

ROSE MACAULAY

—THEY WERE—
DEFEATED



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ROSE MACAULAY was born on 11 August 1881 at Rugby, where her father was an assistant master. Although she read history at Oxford she was primarily interested in writing and her first novel, *Abbots Verney*, was published when she was twenty-five. During the First World War she worked in the War Office, but she was already well on her way to a successful literary career, and the post-war decades saw the publication of such celebrated novels as *Potterism* (1920), *Crewe Train* (1926) and *They Were Defeated* (1932). Repeated disasters during the Second World War interrupted this success: her home was destroyed by a bomb, she was bereaved more than once and she suffered serious ill-health. However in the 1950s she overcame her misfortunes. Her novel *The Towers of Trebizond* won her the James Tait Black Memorial Prize in 1956, and in 1958, shortly before her death, she was created a Dame of the British Empire.

SUSAN HOWATCH was born in Surrey in 1940, and after an uneventful childhood spent writing she attended London University where she obtained a degree in law. Abandoning a legal career in order to pursue her writing ambitions she emigrated to America in 1964 and shortly afterwards published a mystery novel, *The Dark Shore*. However it was not until 1971 that her long novel *Penmarric* became the first of four international bestsellers. In 1975 she left America, and after spending four years in the Irish Republic she returned to live in England. She and her husband have one daughter, Antonia, who was born in 1970.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION BY SUSAN HOWATCH	<i>page</i> 9
PART I: BUCOLICK	17
PART II: ACADEMICK	171
PART III: ANTIPLATONICK	321
POSTSCRIPT	433

To my Uncle
WILLIAM HERRICK MACAULAY
this story of Cambridge
and of one of our distant relatives

NOTE

I HAVE done my best to make no person in this novel use in conversation any words, phrases, or idioms that were not demonstrably used at the time in which they lived; though I am aware, for all the constant and stalwart aid of the Oxford Dictionary, and the wealth of literature, letters and journals of the period that we possess for our guidance, that any such attempt must be extremely inadequate; or, at least, that mine is so. I must apologise both for its inadequacies, and to those (if any) who may think that I have used too many words which now sound somewhat peculiar in our ears; ghosts of words, "old and obsolete, and such as would never be revived" (as Sir Thomas Browne said of heresies), "but by such extravagant and irregular heads as mine." If they should vex any reader, I should be sorry, but would assure him that I have rejected so many more of these ghosts than I have admitted, that I am surprised (and hope others will be grateful) at my own moderation. As it is, they are not so frequent after all, and can, like other *revenants*, be ignored.

As it seems to be the habit to furnish such information, I would add that only a very few of the people in this book are imaginary.

INTRODUCTION

by Susan Howatch

WHEN Dame Rose Macaulay, witty and erudite to the last, died in 1958 at the age of seventy-seven, she left behind a collection of novels, letters and miscellaneous writings which had dazzled literary London for decades. Moreover she was still dazzling her readers when she died, for at an age when most writers are either dead or in their dotage she produced the international bestseller *The Towers of Trebizond*, a work acclaimed by many as one of the two finest novels she had ever written.

The other novel was this book, *They Were Defeated*.

The most interesting feature of these two books, published twenty-four years apart, is their diversity, but diversity was the keynote of Rose Macaulay's long literary career. A graduate of Somerville College, Oxford, she eventually made her home in London, and long before the end of the First World War she had made a name for herself as a novelist. However it was not until the nineteen twenties that she found widespread popularity when she published a series of novels satirising post-war life. Following hard upon the heels of Lloyd George's exhortations about the way the world should be ("What is our task? To make Britain a fit country for heroes to live in!") came Rose Macaulay's entertaining but cold-eyed appraisal of the world as it really was. In the novel *Potterism* her target was vulgarity, the burgeoning world of shoddy standards as represented by the popular press, and in *Crewe Train* the world of publishing was scrutinised with the same merciless humour. Hypocrisy, snobbery, pretentiousness, the cheap, the cynical and the profane—all were winkled out of the social woodwork with a skill and wit which captivated both critics and public alike. Then, at a point when lesser writers might have been content to continue in

the same safe profitable style, the satires stopped. The twenties ended, the mood changed, and the other Rose Macaulay, graver, deeper but infinitely more profound, began to emerge on paper.

