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Spark Life: The Biographies of Muriel Spark

By Willy Maley

In the last of his blogs on Muriel Spark in her centenary year Professor Willy Maley looks at the ways in which her biographies of other writers shaped her own writing and affected how she responded to life-writing as memoirist and as biographical subject.

Centenaries are ideal biographical occasions, and Muriel Spark was good at biographies and centenaries. She loved to celebrate the lives of those writers she admired most. She won a poetry competition for Sir Walter Scott's centenary in 1932; published *A Tribute to Wordsworth* for his centenary in 1950; wrote a centennial biography of Mary Shelley, who had died on Spark's birthday, 1st February 1851; and praised Robert Burns to the heavens on the occasion of his bicentenary in 1996. As a poet and poetry editor in the late 1940s Spark was always on the lookout for literary landmarks. According to her biographer, Martin Stannard, "she had a practical eye on the market. *Tribute [to Wordsworth]* and *Child of Light* [the Mary Shelley biography] had both been produced to coincide with their subject's centenaries". But as Stannard observes, Spark's book on Wordsworth fell victim to the centenary squeeze, and more besides, as former lover and fellow poet Howard Sergeant stole her theme and her thunder: "*Tribute* [...] had scarcely flickered in the London press, included as it was in reviews of other Wordsworth centenary volumes (among which was one by Sergeant who had, Muriel said, admitted to lifting the idea to spite her)".

In her study of Wordsworth, Spark begins the blurring of boundaries between life and literature that would become her trademark: "More than is the case with most poets, Wordsworth the man and the poet are interdependent, and Wordsworthian criticism during the twentieth century has been marked by a narrowing of the distinction between the functions of biographer and literary critic". This blurring of boundaries between biography and fiction goes to the heart of Spark's writing. She was a biographer-turned-novelist. Spark invites us to read her biographical studies as clues to her own life and art.

In her centennial study of Mary Shelley, for example, in the wake of her own doomed love affair with Howard Sergeant, Spark observed: "Mary was to live by her pen [...] she knew that peace and sanity could be obtained by diverting her grief, her loneliness and the sum of her passions along a creative channel". And in speaking of her biographical subject, Spark lays out an artistic theory of life and literature: "Mary Shelley was reticent about her own work, and disliked talking about it. Allusions to her novels in her letters and journals are few, brief and factual. In her writings themselves, then, we must seek the imaginative compliment to an 'imperfect picture'".

The work's the thing, and the life is in the work. In her biographical writing, Spark sets out the same strong sense of a writer's life, as one of many insightful observations illustrates: "Emily Brontë seems to have been determined that her life should come under the category of 'uneventful'; not because she was apathetic about life, but on the contrary, because she was intensely taken up with her own particular calling in life. Life, as she experienced it in her home was meaningful. She bent all her efforts towards defining this meaning, by the direct methods of her literary work, and by indirect means, which included her household and family duties. Any

time apart from this which she was persuaded to spend towards improving her lot, went against the grain. To the end, she caused very little to happen to herself by her own agency”.

Spark’s biographical writing is complex. She complicates both the life and the work by making it difficult for the reader to see where fiction ends, and fact begins. In the introduction to her biography of Emily Brontë she gives the example of an everyday encounter with someone unexceptional who later proves to be a celebrated artist: “Which is the more accurate portrayal, that of the real man whom we chanced to meet, or that of our reconstruction – the legendary figure, in other words? The second impression is the more real. The first merely prefigured the legend. But the legend alone is not enough; we need concrete as well as legendary impressions to bring us somewhere near a true picture of the man”.

In the 1950s, Spark was transitioning from poetry to fiction and in her 1953 biography of John Masefield she articulates her developing sense of the capacity of a writer of fiction to capture life and language with the finesse of a poet: “John Masefield’s achievements in fiction are, essentially, a poet’s. He uses words with the utmost sensitivity. He occupies himself and engages the reader in the minutiae of every phenomenon he undertakes to write about – the smallest details of any profession or craft of mankind belonging to any period in history or any place are not overlooked by him. In this way he gets at the essentials of a situation, perhaps paradoxically. That is Masefield’s secret. Some novelists lay bare their story by making the broad, generalizing sweep. Some concentrate on dialogue to bring forth the essence of their tale. Masefield goes into detail after detail until the reader is closely acquainted with the subject of the story, and until the relevance of those details, carefully, deliberately chosen after all, becomes apparent, and the essence of Masefield’s world, simple and noble, emerges”.

