

SOJOURNER'S EYE: THE LIFE & TIMES OF JOAN LEIGH FERMOR

Joan: The remarkable Life of Joan Leigh Fermor, by Simon Fenwick. 348 pp, Macmillan, London 2017.

The Photographs of Joan Leigh Fermor, by Ian Collins and Olivia Stewart. 276 pp, Haus Publishing, London 1978.

The death of Patrick Leigh Fermor in June 2011 was the occasion for an upwelling of interest in his work and therefore his life, the two being so often and so closely intertwined. The demand for a substantial biography was soon addressed by the publication of Artemis Cooper's excellent *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, which in turn sparked an interest in Fermor's (hereafter Paddy's) long-term companion and wife, Joan Eyres Monsell. In her painstakingly researched account, Cooper gave Joan full credit for her generosity and good sense and for her staunch support of an often flighty and not always very responsible lover and husband; but what also came through was the impression of an admirable woman who never let her close emotional ties to a flamboyant companion obscure her own strongly marked personality. Now Simon Fenwick, the archivist responsible for Paddy's private papers, has written Joan's biography. This is his first book, and he has successfully navigated the inevitable shoals of recounting the life of somebody whose principal claim on our interest is, at least initially, their relationship to somebody famous. The result fully justifies his efforts, and he has produced a fascinating narrative whose only failing is a tendency to go haring off on occasional side trips, chasing after one or another of the many colourful characters peopling his account.

In traditional mode, Fenwick begins with Joan's ancestry. The relative financial independence which was such a determining factor in Joan's life was due to her great-great-grandfather Samuel Eyres, an exceedingly rich and notoriously miserly cloth manufacturer, on whose death in 1868 the *Leeds Times*, having noted "the extreme penuriousness which marked his personal expenditure", went on to remark pointedly, "We do not find that he ever took an active share in either politics or social question, his peculiar bent and disposition being to acquire wealth". His only child Anne married the Reverend Samuel Kettlewell, a social climbing vicar who, promptly upon his wife's death, shook off the dust of Leeds for London's Lancaster Gate; in a delightfully bombastic phrase, he declared that this was solely in the interests of his sons, as it was not appropriate that they should "meet associates other than such I should like them to have".

His sons, Henry (who took the surname Eyres) and Charles, both of whom came into their share of a very considerable fortune at twenty-one, seem on the whole to have been an unprepossessing pair. Charles fell under the malign influence of the Svengali-like Captain F. Bowyer Bowyer-Lane; married the seventeen-year old sister of the Captain's Hungarian mistress, who was described in later divorce proceedings as a 'High Class Viennese Prostitute'; acquired a 420-foot schooner which he sailed to Ceylon, Japan and Kamchatka; bought on a sudden whim two plantations in Ceylon and property "in the island of Sooloo" which was subsequently never traced; and died technically (though hardly surprisingly) bankrupt at forty-nine.

Henry Eyres did his best to rival Charles in financial irresponsibility, but as Fenwick remarks, "his early death meant he was never able to squander the Eyres family inheritance in the manner of his brother". He did however find time to marry his cousin Caroline Sharp and beget Sybil Eyres, Joan's mother. At this point in his narrative, Fenwick gets a little carried away and introduces Caroline's brother Arthur Henry 'Harry' Sharp, Harry's seven-year old daughter Maud, Caroline's nephew Eddie Watt and Watt's best friend, the explorer Ewart Grogan, none of whom are, strictly speaking, relevant to Joan's life story. However, their inclusion does lead to some splendid riffs along the line of "At dawn on 12 April 1899, Sharp, Grogan, five Watongas bearing the Union Jack, ten armed Asiskas and 150 porters marched out of Ujiji...".

At eighteen Sybil, now sole heiress to the still substantial remains of the old miser's fortune, was presented at court. Shortly thereafter she married Lieutenant Bolton Meredith Monsell, a relatively impecunious naval officer with a good pedigree, and the new couple joined their surnames to become Eyres Monsell. Their son Graham was born in 1905, to be followed by three girls, of whom Joan Elizabeth in 1912 was the second. Bolton quickly bought himself out of the navy in order to embark upon a successful political career; a Conservative MP in 1910 and a whip the following year, he eventually rose to First Lord of the Admiralty and a viscountcy, culminating with the signing of the Anglo-German Naval Agreement in 1935 and a meeting with Hitler at the Berlin Olympic Games.