In *They Were Defeated*, published in 1932, she revealed herself to be more concerned with themes of eternal interest than with the current mores she had explored in the satires, and although she continued to write fiction throughout the nineteen thirties she also turned to essays, criticism and biography. For some years following the outbreak of the Second World War she wrote no novels, but 1950 saw the publication of *The World My Wilderness*, a sombre and often unconvincing treatment of the theme of moral disintegration. The aftermath of decayed civilizations continued to fascinate her. Retreating once more into non-fiction she produced her long learned work *Pleasure of Ruins*, but after this the call of the novel proved too strong to resist, and in 1956 *The Towers of Trebizond* crowned her career by combining the wit of the satires with the moral and intellectual depth of her other masterpiece, *They Were Defeated*.

No understanding of this triumphant literary synthesis is possible without examining the part religion played in Rose Macaulay's life. As her great friend and correspondent, the Reverend John Hamilton Cowper Johnson of the Cowley Fathers, once wrote to her biographer, Constance Babington Smith: "You know her real mind, and about the extreme seriousness and centrality of her religion . . ." Religion was indeed at the centre of her personality, and permeated steadily although often stealthily into the very heart of her books. Both her father's family, the Macaulays, and her mother's family, the Conybeares, had been actively connected with the Church of England for some generations, and as both families also had a strong tradition of scholarship, religion was approached from an intellectual as well as an emotional point of view. With her older sister Margaret and the four younger children, Jean, Aulay, Will and Eleanor, Rose Macaulay grew up in an atmosphere in which stimulating debates on clerical issues were frequent, and in later life she always welcomed with zest the chance to discuss the finer points of some intricate moral problem. For the Macaulays religion was no gloomy skeleton to be dragged out of the closet

once a week on Sunday. It was a continuing source of the liveliest intellectual entertainment and spiritual satisfaction.

It is against this background that one of the most crucial events in Rose Macaulay's life must be measured. During the First World War when she was in her thirties, she fell in love with a married man and for many years she lived apart from the Church which had always been such an integral part of her existence.

The playwright Athol Fugard said recently that we cannot grow without pain, and this paradox of the human condition in which spiritual growth can only be achieved through suffering is illustrated by Rose Macaulay's life. In the words of C. V. Wedgwood, Rose Macaulay became absorbed in "the conflict between human and divine love", and out of her personal experiences of this painful conflict came the deepening of her personal vision which led to her triumphs as a writer.

Ever aware of the striving of the soul towards God, yet fully recognising the power of the craving of one human being for another, she was drawn to explore the tragedy which occurs when these two great yearnings of the human spirit are irreconcilable. In *The Towers of Trebizond* the narrator Laurie is in the grip of this tragedy, and over twenty years before Laurie was born in the author's mind, Julian Conybeare, the heroine of *They Were Defeated*, is presented with a conflict which is equally intractable: she longs for the world of the intellect, but finds it cannot coexist with her longing for John Cleveland, a man of sophistication, glamour and irresistible sexual charm. Thus the power of the senses is pitted against the hunger of the intellect; the need for another being is brutally set in opposition to a spiritual quest which is less tangible but no less vital to survival. This is an ancient conflict, and one which is so universal that its consequences are of interest even to those who do not belong to any branch of the Christian Church.

Rose Macaulay came back to her Church in the end. The man she loved died, and after a long correspondence with her distant cousin, Father Johnson of the Cowley Fathers in America, she was reunited with the world in which she was intellectually and spiritually so much at home. In this end there was indeed a new beginning,

and after the success of *The Towers of Trebizond* she had just begun a new novel, *Venice Besieged*, when she died of a coronary thrombosis at the very height of her literary powers.

After her death it was possible to see her work as a whole, and beyond the satires, which now seem dated, and the writings on travel and literature, which appeal to a more specialised public, her novel *They Were Defeated* stands out as unique. This is not merely because it was her one historical novel and her own personal favourite. It is because while she was exploring the history, literature and religion of her beloved seventeenth century, she was creating characters so multi-dimensional that they refuse to become dated; she was writing of people with whom the modern reader can still identify.

