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Edited by Denys Thompson
Excerpt
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Introduction

DENYS THOMPSON

The original aim of this book was to record, while it was still possible, recollections and impressions of F. R. Leavis and his wife. However its scope has widened, though not according to a set scheme. The latter would have tried to throw light on all facets of a nearly lifelong partnership, and would have supplied slots for contributors to fill. Thus there would have been some account of Gordon Fraser's start as a publisher, a contribution from the theatre, a view from America – though that omission is perhaps unimportant, for Leavis's impact there was not deep – and a record of the years at York. In the event there has been little overlapping, contributions have dovetailed closely, and the two figures emerge more fully in the round than could at first have been expected. In fact there is assembled here the basic material for a Life. This ought to be undertaken, as a piece of the cultural history of the times. It would not be easy, so much of the story being within the man, but it could not fail to be illuminating.

There are apparent contradictions in any account of their lives, but they can be reconciled by those who knew the protagonist well. Some of the differences are due to varying emphases, selection or point of view. For example the divergent opinions on Leavis as teacher, in different periods. No one could have indefinitely sustained the quality of the teacher so warmly praised by earlier pupils. The elasticity required was in demand elsewhere, for writing, for meeting the three crises of his wife's health, and for coping with the usual family cares. Moreover it must be strongly emphasised that Leavis never had a single one of the sabbatical years that seem regularly to come the way of established academics, alone among teachers.

The main question must be: how was it that the 'once gay, good looking and hopeful' couple of the letter quoted by Professor

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Bradbrook became the embittered, resentful and suspicious pair of the later years, with Leavis cast as the ogre of Downing for the gutter press to caricature? The seeds of the attitudes that came to form their public image are there in every human being, and circumstances conspired to germinate them and feed them. So far as Q.D.L. is concerned, total rejection by her family on her marriage to a gentile was an act of cruelty that left a lasting wound. That expulsion she did not forgive, and she did not relent when her parents were killed by a bomb. The poison was never purged. Given the right kind of help and the capacity to accept it, she might have overcome the infliction; as it was, it seems that she did not. That she did not receive the needed help was no fault of Leavis's, unless extreme delicacy and tact are faults. With that seeming failure to come to terms with what had happened may perhaps be linked her subsequent illnesses, cancer and heart trouble. Leavis told me that thrice doctors had taken him aside to warn him that his wife had only hours/days to live; each time she never gave in, but made good recoveries. The inability to concede rarely lapsed; it took her years, if ever, to forgive people for being the occasion of her own offensiveness. This unyieldingness may have been part of the Jewish will and power to survive. Other cultural traits were her warmth and generosity, evinced in her kindness to many and her excellence as a hostess – life-long, as Nora Crook and I can testify – and very strong family feeling.

Another aspect of the will to survive was Q.D.L.'s need for success, conceived in worldly terms. She rejected the traditions and religious sanctions of the Jews, and the gap was filled by certain philosophers and by current anthropology and sociology. It is also easy to recognise as part of her heritage the sense of belonging to a chosen people, hardening into a conviction of her own infallibility, which made it natural for her to go along with Leavis in his refusal ever to compromise. Thus she was intolerant, readily contemptuous of other people and their views, and arrogant. She would for example dismiss with disdain a request for permission to quote from her writing, rejecting as a contemptible popularisation the work for which permission was sought, and referring to her own publication as 'seminal'.

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For Leavis the circumstances of his father's death (recorded by John Harvey below) and the traumatic experience of trench warfare were never distanced with the completeness achieved, say, by Robert Graves in *Goodbye to All That*. Like so many who survived physically, including his brother Ralph, Leavis was a war casualty for a long time; the scars remained. After the wonderful start of the Leavises' publishing career and his establishment as an outstanding teacher, things began to go sour. His teaching quality was never in question, as one can infer from the tributes in these pages, but the local university failed to recognise the quality of either of them – it may be that at a comparatively new Downing he was unable to benefit from strong college backing. In his writing he was fortunate in having a well-to-do pupil who started publishing as an undergraduate, and was open to his teacher's suggestions. Gordon Fraser was followed by Ian Parsons, who had joined Chatto and Windus on going down from Cambridge. With rare perception and acumen Parsons not only recognised the quality of Leavis's writing and started a partnership that continued to bear fruit even after their deaths, but also developed his firm as a leading publisher of English literature and criticism. The university however never fully repaired its omission, unlike the state, which made him a C.H. at the very end of his life. Queenie also failed to win the academic recognition deserved by her sparkling teaching and criticism, which if sometimes wayward was always engaging. Despite some shortcomings, *Fiction and the Reading Public* was a genuinely pioneer piece of research, and more than one book has chugged along in its wake.

