

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by
Polygon, an imprint of Birlinn Ltd

West Newington House
10 Newington Road
Edinburgh
EH9 1QS

www.polygonbooks.co.uk

ISBN: 978 1 84697 375 8

Copyright © Alan Taylor 2017

The right of Alan Taylor to be identified as the author
of this work has been asserted by him in accordance
with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may
be reproduced, stored, or transmitted in any form, or
by any means, electronic, mechanical or photocopying,
recording or otherwise, without the express written
permission of the publisher.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

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

Designed and typeset by Teresa Monachino

Printed and bound in Britain by T J International Ltd, Padstow

INTRODUCTION



I may take up detective work one of these days.

It would be quite my sort of thing.

THE COMFORTERS

I had an appointment with Muriel Spark in Arezzo, the Tuscan town where Vasari, fabled for his *Lives* of the Renaissance artists, was born and bred. Mrs Spark's fax was brief and business-like. 'My friend Penelope Jardine and I will come to Arezzo. I suggest we have dinner there at the Continentale Hotel (not far from the station) and we can talk then. Daytimes are very hot.'

The month was July, the year 1990, and only mad dogs and impatient tourists dared expose themselves to the unforgiving sun. During the mid-afternoon, when Spark's working day habitually began, I hid in the hotel and watched an Italian soap opera on television. At six o'clock I took a stroll and by no grand design ended up at Vasari's house in a shaded back street in the *centro storico*. The house was cool, palatial, and empty save for the mute custodian who followed me from room to room with the air of someone who suspected something fishy was afoot.

In that place and at that time, the connection between Spark and Vasari seemed obvious. A fairly pious Catholic and a patriot whose allegiance was to the Medicis, Giorgio Vasari divorced himself from the religious and political issues of his day; art was his obsession. Of course, no one with even a passing acquaintance with her work would say that Spark was oblivious to great world events. On the contrary, they inform her fiction to

an extraordinary if subterranean degree. From the rise of Fascism in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* to her satire of the Watergate scandal, *The Abbess of Crewe*, she was always aware of what was going on in the world at large. But she was never flatly topical: no one with her intellectual attitude to faith and its implications for the hereafter could be. Like Fleur Talbot, her alter ego in *Loitering with Intent*, her sense of herself as an artist was absolute: 'That I was a woman and living in the 20th century were plain facts. That I was an artist was a conviction so strong that I never thought of doubting it then or since.' Even when Fleur makes love her mind is elsewhere, despite efforts to think of General de Gaulle. How like Vasari's hero, Uccello, droning on about the beauties of perspective while his wife tries to drag him bedwards.

In the Piazza Guido Monaco, the *Aretini* had come out to play. Old men, gnarled as walnuts, dealt cards while their sons drank beer and their grandsons harassed pigeons. Growling motor bikes raced round the square at intemperate speed. 'There is carnage every night on the roads of Italy,' observed Muriel – as she will now be called – matter-of-factly. She was a mite early for our appointment and in phrase book Italian ordered a gin and tonic while Penelope Jardine – Penny – parked their car. They had been together for twenty years, sharing a rambling house deep in the Val di Chiana, fifteen kilometres from Arezzo. Centuries ago the house, which is attached to a parish church, had been inhabited by a priest who added rooms as necessity determined. Two separate families had lived in it with the priest and his mother, some twenty people in all. Now it offered books a home, roughly seven thousand of them. 'I buy books,' said Muriel penitentially, 'I often advertise for books; I spend a fortune. I do need rare books from time to time. We have endless encyclopaedias.'

The two women seemed comfortable together, often ending each other's sentences, one deferring to the other when she couldn't put a finger on a fact or recollect a date. The notion that Muriel was some kind of recluse or eccentric, as at least one ill-informed journalist had suggested, seemed absurd. Similarly, the idea of two women living together had raised prurient eyebrows. But why should it? Penny is a sculptor who has exhibited at the Royal Academy in London; she supplied the domestic and business circumstances which allowed Muriel to flourish. 'Penny provides Muriel with emotional security,' someone who knew them both told me.

Enough emotional security to be flirting at seventy-two. I mentioned that I had tried with just a few words of Italian at my command to buy trousers in Florence. If I had told her that I'd been diagnosed with a terminal illness she couldn't have shown more concern. 'Let's ask that dishy waiter who is the best *sarto* in Arezzo.' While the man was summoned, Muriel asked if my hair was as nature intended. It was, I confessed. 'You don't do anything to it? Touch it up?' I said I paid a man called Alfie in Edinburgh to keep it out of my eyes and off my collar. 'I never touch up mine either,' she trumped.

