheless, she was also very much of her time and, as such, often caught in the tensions and ambivalences associated with the transition between colony and nation, and the opposing politics of the status quo and those of radical change which marked the era in which she grew up and which also influenced her literary works.

Jarrett-Macauley draws attention to the success of Marson's play, *Pocomania*, first staged in Jamaica in January 1938 and often cited as her hallmark work. She also discusses how it is 'convention that directs the [play's] denouement' (p132) in which the protagonist, Stella, renounces her alternative community of worship in favour of her romantic union with a doctor. In its staging of the tension between convention and innovation, between Afrocentric and Eurocentric value systems, *Pocomania* typifies much of Marson's other creative endeavours. Indeed, it is the way in which Marson seems to move between radical ideas and conventional resolutions that has so endangered her critical reputation, as she is not a figure whose corpus of works can easily be appropriated by late twentieth-century ready-made theoretical paradigms or political positions. Her poetry sets highly stylised sonnets which deploy an Elizabethan vocabulary of slavery alongside parodies of women's assigned identities as wives. Although Jarrett-Macauley perceives the six poems by Una Marson that were reprinted in the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Poetry* (1986) as showing 'a generous recognition of her

various modes of qualities' (p184) this is, in fact, an impoverished indicator of Marson's own creative writing. Indeed, if her life deserves to be fully represented, then so too do her literary works, and it is a shame that the biography does not pay attention to recent scholarship in this field.

Jarrett-Macauley's biography will almost certainly provoke in its readers the same feelings of frustration and disbelief that researchers and academics working on Marson have felt for a considerable time now. How can it be that a woman who was so centrally involved in so many of the crucial moments and movements of her country's history, and that of its diasporic black British community, has been almost totally forgotten? Although Marson has achieved frequent acknowledgement as a literary foremother and cultural pioneer, I do hope that this substantive work will open up the possibilities for more serious and sustained scholarship on her works in the future, and that Marson will now be awarded the attention and the place in history that she so very clearly deserves.

# Booknotes

*The Capture Of Speech And Other Political Writings*, Michel de Certeau, edited and with an introduction by Luce Giard, translated with an afterword by Tom Conley, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1997, 221pp; £15.95 paperback.

*Culture in the Plural*, Michel de Certeau, edited and with an introduction by Luce Giard, translated with an afterword by Tom Conley. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London 1997, 181pp; £13.95 paperback.

The writing contained in these two volumes spans the period from 1968 until the author's death in 1986 and provides a vivid picture of de Certeau's sustained engagement with a politics of 'everyday' culture. Emerging in response to the events of May 1968, de Certeau's position can be seen as occupying two distinct registers. Evident throughout the essays is the 'political clarification' of a new cultural landscape where 'mythologies are proliferating', where 'convictions are no longer affiliations' and where popular political desires cannot be spoken 'within traditional socio-political frames of reference.'

This is a clarification of the conditions that prevent what Marx called 'the poetry of the future' from being spoken. Just as emergent political desires are about to be given voice, dissident speech becomes hardened and deadened in the language of reform, or the language of fixed identity. Alongside this is the celebration of popular practices, of everyday creativity, and of the agency that allows for the possibility of 'the capture of speech.' De Certeau's promotion of the inventive practices of everyday life is not the measured assessment of the social scientist; rather it is a practical move in the politics of culture. If the 'poetry of the future' is going to be spoken it will not emerge out of bureaucratic institutions but from the everyday encounters with power and with the other.

Between them Luce Giard and Tom Conley have made available a set of texts that are 'keystones in the vault of cultural studies'. These two volumes will add to and complicate the reception of Michel de Certeau's work within cultural studies which for too long has been reduced to partial readings of his book *The Practice of Everyday Life*.

*Ben Highmore*

*Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, James C Scott, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 1998, 445pp; £25 cloth.

This study of the miscarriage of projects that were, notionally, designed to benefit their subjects attempts to identify common factors in such diverse

schemes as modernist architecture, agricultural collectivisation in Russia and Tanzania, scientific forestry, cadastral mapping and systems of measurement. Although the projects on this list may have delivered substantial benefits to their subjects, they have sometimes been characterised by catastrophic mismanagement. Where they have at least partially succeeded (such as Niemeyer's Brasilia), Scott argues that this is largely in spite of, rather than because of, a reasonably wholesale implementation of a theoretical project.

In the worst planning disasters, he identifies four elements: a reliance on simplifying techniques to make nature and society more legible to the planners; a 'high-modernist' ideology, defined as 'a strong, one might say muscle-bound ... self-confidence about scientific and technical progress'; an authoritarian state capable of delivering high-modernist designs; and a weak civil society.

The work is at its best discussing the pitfalls of the implementation of specific schemes. Although impressive and scholarly throughout, Scott perhaps falls victim to his own simplifying schema in trying to make connections between such eclectic studies.

For example, his contrast between Lenin's 'high-modernist' view of the revolutionary process and Rosa Luxemburg's 'far more complex and unpredictable' view of the same, coupled with the separation he makes between Lenin's writings and the practice of the Russian party means that the discussion of these thinkers comes across as schematic. Similarly, it is possible to argue that Tanzanian villagisation owes at least as much to eleventh-century Norman motte and bailey castles as it does to Le Corbusier.

However, this is a fascinating and insightful book, and one that reminds us on every page of the complexities of large-scale social planning.

*Bernard Vere*