What seems to have happened to both is that early wounds were never healed – a condition by no means unique, but one which for them weakened the strength of resistance to the infection of suspicion and hostility that poisoned both. That of course is a simplification; the bodily analogy should not be pressed too far; and they were both as complex as human beings can be. F.R.L. had the rare kind of intelligence of feeling that far transcends what he himself called 'cerebral muscle'. Queenie, it must be said, had not.

Leavis's influence, especially in setting an example that led many graduates to teach, was wide and deep, as we can see from Frank

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Whitehead's precise and authoritative assessment; his books were successful by any standard; he established *Scrutiny*; and tribute to his teaching and criticism was paid all over the English-speaking world. But sadly none of this gave him any deep satisfaction; the 'enemies' were credited with more importance than they deserved, while the steadfast support of friends and former pupils appeared to count for little. Of course he made enemies, as will anyone who takes a position and defends it. He regarded any concession, any meeting half-way as selling the pass, the affirmation of a basic solidarity. He did not find it possible to criticise a man's views without appearing to attack him personally, and the holding of opinions different from his own seemed somehow to be regarded as a moral lapse. However so presented, he himself was not an arrogant man; rather had he a craftsman's confidence in his own power and achievement, a craftsman who knew what he wanted to do, was assured of its importance, and proud of his skill and attainment. Unlike his wife, he was humble in disclaiming any expertise outside his own field; he would always defer to those who had. This may go some way to explain why (in Frank Whitehead's words) he 'devoted so little of his immense energy to the problems of school education'; he merely got on with what he knew he could do. A certain innate aggressiveness would cause him to over-react; innate too seems to have been the 'guarantee of disappointment' remarked by Professor Knights.

The personal recollections of the early years come first, in roughly chronological order, followed by views of Leavis as editor and author. Thirdly we have records of the later years, and more general impressions. Finally Professor Harding takes both a close look and a perspective one; his must clearly be the last word, so far as this collection is concerned.

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Queenie at Girton

GWENDOLEN FREEMAN

'With most people at Girton who are called to mind one thinks, "Ah yes. Her great friend was So-and-So." With Queenie I cannot recall ever seeing her in company with anyone. She seemed withdrawn into the world of work.'

'Outside her own field she was extraordinarily naive.'

'I remember her being pointed out as a brilliant research student. She gave the impression of being very remote; of being hooded, with her hair curving over her glasses. Looking neither to right nor left. Always in dark colours.'

Of the three Girton students here recalling Queenie Roth, one came from her own year, one from a year junior to her and one from three years junior when Queenie was already above ordinary college life.

I myself, coming up a year after Queenie, was friendly with her for a good long time, but one picture of her stands out with extreme clarity. We were jolting up the Huntingdon Road to Girton in the college bus, all of us hungry and relaxed after a morning of Cambridge lectures and reading. Near college we passed Queenie erect and alone, strolling along the path. She was not only not hurrying to lunch. She was reading as she walked, her book held high before her eyes, which may have been short-sighted. (I never asked why she wore glasses.) It could not have been easy to read as one walked along that country path, and presumably she had been reading all the two-and-a-half miles from Cambridge.