However, despite this it must be said at once that of all Rose Macaulay's novels, this is the one that provides the most challenge to the modern reader. One of Rose Macaulay's virtues as a novelist is that she is supremely readable. She made nonsense of the popular notion that readability and literary merit are incompatible, yet *They Were Defeated*, its dialogue constructed in the idiom of the 1640s, may send the reader temporarily into shock. Persistence is required, but this is worthwhile for the shock soon passes, the strangeness becomes familiar and the reader receives a more vivid picture of seventeenth-century England than would otherwise have been possible. Meanwhile, interspersed with the dialogue, the prose is Rose Macaulay at her ironic, economical best, and this merging of the language of one century with the language of another achieves not only a *tour de force* of literary skill but a triumph over "the rags of time" which separate us from those people who lived so long ago.

Rose Macaulay was particularly fascinated by the years which led up to the Civil War, not only because of the religious issues which were involved, but because she was captivated by the intellectual climate and literary excellence of the times. Widely read in seventeenth-century literature she found the poets of the day so familiar to her that it was inevitable that many of them became characters in *They Were Defeated*. Much of the action of the book takes place in Cambridge, then experiencing one of the brightest epochs in its

history, and here Milton, Cowley, Cleveland, More and other illustrious figures meet to discuss and read their work. To the heroine Julian Conybeare, Cambridge represents the magic City of the Mind, symbolic of man's intellectual achievement and all that is most inspiring in the human spirit as it strains to rise above an ignorant, cruel world. Julian is enrapt by Cambridge, and wastes no time regretting her father's decision to leave their home in the Devon village of Dean Prior.

The opening scenes in Dean Prior are remarkable for their realism. The countryside of Devon is shown in all its pastoral beauty, but this is no glimpse back into the fantasy of Merrie England. The people are ignorant and bigoted, cruelty is accepted as a fact of life and religion is streaked with paganism. When Julian's father, a man who despises superstition, tries to help an old woman damned as a witch, local animosity is so strong that he finds it safer to retreat to Cambridge with his daughter, and on their journey from Devon they are accompanied by the parson Robert Herrick, himself a poet, who has been teaching Julian Latin and Greek. For Dr Conybeare, detesting the stupidity of uneducated women, has long since reached the eccentric decision that his daughter should be a scholar.

Conybeare and his friend Herrick form an interesting contrast to each other. Both are kind, humane, intelligent men but Herrick, in his position as parson, is an accepted member of society while Dr Conybeare, the atheist, is always in danger of becoming an outcast. Men like Dr Conybeare who place truth above conformity are always people whom society finds difficult to tolerate, and Julian's unusual education has pushed her equally far from the mainstream of seventeenth-century life. However on her arrival in Cambridge she does not at first realise how unorthodox she is. She is too absorbed in her reunion with her student brother Kit, and too enthralled with the stimulating atmosphere generated by the University. It is not until she falls disastrously in love with Kit's tutor John Cleveland that she comes face to face with conflicts which she had never before realised could exist.

Julian is fifteen years old. Although a talented scholar she has seen nothing of the world, and when her father becomes diverted by Kit's

troubles, Julian is unprotected from the danger which Cleveland represents. Yet Cleveland, although cast as the villain of the piece, emerges as a much more interesting character than the convention of the wicked seducer usually allows. Cleveland is not just an idle rake. He is a poet fluent in Latin, a conscientious tutor who cares for the welfare of his students, a man of consequence at the University and a loyalist who stands fast for the king's cause later during the Civil War. Kind to Dr Conybeare and also to Herrick (whom the younger poets regard as *passé*) he is genuinely charmed by Julian. Although we blame Cleveland for seducing her, we almost blame Dr Conybeare more for his failure to ensure that she remains properly chaperoned, and this success in making Cleveland a sympathetic character is all the more remarkable when it becomes clear that he is concerned only with sexual gratification. Julian's mind means nothing to him. He cares only that she is pretty and can provide him with a delectable new conquest.