Bolton, or Lord Monsell as he became, was not an easy man to like, and Joan never really warmed to him. In a letter to her suitor Alan Pryce-Jones in 1933, she wrote "I'm afraid I was a little optimistic about the £1000 Sir B[olton] ought to give me, but it doesn't matter now as he will die quite soon as last night we made a wax image of him and melted it in front of the fire so I shouldn't be surprised if he is already in his death throes". According to Fenwick, she felt that eventually marriage "would get her away from her father of whom she was terrified", and in later life she avoided talking about her family with whom she claimed to have nothing in common, excepting always her beloved elder brother, Graham. For the reader, however, Sir Bolton is at least partly redeemed as a great if involuntary comic figure through his memorable rejection of Pryce-Jones' suit: "And so, Pryce-Jones, having nothing, without prospects, without a home, you expect to marry my daughter, who has always had the best of everything here, in Belgrave Square, on the yacht which a kindly Government allows me. No, no, Pryce-Jones, come back in a few years' time when you have something behind you."

Though they remained close friends, Pryce-Jones eventually backed out of marrying Joan, largely because he could not make up his mind whether he was primarily homosexual or bisexual. He and her brother Graham had become friends at Eton, lodging in Corner House, described here as being like a slum tenement overlooking "the rat-infested graveyard of Eton Chapel". Despite living in such unappealing surroundings, both boys apparently saw themselves as "young aesthetes in the making". Around 1920, Pryce-Jones wrote of Graham that he had "early developed the art of rejecting unnecessary ties of thoughtless friendship and devoted himself

whole-heartedly and generously to the very few chosen”, a judgement difficult to assess at a distance of almost exactly a century. To contemporary ears it rings like the coolest of put-downs, but in the hothouse atmosphere of the social sphere in which they were both to move, it was probably meant as a compliment.

Joan’s education had been sketchy, as was usual with girls of her class and background. She attended St James’s School in Worcestershire, which she loathed and of which it probably suffices to say that not until the sixties did it succeed in sending a student to university; it was followed, appropriately enough, by stints at finishing schools in Paris and Switzerland. The seemingly inevitable result was to make the strikingly attractive and well-connected Joan yet another recruit to the ranks of fashionable London society - and indeed, she started featuring in the *Times* Court Circular and the society columns, was presented at Buckingham Palace and given a coming-out dance in London, after which she moved smoothly into the role of ‘bright young thing’. Throughout the thirties, her friendships placed her firmly within the inner group of London’s most conspicuous artistic and social circles; Fenwick’s account of that period is a virtual gazetteer of pre-war British high society, from John Betjeman, Tom Driberg and Cyril Connolly to the Lygon family, Cecil Beaton and Osbert Sitwell. Connolly’s was perhaps the strongest and certainly the longest-lasting pre-war connection; he and Joan were to become occasional lovers, even after her first marriage, and he remained deeply in love with her all his life.

However, one of the things which distinguished Joan from the average social butterfly was her increasingly serious interest in photography. Collins and Stewart suggest this might have been first sparked by a photography society at the hated St James’s School, and add that “she had a camera throughout her teenage years and filled albums with images of horses, dogs and family gatherings”. Her involvement with photography continued past her teens, but the focus was to change significantly; in later years, she seems never to have taken a single photograph of her family, while according to Fenwick, “aside from places, buildings and monuments, Joan photographed people – especially her friends – and these are some of her most evocative pictures”. Betjeman, who became assistant editor of the *Architectural Review* in 1930 and had no qualms about commissioning friends, launched her professional career by suggesting she should specialise in architectural photography, which he would publish as often as possible. Thereafter, she would describe her profession as ‘journalist’ on all official documents, and her photographs, at times credited and at times not, started appearing in other magazines and eventually in books.

In 1936 Joan met John Rayner, then features Editor of the *Daily Express*, when he chose her as one of five ‘contemporary beauties’ to be profiled, reporting that “when she was in Budapest crowds used to wait outside the hotel for her to come out so that they could get a glimpse of the ‘English Venus’. She is the daughter of Lord Monsell, First Lord of the Admiralty”. By the following year they were lovers, notwithstanding Rayner’s marriage; following his divorce, they were married in March 1939, on a day Cyril Connolly was to describe as the unhappiest of his life.