In the October of 1926 I had joined the bewildering world of 150 students, 50 to each year, all seeming high-spirited and talented, as most of them were. Among them, however, were some solitaries, and Queenie was one. I met her fairly early as she invited me to 'jug' (the traditional evening cocoa party), but a student in my

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own group, Freda Midgley, had known her previously. Freda remembered her meeting with Queenie in 1925:

'We were both called for interview at Girton to read English, so it was natural we should get together. Without being strongly attracted, I liked her and found her enthusiasm stimulating. I had no idea of her brilliance then, nor did I find her Jewishness later obtrusive.

'Queenie was awarded a scholarship, and I was recommended to try again the following year. This time I was successful, and, before going up, I wrote to Queenie several times for advice, which she gave generously, though about clothes she was not helpful. As a fresher I was soon aware that she was regarded with awe for her ability and for her spartan existence. I never knew anyone less interested in possessions, other than books.'

Freda adds, however, that she 'never knew the mature Queenie. We met in 1925, and, though we kept in touch for a while after her marriage, we had drifted apart by the early 1930s.'

Not such a kindly comment comes from a member of Queenie's own year. She concedes that Queenie at twenty might have been thought handsome, with 'a lovely clear magnolia type of complexion and really lovely soft brown eyes and very pretty wavy dark hair'. But she also recalls that Queenie, when she arrived at Girton, was 'full of the fact that she was top scholar though her parents had "waived the emoluments". And she talked endlessly about it. When we all met as freshers we talked to each other, but soon got sorted out into small groups of special friends, and I doubt if I ever spoke much to Queenie after those first few days. We would say a few words in passing, but I have no recollection at all of ever having a conversation with her.'

This judgement might well be echoed by others of Queenie's contemporaries. The girls taking English in her year were cheerful, friends among themselves and interested in social occasions as well as work. In my letters home I did mention one, Isobel Cumming, who joined with Queenie in inviting me to 'jug' when I first arrived, but on the whole they laughed a little at her.

The Girton to which Queenie came up in 1925 might seem quaint now, but it did provide what one former student calls

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'golden days'. The red Victorian building with its tower, which could be seen for miles over the flat countryside, may seem dark and warrenlike today, but to us, when we got used to it, it became a place where we gained status and liberty. We still recall the glimpses of sunny green through corridor windows, the hard-soap smell of 'gyp-wings' where we washed up after tea-parties, the woodland walks with the fritillaries near the back gate, the pleasure of thinking ourselves grown-up and having friends.

The Victorian pioneers were still close to us. As freshers we came up two days early and were given a talk on them by the Mistress, Miss Major. Their portraits, including that of George Eliot, were on the walls. For some reason a bust of Mr Gladstone was at the end of my ground-floor corridor and was most useful as a guide when I got lost in my first days. The names of the pioneers were about too in the scholarships that helped to provide for us. We always remembered that Girton had been England's first residential college for women.

Arrangements were also rather Victorian. Our room-space was lavish; those with scholarships were each given a bedroom and connecting sitting-room. But there were still basins and ewers on wash-stands, and I remember one winter morning when the water was frozen over; so the rooms must have been cold before we lighted our fires. We had individual fires that were cleared out by the gyps cleaning our rooms. At one period I was waked at six every morning by a gyp banging about with fire-irons in the room overhead. Though timid, I was finally so desperate that I crept up to find the source of the clatter and startled the girl kneeling before the grate. That morning when I went into chapel the gyps standing in a line nudged one another, and I felt deeply embarrassed.

One of the pleasures of Girton was that we did not have to do housework. Country girls did the work, but, except for Portress at the door, who was popular, we did not pay much attention to the domestic staff. I did, however, write home that the gyps were polite and friendly, and the students gave them a Christmas party. Towards the end of my stay I grew friendly with two of them, and they became real people to me. Queenie probably was unaware that they were there.

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I think that some students showed their superiority by grumbling about the food, but to me it always seemed good. Girton students' appetites were said to be legendary, and the joke was passed round – perhaps it is still current – of the porter who said, 'They heats and heats with hintervals for meals.' We brought up food from home and had supplies of tea, coffee and cocoa in our cupboards, and when we were giving parties bought 'deadlies' in Cambridge – rich little chocolate cakes costing the astonishing price of four old pennies each. Queenie, as far as I know, did not discuss food nor give many 'jugs'.