Modern opinion could justifiably label Cleveland a male chauvinist, but ultimately this late-twentieth-century tag fails as fully as the Victorian cliché "the wicked seducer" to catch Cleveland in all his complexity. Above all else he is a poet, and it is through poetry that Julian finally touches his heart. Seeing at last into her mind, he mourns genuinely not only for what he has lost but for what he in his bigotry has never cared to know. It is Cleveland's tragedy that he has the sensitivity to recognise the enormity of his mistake, and in his tragedy he becomes not a stereotyped anti-hero but a living breathing being with all his virtues and vices inextricably mingled in the complicated web of his personality.

And Julian? Julian is one of the most appealing of the unconventional heroines to whom Rose Macaulay gave names which can belong either to men or to women. More intelligent than Denham in *Crewe Train*, quieter and more feminine than Stanley and Rome in *Told by an Idiot*, more serious-minded than Laurie in *The Towers of Trebizond*, Julian underlines more clearly than the others the point behind the asexual name: that women can be the intellectual equal of men, and that the differences between the sexes are not as vast as social conditioning throughout the centuries would have us all

believe. Julian's dilemma is the dilemma so frequently encountered by clever women. She wonders how she can remain true to herself while she seeks happiness with a man who finds it necessary to regard women as an inferior species. It often seems that the woman who is equal has to become a woman who is second-rate if she is not to be denied the happiness she wants from life, but the acceptance of a second-rate role means the suppression of the true self. The result is that although the joys of love can be bought by role-playing, the price paid is nothing less than the mutilation of the personality.

Yet Julian's dilemma is not confined to women for she represents all those people, male and female, who are too original in character to conform to the standards which society classifies as normal. Society sees any threat to its stability as abnormal; insecurity leads to bigotry and bigotry leads to witch-hunts as the deviants are hunted out and destroyed. The tragedy of Julian is mirrored not only in the witch-hunt at the beginning of the book but in the gradual disintegration of England into civil war as the Puritans gain the upperhand with the fall of Strafford.

Julian's society decreed that only men were fit to become scholars. It is her brother Kit who attends the University, and Cleveland only gives her private lessons in order to have a better opportunity to seduce her. Mocking Julian's love of learning and scorning her ambition to be a poet, he makes no secret of his belief that Julian's sole ambition in life should be to please him in love. This attitude certainly reveals the bigoted, insecure side of John Cleveland, but more importantly it reveals the bigoted, insecure society which produced him. For Cleveland is not a social outcast. He is a typical product of his times, and it is left to Dr Conybeare, the intellectual outlaw moving inexorably towards exile, to see his daughter not as a mindless cypher but as an individual as uniquely gifted as the man who treats her with contempt in the name of love.

Accustomed to her father's humanity Julian finds the encounters with her lover emotionally bruising, but so deeply is she drawn to Cleveland that she feels she has no choice but to accept him as he is and to be as he wishes her to be. Suppressing her true self in order

to gain his love she thus unconsciously connives with Cleveland to bring about the tragedy which forms the climax of the novel.

This climax will have a special significance to the reader living in the late twentieth century when random violence is rife and the threat of senseless death is constantly present in even a stable society. Violence explodes between Cleveland and Julian's elder brother Frank, and in their fight we see not merely the confrontation between Anglican and Puritan, but the glimpse of the war which achieves no victory but only the destruction of innocence and beauty and the psychological maiming of those who survive.

Cambridge, Julian's City of the Mind, was ravaged by the Civil War, its treasures smashed, its intellectual glory dissipated. All the characters in the novel share this terrible defeat, yet this was neither the end of Cambridge's history nor the end of Rose Macaulay's novel. The book ends with Robert Herrick, representing not only all the poets but all that is best in the Anglican tradition. He has been dispossessed of his living but he has survived to fight another day, and in shattered Cambridge learning is being kept alive by those few who remain to pass the tradition to the next generation. It is a historical fact that the living of Dean Prior was restored to Herrick after the Restoration, while Cambridge rose again from the ruins to become the world-famous city of learning which exists today.

The title of the book is *They Were Defeated*, but despite this the book's message is that such a defeat is ultimately unacceptable to the human spirit. Buffeted and bludgeoned by the brutality of an imperfect world, the human spirit continues not only to strive for the unattainable perfection which God represents but to build those cities of the mind which signify all that is noblest in man's achievements. Rose Macaulay's work is a tribute to this indestructibility of the human spirit, and because of this, *They Were Defeated* is not a novel merely for today and yesterday but for all time.