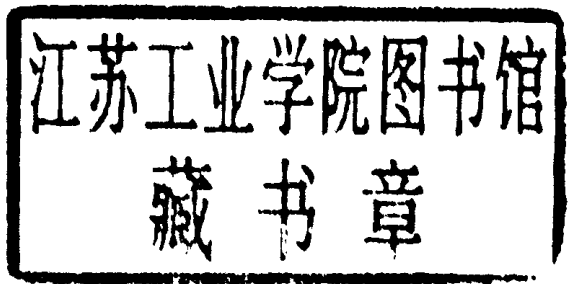


THE  
WOMEN  
OF  
MURIEL  
SPARK

JUDY  
SPROXTON

CONSTABLE · LONDON

THE WOMEN OF MURIEL SPARK





THE WOMEN OF  
MURIEL SPARK

Judy Sproxton

Constable · London

First published in Great Britain 1992  
by Constable & Company Limited  
3 The Lanchesters, 162 Fulham Palace Road  
London W6 9ER

Copyright © Judy Sproxton 1992  
The right of Judy Sproxton to be  
identified as the author of this work has been  
asserted by her in accordance with the  
Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988

ISBN 0 09 471380 4

Set in Linotron Ehrhardt by  
Falcon Typographic Art Ltd,  
Fife, Scotland

Printed in Great Britain by  
St Edmundsbury Press Ltd  
Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk

A CIP catalogue record for this book  
is available from the British Library

*This book was written for  
Constance Swan, my mother*



## Contents

	Introduction	9
1	The Mature Woman	19
	Caroline Rose: <i>The Comforters</i>	20
	January Marlow: <i>Robinson</i>	25
	Barbara Vaughan: <i>The Mandelbaum Gate</i>	32
	Fleur Talbot: <i>Loitering with Intent</i>	40
	Nancy Hawkins: <i>A Far Cry from Kensington</i>	48
	Conclusion	59
2	Women of Power	62
	Jean Brodie: <i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i>	63
	Alexandra: <i>The Abbess of Crewe</i>	72
	Selina Redwood: <i>The Girls of Slender Means</i>	82
	Maggie Radcliffe: <i>The Takeover</i>	90
	Margaret Murchie: <i>Symposium</i>	96
	Conclusion	111
3	Women as Victims	114
	Dame Lettie Colston: <i>Memento Mori</i>	115
	Alice Dawes: <i>The Bachelors</i>	123
	Annabel Christopher: <i>The Public Image</i>	130
	Lise: <i>The Driver's Seat</i>	137
	Conclusion	143
4	Narrative and Faith	145
	Index	156





## INTRODUCTION

The greatest irony in Muriel Spark's fiction is its success. Peter Owen, the publisher for whom she worked in 1958, has said that she was amazed by the warm reception accorded to her first novel, *The Comforters*. She had thought of herself as a poet and a biographer; writing fiction had never attracted her. Then, already well known in literary circles, she was commissioned by Alan Maclean of Macmillan to write a novel. She embarked on this project in the winter of 1955. The book turned out to be a revelation about her resources. The sensitivity to words and to their hidden wit which had dynamized her poetry found a new medium in the novel: the very power of words and their hold on the mind became the major theme of this one. Her elegance of phrase, her intellectual control and capacity for stringent organization of material had already made of her a sound and efficient biographer; these talents enabled her to construct in her novel an unpredictable plot with many possibilities to exploit, many meaningful details to retain, and a forceful resolution.

Until recently, there has been no reliable source from which to derive an account of Spark's early life. Derek Stanford's brief biographical study of her which he published in 1963 has been discredited by Spark herself. Fortunately, Spark has in recent years embarked on her own autobiography.\* Two sections of this have appeared in *The New Yorker*; the material they contain

1\* To be published by Constable in 1992.

is invaluable to the student of Spark's work, since it makes clear how many features of Spark's intrinsic personality and the experience of her childhood contribute to the substance of her novels.