Here, Spark is not merely praising a writer she admires, but commending a poetic approach to prose fiction as a path that she herself would choose. Spark’s biography of John Henry Newman appeared in 1957, the same year as her debut novel, *The Comforters*, and three years after her conversion to Catholicism, the life event she later said opened the door to her as a novelist. Spark’s account of Newman’s life and work allows her to home in on the questions of faith and fiction that exercised her at the time: “It has been said that as a history of his religious opinions the *Apologia* is at times not accurate. How could it be, in the hurried circumstances? It is a document of memory at white-heat; as an autobiography it is artistic in nature; as a work of art it is autobiographical in kind”.

Creative autobiography and autobiographical creativity would be the key to her own development as a writer. When Spark emerged as a novelist and began to put pieces of her own life into her fiction, there was inevitably curiosity about her life before she became famous. Derek Stanford, her long-time collaborator and sometime lover – on the rebound from Howard Sergeant – considered himself well-placed to take on the task. Spark had dedicated her early collection of short fiction, *The Go-Away Bird and Other Stories*, to Stanford in 1958, but as her star rose, she saw him as part of a past that she wanted to write herself. Her collaborative days were done. In 1963, Stanford published *Muriel Spark: A Biographical and Critical Study*. It was not a book that Spark welcomed: “If Mr Stanford had applied to me, I would have advised against this undertaking”. It told tales out of school at a time when she was becoming

increasingly protective of her private life, and at a time when she was taking control of her past and drawing on it for her remarkable fictions.

Stanford's early – one might say premature – biography of Spark is sympathetic, gossipy, mischievous, and for Spark extremely annoying, not just for its at times ponderous prose but for its indiscretion. Stanford could really get on Spark's nerves, and in the end, she cut him out of her life, but in his memoir of her he says a lot of favourable and some quite fascinating things about her work and life: "To off-set the image of a person one privately recalls against a fashion-plate photo, is commonly an intimidating business. As one of the leaders of English fiction, Muriel Spark carries with her an imaginary train of maids-in-waiting, courtiers and graces. It is difficult to reconcile this picture with that of an ink-stained editor putting the *Poetry Review* to bed after an orgy of pasting-up; or with that of her singing her 'Weary Song', after some day of persistent frustration, to the 'Gothical' words of

Weeza-weeza-ba,
O Weeza-weeza-ba
O Weeza-weeza-ba

– each line in a higher key".

Stanford clearly from his note didn't understand that this is "Wheesht, baby" or "Wheeshy-baw" or "hush-a-bye baby" in Scots.

Elsewhere, Stanford says: "But all of the child in Muriel Spark, for me, is enfolded in the memory of her running towards me carrying an ice-cream cone in either hand, like an Olympic-runner provided with a second torch. She was wearing a cheap, blue print dress, with flattie sandals which made her shorter than ever. We had been working seated on the grass of St. Mary Abbots graveyard. The sun had parched us, and the ice-cream-man's bell had sent Muriel running after him. So here, between the turmoil and debates of print, I glimpsed the authoress who, at the age of eight, had filled a note-book full of poems collectively entitled *Modes of Fairy Life*. Some people wake feeling old in the morning, or manqué or blasé, or plain splenetic. Muriel, as she remarked to me, woke every morning 'to innocence'".

There is a certain richness of detail in Stanford's accounts of his time with Muriel that is arguably missing from her own version of events. Stanford revisited his time as Spark's lover and literary collaborator in some very revealing chapters of his 1977 book, *Inside the Forties: Literary Memoirs 1937-1957*. In one chapter he recalls an incident that seems to foreshadow Spark's own recollections of her life as a budding author in *Loitering with Intent* (1981). Stanford, revisiting the old haunts frequented by Spark and himself in the 1940s and 1950s remarks on her profound sense of future fame: "To say that Muriel regarded her gifts with expectant fondness would not be in any way an overstatement. I remember, when she lived in the Old Brompton Road, discovering her in the act of shredding a disused manuscript into tiny pieces. I asked the reason for this great precaution, and was told it was to protect the copyright of her vision against marauding poets who might come visiting her dustbin for verbal tip-offs. Was this a fantasy or a joke?"

Stanford adds another observation that fits with what we know of Spark's sense of the artist as a secret self, set to emerge from its shell through writing: "One further remark by her returns to mind. We were walking on a cold late autumn day in 1957 in Kensington Gardens, a month or so prior to the appearance of *The Comforters*. 'If only people knew how famous we were!' she observed with a sly innocent-eyed laugh. I could only bow at her kind inclusion". Stanford's bow might have been deeper still had he caught in her sly look the fact that Spark was using the royal "we". He was becoming past tense.