As the waiter was interrogated about the best tailor in town I took the opportunity to study Muriel. She looked at least ten years younger than her age. Her hair, touched up or not, was red, as it was when she was a girl growing up in Edinburgh and before it was bleached under Rhodesian skies when she was in her early twenties. She was petite, with a gay and curious demeanour. She seemed to me someone to whom you could talk unguardedly, like a doctor or a priest, without fear of it ever being passed on. She dressed elegantly and expensively. Her dress was a riot of yellow and black. Round her neck she wore

a string of white pearls and a canary-yellow silk scarf. She had a reputation for being waspish, once making mincemeat of a BBC interviewer who asked a fatuous question. When I told her – sincerely – how much I admired her latest book, *Symposium*, her dark eyes lit up and her face creased with pleasure.

The life of a ‘constitutional exile’ appeared to suit her. No one, though, should be deceived into thinking that the road to Arezzo had been straight and smooth. At that time, her autobiography, *Curriculum Vitae*, had yet to appear. When it did – in 1992 – it ended with the publication in 1957 of her first novel, *The Comforters*, just as her career as a writer was beginning. At thirty-nine she was a relatively late starter, but, as she makes plain in the autobiography, her life up to that point was about laying foundations and accumulating experience. ‘Since I wrote my first novel,’ she stated towards the end of *Curriculum Vitae*, ‘I have passed the years occupied with ever more work, many travels and adventures. Friends, famous and obscure, abound in my life-story. That will be the subject of another volume.’

That promised volume never materialised. In Arezzo, Muriel was happy to revisit her distant past, which was full of obscure people, some of whom had subsequently gained prominence because of their association with her. She was born on 1 February, 1918, while the ‘war to end all wars’ was still rumbling on. She told me her brother, Philip, who was five years older than her, had had a distinguished career as an engineer with Boeing in California. We talked about her father, Bertie Camberg, a Jew who was born in Scotland and who ran away to sea when he was fourteen. ‘He got as far as Kirkwall.’ Her mother was English and an Anglican. There was no hint of gypsy blood in her, she remarked, countering a falsehood first spread by Derek Stanford, a former lover and collaborator.

A memoir he had written had infuriated her and continued to cause her anxiety because it was often quoted. He was one of the reasons why she had embarked on *Curriculum Vitae*. 'He is the limit,' she said, her voice rising an octave. 'He was very fond of me. Absolutely. But as soon as I got any form of success he went so sour. He sold all my letters to Texas University. Then he started writing books full of the wildest things about my life, and the whole thing I ignored. I never did a thing. I am much too busy and life is too short. However, I thought I would put the record straight. One critic picks it up and then another and on it goes. He's a mythomaniac.'

Bertie Camberg was an engineer with the North British Rubber Works. He was a betting man, fond of horse-racing, an interest his daughter inherited; at one time Muriel had a share in two racehorses, neither of which was conspicuously successful. Her mother, Sarah, she reckoned, could have been a Bruntsfield Madame Bovary. 'Quite easily,' she said. 'She was craving for what she called the "bright lights".' In *Curriculum Vitae* she recreated in meticulous and loving detail the first five years of her life, a whiff of Nivea cream being the equivalent of Proust's *petite madeleine*. 'Sometimes', she wrote, 'I compare my early infancy with that of my friends whose very early lives were in the hands of nannies, and who were surrounded by servants and privilege. Those pre-school lives seem nothing like so abundant as mine was, nothing like so crammed with people and with amazing information. I was not set aside from adult social life, nor cosied up in a nursery, and taken for nice regular walks far from the madding crowd. I was witness to the whole passing scene. Perhaps no other life could ever be as rich as that first life, when, five years old, prepared and briefed to my full capacity, I was ready for school.'

In the 1920s and 1930s, Edinburgh, Scotland's precipitous capital, was a provincial, culturally inward, begrimed city. To a dyspeptic observer, such as the poet Edwin Muir, it was a city of 'extraordinary and sordid contrasts'. It is true, and something of a cliché, that it was a divided city, in which Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* was conceived, where wealth and poverty were bedmates. The air in Spark's teenage years was sweet with the smell from the numerous breweries. *Haars* – bone-chilling mists – rolled in from the Firth of Forth to the north of the city, and the wind, which so discomfited Stevenson, seemed never to cease blowing. Edinburgh was a city of lawyers and accountants, clergymen and teachers, of pen-pushers who made a living without getting dirt under their nails.