The beginning of the war seemed in many ways to draw a line under Joan's life, as of course it did for many. Whilst she remained faithful to her pre-war friendships, her days of featuring in inane society columns were over. She joined the British Red Cross just as the first heavy air-raids began in autumn 1940, "walking every night from Gray's Inn Road through the most densely bombed part of London to Holborn tube station, to work as a volunteer nurse", while Rayner left the *Daily Express* to work at first for the Ministry of Economic Warfare and later for the Political Warfare Executive – in many ways the ideal war job for an *Express* journalist, as it involved the production of both 'white' (open) and 'black' (profoundly fallacious) propaganda. Their marriage, however, was increasingly shaky; as Fenwick puts it, "Joan considered that her marriage was sufficiently modern to encompass her taking lovers", which included not only Connolly, but also her old suitor Alan Pryce-Jones. At least where Joan was concerned, Rayner did not share her *laissez-faire* attitude to sexual matters and became increasingly unhappy, though for a while the two continued to share a roof. Later, Rayner was to start an affair with Isabel Nicholas, the wife of his *Express* colleague Sefton Delmer and a close friend of Joan's - who shortly thereafter wrote to Isabel to reassure her that their friendship was unaffected by the affair.

In January 1943, after training as a cipher clerk, Joan was posted first to Algiers and subsequently to Madrid; the marriage was to all effects over. That October, she wrote Rayner a notably honest and considerate letter preparing them both for a definitive separation:

A much more difficult question & I promise you that this isn't the first & preparatory letter of a long series on the same subject – Do you really want to start our same old life again? I know this sounds as if I'm making you take all responsibility and decisions, but I've tried and can't and I think it is you who would benefit more by a change than me, as I shall have the same difficulties and disagreeable habits such as putting the blame on other people, whatever I do. It is hard to write like this and not let absence influence me and I am sure I am always nicer away, but I'm afraid when I come back everything will be the same and I shall be as bad-tempered as ever. Another point is I shall never like living in England. I am trying to put all the difficulties & everything in its worst light & it is torture not being able to see you to discuss everything altho' I'm sure we should never arrive at a decision.

A year later, yet another posting sent a peripatetic Joan to Cairo where she was to encounter Paddy, already celebrated for his role in the abduction of General Kreipe the previous year; but before meeting him she had, typically, met and befriended his current lover, Denise Menasce. For his part Paddy, briefly back in Crete, heard of Joan through a letter from Billy Moss in December 1944: "A good thing has turned up in the shape of Joan Rainer [sic], and we have seen quite a bit of her recently. She's got a good brain and she talks a lot about bull-fights and Spanish poets. I think you would like her". He did. When they finally met at a party, despite Joan's prior determination to remain resolutely undazzled, the attraction was instant, and mutual.

Thereafter, though often separated by geography and their by disparate concerns and obligations, they became and were to remain to the very end the most important person in each other's lives. In March 1947, Joan's divorce from Rayner was at long last finalised, and later that year Joan and Paddy embarked on the first of their many journeys together – to the West Indies, on the trip with Costa Achillopoulos which was to result in Paddy's first book, *The Traveller's Tree*. They married in the end, at Caxton Hall in London in 1968, but not until they had been together for almost a quarter of a century; it was also the year when the house at Kardamili was finished, which may have contributed to a sense of consummation or fulfilment.

Theirs was in some ways an unusual relationship, insofar as there is any such thing as a 'usual' relationship at all. It was essentially open, probably implicitly at first, though by 1951 it had become explicit, as a letter from Paddy to Joan that year makes clear when he refers to "our new pact of liberty". It was obviously Paddy who took most advantage of this arrangement, which is not to suggest that Joan was or felt in any way victimised by it. According to Paddy's biographer, "Joan was never threatened by [...] any of Paddy's women friends, since they occupied such different spheres of Paddy's existence. She was always the magnet, the one he came home to."¹ In their biographical essay, Ian Collins and Olivia Stewart make a perceptive point: "Paddy was both the more likely to suffer anxiety and jealousy when they were apart, and the more liable to act on a passing fancy". Artemis Cooper also recounts the story of Paddy and Joan in Nicosia in 1953: "One evening, Leonora [Cardiff] and Joan left the restaurant earlier than the men. As Joan stood up to go, she took a handful of notes out of her wallet and gave them to Paddy saying, 'Here you are, that should be enough if you want to find a girl'."² Considered baldly, such a gesture might easily be construed as angry or contemptuous, but as related by Cooper, it comes across as rather amiable and matter-of-fact, if perhaps a little disconcerting for bystanders.

