

BOOK REVIEWS

Margaret Storm Jameson: A Life. By Jennifer Birkett. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009. xviii + 441 pp. \$55.00 cloth.

The Constant Liberal: The Life and Work of Phyllis Bottome. By Pam Hirsch. London: Quartet, 2010. xxii + 458 pp. £25.00. cloth.

Storm Jameson and Phyllis Bottome held each other's work in high regard. Bottome praised Jameson's dystopia of Britain under fascist rule, *In the Second Year*, published in 1936, one year before *The Mortal Storm*. Jameson read *The Goal*, the third volume of Bottome's autobiography, and wrote the author, "I do not know any two people who have given ... so much to so many ... as you and Ernan" (PH 346). Storm Jameson gave no less.

In addition to their friendship and mutual esteem, Jameson and Bottome had much in common. Prolific British novelists of the twentieth century, both gravitated to the subject that dominated their era: global and, more particularly, European conflict. The century proved generous in providing material. Bottome, like Jameson, was at her best as a novelist of the Second World War, what led to it, and what followed it. The work of each has by now fallen into neglect. Most of their literary production is out of print. Some of what was resurrected, Bottome's *Old Wine* in 1998 and Jameson's *Company Parade* a decade earlier, faltered for want of commercial viability. Pam Hirsch generously refers to Bottome's "uncertain posthumous reputation" (68), while Mark Bostridge, writing in the *TLS*, notes "a revival [at least] of academic interest in" Jameson "over the past decade" (23).

Other similarities between the two abound. Each enjoyed a writing life of nearly 60 years. Bottome produced 33 novels and Jameson 45. Each published autobiographies that explore more than the lives they lived. They depicted their times with the same acuity as the characters in their novels. Both survived difficult, even sadistic, mothers to enter into marital partnerships that sustained and nurtured. The First World War formed them as it did their spouses. The rise of fascism and the second cataclysmic conflict of the century inspired not only their best fiction, but also their most ardent social engagement. Each worked tirelessly to aid refugees from the Third Reich. With equal prescience, each warned that Europe's unexamined

anti-Semitism could threaten more than the Jews. And within a year of each other, Bottome and Jameson have been the subject of major literary biographies which encourage reevaluation and reconsideration of a body of fiction that includes novels nearly four score in number.

There, however, the similarities end. Bottome has been well served by her biographer. Jameson, the critical consensus would have it, somewhat less so. Mark Bostridge captured one problem with Birkett's biography, that of the quality and use of sources. While praising her "assiduous" uncovering of "primary material," he lamented her acquisition of "straws in place of the bricks she needs to reconstruct the life" (23). Birkett indeed has archival riches to share, but the reader at times hungers for more substance in the treatment of major events or responsibilities in the novelist's life. For example, Jameson served as president of the English section of PEN during a critical period, assuming the position at the height of the Munich crisis and holding it until her resignation in 1944. Her efforts on behalf of British letters are lost in a welter of detail surrounding the politics of the organization rather than her role as chair.

Hirsch, on the other hand, is deft, sure, and never plodding. She has the capacity to engage her reader, wisely leaving open questions she cannot answer from the sources such as the possible bisexuality of Bottome's husband, Ernan Forbes Dennis. Where she can document, she does. Hirsch astutely observes, "A biography of Phyllis must include a portrait of ... [her] marriage" (352). In resurrecting Ernan Forbes Dennis, Hirsch balances a joint biography of the novelist and her spouse. She recounts not only Ernan's achievements but also the compelling influence that he exerted on his wife, particularly regarding the incorporation of Adlerian psychology into her fiction.

Jameson too enjoyed a consuming marriage. She married Guy Chapman in 1926. Shortly after his death in 1972, she told a friend, "I wrote my books for Guy and now he has gone there is no point in it, no point in anything (335). That statement must substitute for an account of a relationship that exists only fleetingly in Birkett's biography. The reader is left to wonder what Chapman's influence on Jameson may have been and vice versa. Birkett tells us that the "painfully spare prose" of his 1930 memoir of trench warfare, *A Passionate Prodigality*, inspired modification of Jameson's own early prose style, but fails to address the questions that would allow her audience to verify this claim (236). Can Jameson's readers discern a shift in prose style from her early fiction to that written after 1930? Is her family saga set in north Yorkshire so different in style from later works? And if so are the differences attributable to Chapman's memoir and stylistic admonitions?

How in turn might Chapman and Jameson have mutually influenced each other? What relationship existed between Chapman's scholarship on

the French Third Republic, for example, and Jameson's passion for Stendahl and Proust, the two writers who modeled her own fictional experimentation and helped her to form a larger European identity? Did their shared fascination with French culture and politics, if not enthusiasm for the French themselves, bind them with creative results for both? What relationship exists between *Cloudless May*, her novel on the fall of France, and his study of the fault lines in modern French politics? Those questions remain open.

The mutual influence of Bottome and her husband centers on one figure, the renowned psychologist Alfred Adler. Ernan introduced his wife to Adler in 1927. Bottome's use of Adler's concepts in her fiction encompasses both the motivation of her characters and the structure of her novels. She dedicated her most famous novel, *The Mortal Storm*, to him a decade later. The prominence of that particular work in Bottome's oeuvre serves Hirsch well. She devotes two chapters or nearly one-fifth of her biography to Bottome's bestseller and MGM film of 1940, *The Mortal Storm*. Hirsch has done a fine job recounting the politics behind the transformation of novel into film, the first Hollywood feature to depict the truth of Nazi persecution of Europe's Jews. This reviewer knows the sources with which she worked and can testify to the accuracy of her account.

Birkett, on the other hand, provides no particular focus to her exhaustive account of Jameson's literary output. Addressing all of Jameson's work, while commendable, has left her little room for critical evaluation or assessment either of relative merit or political relevance. Selective emphasis, for example, giving more weight to the work of the period "entre deux guerres," to use Jameson's phrase (15), could confirm her place in pre-war British culture. Without Jameson, as Phyllis Lassner has observed, the 1930s would not be "complete or even comprehensible (442)." Yet Birkett does not address such questions as: What relationship did Jameson's writing bear to that of the other literary women of Britain in the 1930s, the Cassandras who saw the truth of fascism and spoke out in fiction and criticism? What did it cost Jameson "to fix her gaze on Europe" from an England that, as Bottome lamented, "appeared to have gone fascist in its sleep" (*The Goa*, 258). What relationship does Jameson's *Europe to Let* (1940) have to Bottome's equally engaged *The Mortal Storm*, published three years earlier? In Birkett's work Jameson seems strangely aloof from the political and literary culture of the 1930s rather than the committed participant that she was. Birkett constructs not so much an alternative view of Jameson as a figure who fades from view in the period in which she was most vibrant.

Both biographers can be faulted for their factual errors. Each refers to Hitler's "election," Birkett in February 1933 and Hirsch in March of that year. Hindenburg appointed Hitler Chancellor on January 30, 1933. The Nuremberg Laws date from 1935, not 1934 as Hirsch states. Birkett refers to a Soviet invasion of Hungary in July 1958. Does she mean the one in

November 1956?

In sum, discernment and restraint have served Hirsch well. Bottome emerges in her treatment with clarity and precision. Birkett has in the end provided a thorough and stimulating overview of Jameson's prodigious output along with her life that extended for nine and half decades. A more judicious selection from both the work and the life might have improved the result. Taken together, however, both studies confirm that reexamination of the broad body of fiction that Bottome and Jameson left us is long overdue.

Works Cited

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