As a child, Muriel was aware of what she called 'social nervousness'. Though Edinburgh was not the worst-hit of Britain's major cities during the depression in the 1930s it was impossible to avoid the gulf between the haves and the have nots. Men and women queued for welfare payments, and ex-servicemen, veterans of the First World War, busked in the streets. In *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, the teacher's favoured girls, the crème de la crème, are taken on a walk through Edinburgh's Old Town, with its cobbled streets, dark, narrow alleyways – known locally as closes – and vertiginous tenements, built long before Manhattan's skyscrapers were conceived. It is alien territory for the girls, 'because none of their parents was so historically minded as to be moved to conduct their young into the reeking network of slums which the Old Town constituted in those years'. This was a part of Edinburgh that just over a century earlier had been abandoned by the upwardly mobile and the gentry who, discomfited by overcrowding and noxious odours which were a result of the inhabitants dumping



Muriel, aged 10, in Edinburgh, where she was first ‘understood’

their waste in the street, had fled to what was, and is, known as the New Town. Where once dwelt the aristocracy now there were ‘the idle’.

For Muriel, who lived on the city’s south side in a middle-class enclave, in close proximity to hills and with an abundance of street life on her doorstep, Edinburgh was where she was first ‘understood’. The school she attended – James Gillespie’s High School for Girls – was formative and was to be immortalised as

Marcia Blaine School in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, becoming almost as famous as St Trinian's and Dotheboys Hall. Looking back, Muriel saw that it was 'more progressive' than she realised. Her schooldays were 'very pleasant, very enjoyable'. Recalling Jean Brodie echoing the boast of the Jesuits – 'Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life' – she asked herself if a bad teacher could have killed her interest in writing and literature. She was adamant in her response. 'No. I'd have written at home.' Her first poem appeared in a school magazine when she was nine, and one appeared annually until the school broke its own rule and published five in the same year by the precocious student who regarded herself as 'the school's poet and dreamer'. With this status came 'appropriate perquisites and concessions'. In 1970, she wrote: 'I took this for granted, and have never since quite accustomed myself to the world's indifference to art and the process of art, and to the special needs of artists.'

She lived in Edinburgh until she was nineteen. In an oft-quoted passage, written in a hotel where she waited as her father lay dying, she wrote: 'It was Edinburgh that bred within me the conditions of exile; and what have I been doing since but moving from exile to exile. It has ceased to be a fate, it has become a calling.' For her, exile was not a negative condition but something she embraced, allowing her the freedom and space and distance to write. Away from Edinburgh and Scotland, away from anywhere in which she felt constricted and obligated and misunderstood, she could work untrammelled. In that sense, her ethic was Presbyterian: Life is what you make of it. What one achieved was by one's efforts. Take nothing for granted. Expect no favours – nor, for that matter, much in the way of thanks or praise.

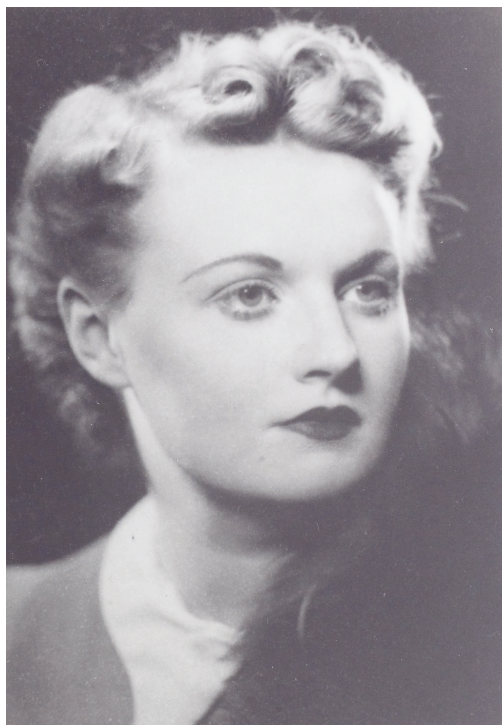
Muriel left her homeland because she had met a man with whom she believed herself in love. In her teens, she said, she was constantly falling in love. Over supper in Arezzo, she told me: 'My best love affairs were when I was young – eighteen, nineteen – and I was surrounded by students. I had a really nice time then. But I had to be in – home – early.' Surrounded by students she may have been but she did not go to university. It was certainly not for lack of academic collateral. Money, or rather the lack of it, was undoubtedly a factor. Looking back on those years, however, Muriel regarded university as something of a luxury and a waste of precious time. Other, older, girls who went to university, she noticed, seemed dull and earnest and gauche, lacking charm, one of her favourite words and a quality she prized. So what if these girls could write an essay on John Donne – so could she. Nevertheless she took a course in précis-writing at Heriot-Watt College, now a university, schooling her early in finding the briefest way to express meaning. Few writers have been as parsimonious with words as she. Fewer still have written such short books layered with significance. Often, she'd jokingly remark, she felt she was short-changing her readers, so slim were her novels. Fleur in *Loitering with Intent* spoke for her when she said: 'I've come to learn for myself how little one needs, in the art of writing, to convey the lot, and how a lot of words, on the other hand, can convey so little.' What Muriel was doing in those apprentice days was very practically and conscientiously banking the skills and the wherewithal she would need when she became a writer. In order to write about life, as she intended to do, she had first to learn to live. Among the other subjects she studied were shorthand and typing, both of which she later found to be highly useful. Thus she learned how to style letters and to present essays and stories. As a professional eavesdropper,