There is no denying that Stanford knew Spark well, or that their close literary partnership was a fruitful one. They wrote poems together too. In his biography of Spark, Stanford prints a verse in ten quatrains that he and Muriel co-wrote around 1949. Entitled "Elegy for the Topsy Malingerers of Autumn", it builds on an image of fallen leaves: "We saw the drunken squads of tumbled foliage". Verses 5 and 10 give the flavour:

Fit for no proper purpose save the passing
of yellow petals' dog-eared betting-slips:
the tic-tac wind had handed-in his ticket
and slapped the saucy backside of the sky.
[...]
Drink up, brown soakers, there's no future in it.
Bravado's withered, but your top-branch talk
fetched out the image that announced our poem
amid a wasted Alamein of leaves.

Stanford comments after citing this jointly produced but otherwise unpublished and uncollected poem: "Something of the difference between our verbal sensibilities can be seen in the images we each put into it. Muriel spoke of 'the tic-tac wind' handing in its 'ticket' (the wind-scattered foliage of autumn). I spoke of 'a waste Alamein of leaves.' I was the elegist; she the wit". Stanford may have been deluded, disloyal and a lesser talent than his erstwhile collaborator, but he is deserving of a second glance.

Whatever the accuracy or ethics of Stanford's reminiscences, he conjured up the people and places Spark had known in her years as a poet, poetry editor and biographer, a crucial period of her life. The fact that she wrote two of her most remarkable autobiographical novels in the wake of Stanford's version of events in *Inside the Forties* may suggest that she followed her old co-author and co-editor closely, if only to correct him. All of Spark's novels are autobiographical, but *Loitering with Intent* (1981) and *A Far Cry from Kensington* (1988) deal directly and imaginatively with the formative years chronicled by Stanford. In "How I Became a Novelist" (1960) Spark reflected "ever since I can remember I've had the habit of going over conversations which I have overheard, or in which I have taken part, recasting them in neater form". In *Loitering with Intent*, her fictional account of London literary life in the late 1940s, she wrote: "While I recount what happened to me and what I did in 1949, it strikes me how much easier it is with characters in a novel than in real life. In a novel the author invents characters and arranges them in convenient order. Now that I come to write biographically I have to tell of whatever actually happened and whoever naturally turns up. The story of a life is a very informal party; there are no rules of precedence and hospitality, no invitations".

In *A Far Cry from Kensington*, Spark was dogging the steps that Stanford had dogged to write his version of events, and in this novel, she gave Derek Stanford his character: “At this point the man whom I came to call the *pisseur de copie* enters my story. I forget which of the French symbolist writers of the late nineteenth century denounced a hack writer as a urinator of journalistic copy in the phrase ‘*pisseur de copie*’, but the description remained in my mind, and I attached it to a great many of the writers who hung around [...] and finally I attached it for life to one man alone, Hector Bartlett”.

Stanford, as he laboured with Spark on critical studies of Wordsworth, the Brontë sisters (they had been commissioned to write a study of Anne as well as Emily) and Newman in the 1950s could not have imagined such a cutting characterisation, but then nor could Spark have envisaged such an unforgivable betrayal of her trust. Spark was an extremely resilient individual – as Fleur Talbot says in *Loitering with Intent*: “I was not any sort of victim; I was simply not constituted for the role” – but she was subject to unwelcome attention and misogyny, and Stanford joined a long list of patronisers, pests, predators and parasitic substandard writers who wanted to bask in her success, then rain on her parade.

Muriel Spark’s account of her own life before she became a novelist, *Curriculum Vitae: A Volume of Autobiography* (1993), is a brilliant book, but it tells only part of the story of her life up to her emergence as a novelist. Anyone interested in Spark’s life needs to look back at the lives she wrote, and at the earliest biography of her. Derek Stanford became persona non grata for Spark because of what she saw as a great betrayal. This has closed off access to both of his books on her, which are well worth another look. She saw Stanford as having shredded their friendship by his indiscreet biography and by selling her letters and so she in turn resorted to shredding him like a disused manuscript. Martin Stannard’s authorised biography of Spark, which appeared in 2009, is of enormous importance in understanding her later life, and other accounts that have appeared posthumously, including essays by Stannard and other critics, will add to our knowledge, as more of her papers become available and more perspectives become possible. According to Stannard, Spark so loathed the Stanford biography that she “always refused to read it”.