Indeed, money can prove as big a stumbling block to a relationship as sex, and Paddy had none. Or at least, none to speak of beyond his fluctuating and erratic earnings as a writer. Joan, on the other hand, drew an income from the family estate which though not princely, was enough to live on when supplemented by her photography, and she was later in life to inherit from her mother sufficient funds to finance the building of their house at Kardamili. Paddy, Fenwick remarks, "was always clueless about money", and "in the early years of their relationship Joan was forever giving him cheques for £5 or £10". In 1950, Joan decided to simplify and regularise the situation:

I propose to pay into your bank account £30 a month from June for the rest of the year & an extra £50 to start you off & then you need not have all this bother & hell of asking me. It sounds terribly little darling but I do think you ought to try & make some money for yourself – I can't think why really but it would be much better for you from every point of view. Also it's about half of what I really must try to live on. Please don't think I'm doing this so that we can see less of each other but only so that we needn't be so much bothered by it all.

¹ Artemis Cooper, *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*, p. 265

² Cooper, *ibid*, p.278

This letter – affectionate, practical and above all careful not to slight either party’s self-esteem – is in many ways characteristic of Joan. Though theirs was mostly a relationship of equals, it seems to me that Joan was, in an unthreatening way, clearly the strongest of the two. Readers of Paddy’s travel books are sometimes surprised by how few references there are to Joan (and most of those are in *The Traveller’s Tree*), and this can seem even stranger now that we know just how much of an emotional and practical support she was on his journeys. Artemis Cooper suggests that “Joan might have made more appearances in Paddy’s two books on Greece, but as a fiercely private person and his initial editor, she did not encourage mentions of her presence. That is left to her photographs”.³

Joan’s status as a photographer has been and to some extent remains ambiguous. The biographers of both Fermors seem to be in agreement over her attitude to photography; Fenwick considers that “photography, for Joan, was always a means to an end, preferably that of making an income”, while according to Cooper, “Joan never set much store by her photographs, often referring to them dismissively as ‘my snaps’”.⁴ John Craxton, in his foreword to *The Photographs of Joan Leigh Fermor*, writes “Somehow I never dared ask her why she gave up photography. It was always foolish to ask Joan a question when one already had a jolly good idea of what the answer might be: probably she did not think she was good enough”. Insecurity, then, or could it perhaps have been a lack of really serious encouragement? One is inclined to suspect the latter. Joan was complimented on her work by those close to her, but it may also be that this work was thought of, at least subconsciously, as both useful and essentially slight – at best a valued talent, at worst a handy appendage to the writing of others.

On the other hand, Betjeman, admittedly a man unafraid of nepotism in his friends’ interests, recommended Joan (as well as his wife Penelope) for inclusion in a book Cecil Beaton was writing on the history of photography.⁵ I have never seen any of her photographs other than in (usually poor) reproductions, but those few seem to suggest the existence of an interesting and potentially significant body of work. Joan’s reputation undoubtedly suffered from the fact that she made no effort to exhibit or otherwise promote her photographs, remaining content with publication in books and magazines; but in the fifties and sixties, technical limitations and the economics of book publishing, particularly of travel books, invariably resulted in poor or insensitive design, square images mercilessly cropped to fit a vertical page, and coarse halftone reproductions with an obtrusive raster (dot pattern)⁶.

³ Cooper, *ibid*, p.257

⁴ Cooper, *ibid*, p.257

⁵ This was presumably *The Magic Image: Genius of Photography from 1839 to the Present Day* by Cecil Beaton & Gail Buckland (Weidenfeld, 1975); Joan is not mentioned.

⁶ For a particularly striking confirmation, compare Freya Stark’s photos in the original John Murray editions with some of the same images reprinted incomparably better in a later collection such as *Rivers of Time*.