she was well aware of how handy it was for future reference to be able quickly to take shorthand notes of 'meetings, encounters, chance remarks overheard on a train, in a restaurant'. *Pace* Isherwood, she was a camera with its shutter forever open.

With each new month her horizons expanded. She longed to work in Princes Street, then, as today, Edinburgh's main, mile-long shopping thoroughfare, on the north side of which were large department stores, each independently owned. On the south side loomed Edinburgh Castle perched atop a volcanic plug, simultaneously a symbol of impregnability and paranoia. Getting a job proved difficult, not, she was eager to emphasise, because her Camberg surname marked her out as a Jew and therefore a target of anti-Semitism, but because of her lack of experience and secretarial qualifications. Eventually she was taken on by William Small and Sons, one of the more modish Edinburgh fashion emporia. It suited her perfectly. Her employer was sweet and old-fashioned and she was allowed to help him choose fabrics, always urging on him the bolder designs, a taste that never left her. He was also a source of folk wisdom, of which she was an avid collector. 'The majority of old people die in November,' was one of his many aperçus.

Little by little, she was liberating herself; she was hungry to discover what lay beyond Edinburgh and its environs. Just how desperate she was to leave may be gauged by the manner in which she achieved it. At nineteen, in 1937, when war was so close you could almost touch it, she agreed to marry Sydney Oswald Spark, a teacher who was thirteen years her senior. Was she in love? I asked. 'Not madly, no, but I thought it was nice to get away.' In her autobiography, she recalled that several of her friends were engaged to be married. Perhaps that was why she was so keen to do the same. What her friends were

not doing, though, was leaving Edinburgh for a new life in Rhodesia, which we now know as Zimbabwe. Her parents, in particular her father, disapproved of her husband-to-be, but to no avail. How could she turn her back on a man who brought her flowers when she was in bed with flu? The marriage was an unmitigated disaster. With the benefit of hindsight she made her personal motto, 'Beware of men bearing flowers.' 'I was only married a short time,' she said, as the sun sank over Arezzo and the sky turned black and blue like a bruise. 'Love is madness. There is nothing you can do about it. You must wait till it passes; it's like any other obsession.'



Muriel in Rhodesia in 1940. Her parents disapproved of her husband

The same is probably true of pain. Sixty years on, the scars of her marriage to 'S.O.S.' had healed but were still noticeable. On that first meeting we did not talk much about it. In *Curriculum Vitae*, she related how in Rhodesia her husband began to show the first signs of a nervous disorder that would haunt him for the rest of his life. Immediately after their son, Robin, was born she realised the marriage was doomed, and she sought a divorce. Since her husband wouldn't divorce her, she divorced him. But she retained his surname. Camberg, she reasoned, was 'comparatively flat'. In contrast, Spark had a bit of oomph about it, a bit of get up and go. It was an affirming, memorable surname. Moreover, it seemed to sum up her personality: no one was ever more sparky than Muriel Spark. That much was clear on that evening in Arezzo. The popular image of her was of someone who rather resented the world and was something of a misanthrope. Nothing was further from the truth, as her novels testify. What she would concede was that, whenever she felt her ability to write was in any way compromised, she had to retreat, to remove herself from temptation and supplication, from the hangers-on, pub bores and spongers, who would cling to her like leeches, whether in London, where she lived in the aftermath of war, New York, or Rome. She drew an analogy with the forest fires that sweep Tuscany in the summer months. To prevent these spreading, the local people make a *contra fuoco*, a counter-fire round the perimeter of the fire. 'They say, "So far and no farther. That fire is raging and devouring. It won't get past this stretch because it's burnt down." And I think that's what I've had to do with my life; make a counter-fire, to stop the encroachment of really devouring demands.' Thus she had managed to avoid the many 'enemies of promise'. The pram in the hall did not thwart her, as it has many women writers, nor

did sex, success, sloth or self-doubt. Regarding her vocation, she was unswerving.