Yet it’s not quite true to say that Spark refused to read Stanford. She read him closely enough to recount his errors in *Curriculum Vitae*, where she is responding in particular to the more recent publication of *Inside the Forties*. There is no doubt that Spark felt stung by Stanford’s accounts of her life. She writes in a way that suggests she remained incandescent even after thirty years: “I would write off almost the lot as examples of fabulism, or an inadequate sense of objectivity. But those efforts of Stanford do not have a pleasant tone. They contain a touch of the sniggering schoolboy, or of the gossip-columnist, that only scholars of equal leanings would seize on and elaborate. His attitude to me after my success was totally unmerited. Our friendship had long since fizzled out. But I had treated him generously, as had my family”.

Spark’s trashing of Stanford’s biographical writings on her was relentless: “As an aid to scholars and students (I hereby beg them, in their own interests, to check with me before using any Stanford material that they are unable themselves to substantiate) [...] sheer guesswork, mythomania, invention or what you will”. But despite the very public and persistent shredding,

and the excommunication that followed on from his rash publication of a personal recollection of a portrait of the artist as a young woman, Stanford's books are still there for the reading and I would recommend them, with all their faults and failings, to anyone with an interest in Spark's life and work. An author's life is never an open book, nor is it ever a closed book.

Writing about an author's life is no less difficult when they are dead than it is when they are alive. Alan Taylor's sparkling memoir *Appointment in Arezzo* (2017) is more than the story of a remarkable friendship made in Edinburgh and Italy. It adds to our sense of Spark as a writer whose life informed her writing, and one who drew on the lives of others too. Like Stanford, Taylor turned out to be more than a friend, becoming a kind of collaborator and enabler – of, for example, her celebrated appearance at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2004. Taylor's conversations with Spark offer valuable insights into her working practices. As her centenary year draws to an end, it is clear that while Spark will continue to enrich the lives of her readers, her own lives, all of them, remain fascinating, whether as told through her various biographical studies of other authors, through her own inimitable memoir, or in the vastly different but in their own ways equally insightful biographies of Stanford and Stannard, or in the lively and engaging recollection of a late life friendship by Taylor.

One line in Taylor's book gave me pause. He mentions Stanford, and comments: "A memoir he had written had infuriated her and continued to cause her anxiety because it was often quoted". Taylor expands on this notion of Stanford as a pervasive false authority: "The books of his in which she features are replete with errors of fact and wild imaginative flights which have been repeated down the decades without challenge by countless other writers and scholars". The idea that Stanford continued to haunt Spark in the 1990s as an oft-quoted source for her life doesn't quite ring true to me. My sense is that Spark's efforts to discredit Stanford proved highly effective. She wrote to early critics warning them away from her former friend and collaborator – "don't copy Derek Stanford" – and it seemed to work. She wrote to Alan Bold on 18 March 1986: "All Derek Stanford's writings on me range from distorted to sheer invention". Bold, being bold in name and nature, nevertheless went against orders and cited Stanford: "The main source of stories about Spark's private life". Other critics, especially male critics, are gallant enough to ignore Stanford entirely as per Spark's instructions or simply echo her judgment of him without bothering to cite sources or evidence. There are loyal Sparkeans who wouldn't touch Stanford's biography with a bargepole; many haven't read him or realised the extent to which Spark emerged as a fully-fledged writer from a decade of collaboration with him. He makes only fleeting appearances in most studies of her work. In some studies, he is absent altogether.

Another of Taylor's remarks does have the ring of truth: "In the story of Muriel's own life, Derek Stanford occupied the unenviable role of cad and betrayer". Yet even here, we must pause, because this is Stanford the cad who wrote the unauthorised biography and sold the letters, not Stanford the collaborator who lived, laughed, loved and wrote with Spark throughout the 1950s. We reinvent ourselves every day, and we rewrite our pasts to suit the present. Betrayals are hard to take, but real life – in all its richness – does not cancel out the pages of a relationship gone sour. Like Spark, Stanford was born in 1918 – on 11 October to be precise – so this is his centenary too. Perhaps a reappraisal of his work is due, both in its own right, and with respect to his work with, and on, Spark. We should bear in mind the words – jointly written – of Spark and

Stanford in *Tribute to Wordsworth* (1950), their collaborative centenary study of that great poet. They say that Wordsworth “seemed to require some profound emotional disturbance before the universe appeared to him in vital and imaginative terms”, and they add: “Wordsworth was not an amiable person, and biographers who attempt to present him as such, are doing no service to an understanding, either of the man or of his works”.

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