Any questions and ambiguities about the quality of Joan's work ought to have been resolved by the publication of *The Photographs of Joan Leigh Fermor*, a substantial volume including 180 pages of photographs, nearly all reproduced one to a page, an extensive biographical essay by the authors, a foreword by John Craxton and a useful "Note on Technique" by Robert McCabe. Unfortunately, welcome though this volume may be at first sight, it cannot be considered definitive. One question which it raises is that of the selection of images, presumably based on the substantial archive of 5,000 items now in the National Library of Scotland - because as it stands, the book includes a number of essentially uninspired photographs, mostly of landscapes and buildings. For every image like that of the Lion Gate at Mycenae, rightly singled out for praise by McCabe in his "Note", there is a pedestrian view of a heavily shadowed corner of the Herod Atticus theatre. In the absence of any information about the contents of the archive, constructive criticism of the selection is of course virtually impossible; but why, for instance, are there no images of the cemeteries which Joan explored so enthusiastically, including amongst others Kensal Green, Père Lachaise and the vast necropolis of Guadeloupe? Given the presence of the many undoubtedly excellent photographs in the book, it seems a shame that the overall quality should be dragged down by an uneven selection of work.

The other and far more serious issue is that the poor quality of the reproductions, characterised by a very narrow tonal range, blown-out highlights and clogged-up shadows. This suggests a problem with either the scans of the originals or with the printing, or almost certainly both. Many of the black and white images betray sloppy post-scanning procedures, betrayed by specs of dust, tiny hairs and even lines across the image, all easily removed in Photoshop; most of them also display a noticeable colour cast, tending towards green or blue and exacerbated visually by the extraordinary decision to frame each one in a heavy battleship-grey border. On the other hand, the half-dozen or so colour images have fared even worse, and appear to have been scanned by an out-of-focus flatbed scanner, probably while still in their mounts.

That none of these flaws can be laid at Joan's feet was made clear by the excellent prints recently on show at the Benaki Museum in Athens. It becomes immediately clear upon first viewing that the difference in quality between the reproductions and the exhibition prints is as night to day. The prints are crisp, clear and luminous, cover a much wider tonal range, and display a well-judged contrast ranging from good, firm blacks to excellent detail in the mid-tones and highlights. The reason, it turns out, is that when the first set of scans (used in the book) reached the Benaki's photography department, they were so horrified that they sent their in-house expert, the highly talented Leonidas Kourgiantakis, to Edinburgh to re-scan all the negatives. His colleagues in the department then carefully adjusted them in Photoshop, removing scratches and spots as they went, before Kourgiantakis went on to produce the immaculate exhibition prints.

This is not an inconsequential quibble. To put it bluntly, the reproductions in *The Photographs of Joan Leigh Fermor* do the photographer's reputation a serious

disservice, because it is on the basis of these reproductions that Joan's work, still largely unknown, will almost exclusively be judged. A more careful edit would have weeded out a handful of clearly out-of-focus photos and concentrated on Joan's strengths, rather than perhaps trying to cover everything. On the basis of the images published here, her best work includes street scenes, for example the beaming gentleman standing in the doorway of his Athenian shoe emporium, as well as many of her more spontaneous portraits, like that of the woman in Gerolimenas sitting next to a wind-up gramophone with an enormous horn, originally one of the illustrations for *Mani*. She also has an eye for telling detail, as in the tin ossuary trunk marked with the name of a 23-year old man but containing no fewer than *three* skulls, like the miraculously multiplying relics of a medieval saint.

In conclusion, it seems clear that where Joan's photography is concerned, there is still work to be done; *The Photographs of Joan Leigh Fermor* (I have tried to pass in silence over the patently silly subtitle, 'Artist and Lover') should not be considered the last word on the subject. In my opinion, the publishers have what might be called a moral duty to republish as soon as possible, using the Benaki's scans and the services of a properly briefed and overseen book printer, of whom there are several in Italy. By the same occasion, it would be a good opportunity to reconsider the final selection of images.

Fenwick mentions Joan's pocket diary for 1936, in which, in a self-reflective mood, she inscribed some lines of verse. They end:

*must the light be on or off?
must he be a tough or toff?
how many sheets/ Can you pull the plug
on the bed? Or neath the rug?
at the keyhole? Crowds? Alone? 'I don't know; cries Schizo Joan.*

Here, as also in some of her letters to Paddy, Joan accuses herself of indecision; but perceptive though she usually was in most things, she could not but conform to the rule that we are rarely the best judges of ourselves. In retrospect, I believe few could accuse Joan Leigh Fermor, Joan Eyres Monsell as was, of a lack of decision. On the contrary, this was a woman who from an early age had shown herself more than capable of choosing the direction of her life, and had the strength of character to offer her chosen companion unconditional support without ever compromising any essential part of herself. Both these books confirm her as something very much more than just another aspect of the life and times of Paddy Leigh Fermor - not that anyone who had the pleasure of knowing her in life is ever likely to have suffered from that delusion.

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