Muriel Spark was born in Edinburgh in 1918; her father was a Scottish Jew and her mother was English. Spark was conscious of the fact that her mother dressed rather differently and indeed *was* rather different from the other women of her age in Edinburgh; apart from her nationality her mother had a nervous condition and could not be left alone in the house. Spark says that she herself accepted this idea 'robustly'; she clearly had a happy family life, and greatly admired her father whom she inwardly acknowledged for his understanding of child psychology when on one occasion, after his daughter had been crying, he wiped her dolls' eyes. Her mother would take her visiting, which she loved. Children were expected to sit quietly on such occasions, but Spark recalls being glad of this since she loved to listen. She was clearly fascinated by personalities at an early age. She was thrilled when visitors came to her parents' house, retaining vivid visual memories of the visitors, and mental records of their stories and circumstances. Even people she did not meet fired her imagination: her paternal grandmother, for example, of whom she had only heard, featured in Spark's imagination as reading her Bible and sitting on her long hair at the same time, since she was reputed to have done both. She also 'imagined' Emmeline Pankhurst, of whom her maternal grandmother spoke.

Spark's own powers of perception as a child are obviously a source for the way in which children are frequently portrayed in her work. One need only cite the baby in *The First Year of my Life* who smiled for the first time when Asquith broadcast his statement that the 1914-18 war had 'cleansed and purged the world'. The smile was of course ironic, and it is the irony of the child's perception, seeing beyond the fatuous myth of adults, that Spark uses to dissolve the mystique of adult hypocrisy. In this story, the child's smile is, in a sense, metaphorical. However, in

## Introduction

later works, such as *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, much of the narrative is expressed from the viewpoint of children and their insights are in turn romantic and devastating. Muriel Spark's account of her own childhood gives an example of the integrity of her early youth; her much admired Aunt Gertie took her to see Florrie Ford, the music hall star, which was an overwhelming experience for her. Her parents, however, who had been at a race meeting, greeted the news of their trip with gales of laughter. Spark observes that she can never to this day understand why they should have responded in this way; she implies that she handled her incomprehension with dignity, even at this age, and stood by her original pleasure in the outing.

Spark was excited by the tales she heard of her acquaintances and of her family (her father ran away to sea at the age of fourteen and got as far as the Orkneys, whence he was returned, very sea sick). However, there was a sober side to her early experience, which indicates how, without being a consciously political writer, Spark was aware from the outset of class divisions in society. She tells how she would see poor men and women singing for pennies on the back green, behind her house. 'I was aware', she writes, 'that others suffered. Poor as we certainly were, there were others greatly poorer than we.' She notices barefoot children 'clustered round smelly pubs'. Together with an acknowledgement of the problems life held for some, she appears to have had at the same time a sense of privilege that her own life was so 'abundant'. She remembers it as 'crammed with people and amazing information'. She is still grateful for these rich early days in which she was 'prepared and briefed to my full capacity'. This resulted, she declared, from being integrated into adult life rather than being 'cozied' in a nursery.

The second part of her recollections of childhood is concerned with her school days. She acknowledges with passion the importance to her of these years, which stimulated her intellect and which also fed her response to people, already so well developed in her pre-school years. The school she attended was James Gillespie's High School for girls, founded

by an admirer of the Covenanters ('worthy bearers of Bible and sword who rebelled against the imposition of the English liturgy in the 17th century'). Officially the school was Presbyterian, but Tolerance was the prevailing religion of her day 'always with a puritanical slant'. The overwhelming feature of Spark's account of her school days is the description of her teacher, Miss Christina Kay. Miss Kay is acknowledged as the source of Spark's infamous character, Miss Jean Brodie, and indeed, the similarities are unmistakable. Spark relates how she started to write about Miss Kay at the age of ten, so inspired was she by the heady mixture of culture, romance and incisive comment which her school teacher's life relayed to her. Like Miss Brodie, Christina Kay adorned her classroom walls with reproductions of early Renaissance paintings; equally, she placed there newspaper cuttings about Mussolini's troops.