Symposium's title is borrowed from Plato's dialogue, in which guests at a banquet take it in turn to talk about love – mythically, sophistically, poetically and, finally, comically. Socrates said that the priestess Diotima had taught him that it was possible for love to take an intellectual form, creating the desire to make things of beauty, including poetry. Set partly in London and Scotland, *Symposium* has as one of its themes madness. 'Here in Scotland', says Magnus Murchie, 'people are more capable of perpetrating good or evil than anywhere else. I don't know why, but so it is.' The Murchies live in 'a turreted edifice' near the golfing Mecca of St Andrews, a game which Muriel played on Bruntsfield links when she was young. Magnus is mad, but during periodic bouts of lucidity he is allowed out of the mental institution to advise his family on how they should run their affairs. When one of them questions the wisdom of this, Magnus retorts:

Who do you have but me? Out of my misfortune, out of my affliction I prognosticate and foreshadow. My divine affliction is your only guide. Remember the ballad:

As I went down the water side
None but my foe to be my guide
None but my foe to be my guide.

Muriel remembered the Border ballads from her youth and could recite large chunks of them by heart. They are remarkable for their sense of fatality and lack of sentimentality. The most awful things are reported matter-of-factly, needing

no embroidery. Death and misfortune are not occasions for lachrymosity. They speak for themselves.

‘What do you think of Magnus?’ Muriel asked. I muttered something inadequate, perhaps suggesting that it was stretching credulity somewhat to have a madman as a familial mentor. ‘It’s amazing how many people do go to bins [lunatic asylums], or to their mad relations,’ she countered, ‘especially in Scotland.’ Over the intervening years I have often pondered that remark and have grown to accept its truth. Certainly, the Scotland that Muriel grew up in was remarkable for its acceptance of ‘lunatics’, of whom even the smallest town had a smattering, some ‘barking’, others merely oddly behaved. Who knows why there was such a preponderance? Hellfire-and-damnation religion? Generations of inbreeding? The constant harping on about ghosts and ghouls, witches and warlocks? What is undeniable is that in Muriel’s work real and other worlds exist in tandem, as naturally as human beings and animals.

Though it was many years since she had left Scotland Muriel still spoke with a pronounced accent. It hurt her, she said, to think that anyone might think her other than Scottish. ‘What are you if you’re not Scottish?’ Penny interjected while we were still at the table. In Scotland, there is a tendency to measure one’s Scottishness as if it were weighed in carats. Scots who live outside the country of their birth live in constant danger of deracination.

We left the Continentale and stepped into the Tuscan dusk, and Muriel and her chauffeuse set off on their journey home. I bought a glass of chianti in the piazza. I opened Vasari at his life of Brunelleschi, who built Florence’s famous *Duomo*, among other wonders. Swap genders and he could have been talking about Muriel Spark: ‘Many men are created by nature

small in person and in features, who have a mind full of such greatness and a heart of such irresistible vehemence, that if they do not begin difficult – nay, almost impossible – undertakings, and bring them to completion to the marvel of all who behold them, they have never any peace in their lives . . .’

A few weeks after my article based on the interview in Arezzo appeared in the newspaper for which I then worked I received a complimentary letter from Penny, gently correcting a couple of errors and asking if I would be interested in looking after their house the following summer. It was put in such a way that I was made to feel I was doing them a favour. How could one refuse? Now Spark magically metamorphosed into Muriel. It was the overture to a friendship which continued until her death, and which included the exchange of many letters and phone calls, frequent sojourns in Tuscany, trips to New York, London, Prague and, finally, in 2004, to Scotland and Edinburgh. Muriel was an inveterate traveller, never happier than when climbing into the passenger seat of the Alfa Romeo and motoring thousands of miles. In 1995, I helped make a BBC documentary about her. What, I asked in a preparatory letter, was her achievement, her legacy? ‘I have realised myself,’ she wrote. ‘I have expressed something I brought into the world with me. I believe I have liberated the novel in many ways, showing how anything whatsoever can be narrated, any experience set down, including sheer damn cheek. I think I have opened doors and windows in the mind, and challenged fears – especially the most inhibiting fears about what a novel should be.’ As for her roots, her origins, her nationality, she said simply this: ‘I am Scottish by formation.’