The way in which Spark developed the character of Miss Brodie shows how fertile this contact with Christina Kay's forceful personality was to be in her literary life. On a personal level, both she and her friend Frances were encouraged and nurtured by Christina Kay, who insisted that they should 'benefit from all that Edinburgh had to offer'. Miss Kay was a member of those post-war spinsters, deprived of their generation of men by the slaughter of the conflict, but retaining a great dignity and a passion for culture. Apart from inspiring Spark's most famous character, Miss Kay also inspired her intellect in other ways, giving lectures on relativity, conducting 'marvellous' scripture lessons, which led to Spark's deep knowledge and familiarity with the Bible. She shared with her pupil her sense of the poetry in the Bible, and predicted that Spark would herself be a writer.

Spark was already writing copiously in her school days and was given a prize for her poetry. She was crowned as the school's 'queen of poetry', a ceremony which nauseated her, but only Miss Kay understood why. Although it is clear that Spark was much indebted to her teacher for her early acquisition of knowledge and culture, it is also clear that her mind was

## Introduction

very independent and developed in its own terms. Her sense of religion emerges from these reminiscences. Before she went to school, she recounts, she had a strange feeling whenever she saw the child of one of her parents' neighbours, to whom she bore an uncanny resemblance. This girl was to appear again in her later life when she was in Rhodesia, as it was then called. She was shot by her husband, an event on which Spark based her story *Bang Bang You're Dead*. Apart from this early apprehension of a mystical link in people's lives, Spark has a memory which she terms specifically a religious experience; she saw when coming from school a workman knocked down by a tram car; he ran to the side of the road, his arms stretched out before he collapsed. This image haunted her. Spark's story *The Gentile Jewess* shows how enthralled she was as a child by her mixed ancestry, a mixture which she identified in her maternal grandmother whose father was also a Jew and her mother a Gentile. This grandmother was proud of the Jewish element in her blood, and also had great sympathy for nonconformist Christian faith. She used to caricature spiritualists, re-enacting their behaviour to the excitement of her granddaughter, who was later to call on such eccentricity in *The Bachelors*. The sense of the ceremony of identity which she drew from her grandmother was to be a lasting one. At the end of *The Gentile Jewess*, probably the only purely autobiographical story she ever wrote, she explains how her ultimate Catholicism appeared to her to reconcile the different strands in her religious experience and that of the different members of her family, since 'with Roman Catholics too, it all boils down to the Almighty in the end'.

To learn from Spark's account of her early life how deeply her imagination was stirred by the people she knew is to appreciate how much she has drawn on her own experience of people for the seeds of the moral potential she develops in the characters in her novels. When I suggested to her recently that her former acquaintance, Derek Stanford, whose biography of her she finds so distastefully unreliable, might be the model for the *pisseur de copie* in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, she responded

## Introduction

that she didn't think Stanford would actually plan to murder anybody. However, this was not a denial of my suggestion! As the development of Christina Kay in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* shows, Spark has a brilliant capacity for creating plots out of the raw material to which she is so sensitive in the course of her life.

Future chapters of Spark's autobiography will shed more light on the links between her life and work. However, the basic facts are known: after she left school, she married and went with her husband to South Africa where she had a son. She returned to Britain where, in wartime, she worked for Intelligence, with a responsibility for devising broadcasts aimed at demoralizing the German war effort. After the war, Spark went into journalism and then was successful in applying for the post of secretary of the Poetry Society. She soon began to publish. In 1952 she wrote a study of John Masefield and in 1953 published a biography of Mary Shelley. She read avidly: amongst her favourite authors were Beerbohm, whose prose style she admired, Proust and Newman. Proust is mentioned in *A Far Cry from Kensington*, a novel set in the publishing world, in which Spark began to work about this time. A young writer is discussing his work with Nancy Hawkins, the main character in the novel: she is concerned that his work is too rambling and recommends that he write about 'something in particular'. The young man demands if Nancy has read Proust, thinking to cite an author who ignored this principle, but Nancy simply says of his work – 'It's about everything in particular'. This comment says much about Proust's importance for Spark. His ability to salvage the impact of the single moment perhaps suggested to Spark a way of writing in terms of the immediate, but implying with this ripple upon ripple of continuous meaning. Spark must have identified with Newman in a highly personal way; his conversion to Roman Catholicism brought to him, as to her, an essential sense of identity.

It was in fact Spark's conversion to Catholicism which was to supply the perspective so fundamental to her novels. The

## Introduction

experience of giving over her mind to a narrative at the same time fragmentary yet adequate, was almost at one with the acceptance of an ultimate sense of things which could never be fully comprehended but which made of each particular moment an essential element of a fuller truth. Spark was now in a position to devise plots and personalities in which there was a hidden potential, often apt to rebound on the lives of those in whom it lay. She wrote of people unable to control their fortunes but reacting to this deficiency in a compellingly interesting way; sometimes with dignity and courage, sometimes with bad faith, intent on imposing a fiction and on mystifying others. There can be no doubt that the time of Spark's conversion was stressful and demanding. Yet, like Caroline, the main character in *The Comforters*, she emerged with a sense of relief; now she was free to write of life as it struck her, refusing to make facile distinctions between truth and fiction, right and wrong, but presenting her characters and the situations in which they struggle through the kaleidoscopic perspective of several responses. In this way her novels generate their own terms of reference, explicable through themselves alone and not marshalled into order by any preconceived structure.

Whilst Spark does not acknowledge a debt to so-called English Catholic writers, it is interesting to compare her approach and technique with those who immediately spring to mind: I am thinking of Greene and Waugh. Perhaps Spark's writing is closer to that of Waugh, in the sense that his Catholicism enabled him to see human motivation as self-delusory and often risible. The sardonic element of Waugh's writing has behind it a strong intimation of a tragic absence of charity in human relationships. Spark's ability to portray the ridiculousness of some of her characters revealed by their absurd pretensions is not far from the acerbic wit of Waugh.

Greene's work, on the other hand, reflects his religious sensibility in a different way; he recounts the anguish of an individual from an interior perspective. The situations in which individuals find themselves in some way bring them to confront



a moral problem. They are characterized, however, not in terms of moral debate, but in responses to atmosphere, personality and emotion. Greene's characters are intrinsically inadequate, and this in itself indicates a need in them for a spiritual compensation which they search for but do not find. Spark does not write in this way; she, as narrator, is always at some distance from her characters; when she uses a first person narrative, she builds into the account an element of irony or apparently unconscious self-criticism which enables the reader to be objective. However, Spark has in common with Greene a reluctance to identify with the Roman Catholic Church in terms of its instructions and demands. Like Greene, she shows her characters in need of a higher order to demarcate, celebrate and acknowledge the challenge and tribulation of human experience. She, like Greene, is able to be critical and independent of some aspects of the Catholic Church and its practitioners. Several of her minor characters present themselves as Catholics without any idea of the experience of faith. However, as in Greene's works, the personal integrity of many of her major characters is identified with their faith, with their ability to recognize the vulnerability of others and their own need of grace.

Spark's work has attracted a good deal of critical attention in recent years. David Lodge in *The Novelist at the Crossroads* (Routledge and Kegan Paul 1971) offers a useful discussion of the narrative stance she adopts with reference to her faith. He comments that Spark's novels are distinguished by 'a highly original and effective exploitation of the convention of authorial omniscience'. Lodge discusses at length the function of narrative presentation, showing how this inevitably depends for its coherence on assumptions about the nature of providence, or its absence. He distinguishes between the Catholic writer such as Mauriac, whose authorial structure implies a perspective such as God might well have, and the writer like Graham Greene, whose characters' responses to providence are the only indication of the writer's own apprehension of the divine. Occasionally, irony in the plot implies some deeper purpose, but this is never spelt