When we came up – you had to remember to say 'up' and not 'down' – you learnt the Cambridge vocabulary and at first were terrified of not conforming. You were a 'fresher' and were entertained at evening 'jugs' by older students and had to entertain them back. Your own group of friends, which you kept with variations through the three years, eating with them, sitting with them at lectures, was known sentimentally as a 'family'. Evening dinner was 'hall', and you had to learn about getting 'exeats'. You did not ask other students, 'What is your subject?' but said, 'What shop are you?' If you made a noise in the corridor at night you could be 'jumped'. The aggrieved student emerged to protest, and you had to go and apologise the next day.

One Victorian practice which I think was dropped in the late 1920s was the fire-drill. Girton had been too far out for the Cambridge fire brigade to serve it. So the students had their own brigade, who rushed along the corridors, seized curled-up hoses stacked in corners, ran along unwinding them without twisting and coupled them with others brought along by other groups. It was a useless exercise and got members of the brigade out of bed early in the morning. Queenie did not belong to the brigade when I was there, but there was a general alarm once a year which brought all students out from their rooms.

There was a short service in the chapel before breakfast each morning, with an organ student to play. Students tended to go to chapel in their first weeks and then either lose their faith or become indifferent or lazy. In any case this would not have affected Queenie as a practising Jew. She would also have been unaffected by the

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various Christian movements, whose leaders arranged study-groups of four or five in their rooms, where you might discuss aspects of the Bible, sin or immortality.

Elegant students who wore fur coats, had been to Paris and had many men friends in Cambridge grumbled about the chaperon rules by which you had to take a girl friend with you when you visited a man's rooms and men had to be out of Girton before hall at night. You had to ask for an exeat if you wanted to be out in the evening, and there was a certain amount of climbing-in at ground-floor windows by students who had forgotten to ask or were returning in the small hours. But for most of us, who had come up straight from school, the rules were no burden, and it was pleasant to signify your friendship by asking somebody to come with you to a man's rooms or similarly to be asked by a friend.

Some people were sorry for us because we were two-and-a-half miles out of Cambridge, on a distant site chosen for etiquette's sake in the early 1870s. We had to have bicycles, and there was a crowded cycle-shed off the main college entrance. Very few students had cars, and a white rose used to bloom in the courtyard, now a car-park, behind the tower. But none of us, as far as I know, objected to being where we were, and the open country made it possible for the college to have acres of beautiful grounds. On Violet Sunday, near the end of the Lent term, you were allowed to pick large violets by the woodland paths and pack the flowers in boxes and send them home. Honeysuckle Walk, with its ramparts of bloom coming out just before we went home in June, was noted among us, and at all seasons you could escape from the throng in the winding walks among the trees. Outside, the Huntingdon Road, bordered with fields much of the way from Cambridge, led to an unknown flat countryside which most of us liked. On autumn days we used to pick 'autumn leaves' for our rooms.

Queenie was probably too busy with her books ever to look much at the grounds. Nor do I think she took part in those comfortable Sunday-evening stocking-darning sessions in friends' rooms when we had no social engagements in Cambridge, nor in those interminable discussions between two or three friends – on literature, religion, love – which might go on into the small hours, even

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occasionally till the sky paled in the north-east and we were almost too tired to go to bed.

We had hard and grass tennis-courts, and Queenie must have played, for a small photograph remains of her in a short white dress, very much of the period, sitting with a racquet beside her. But as far as I know she never joined the hockey, lacrosse or net-ball teams that were led by third-year enthusiasts.

Her lack of close friends did not necessarily stem from her Jewishness, though this may have made some barrier. There were several Jewish girls at Girton, including the top scholar in English in the year senior to her. Grace Cohen was also solitary, but others fitted in. Queenie herself, however, was aware of her superiority. She once said to me that Jews' minds worked much faster than other people's and that when she entered a room she knew immediately who was Jewish by the speed of the reactions. I accepted this. I had known clever Jewish girls at school.

At that period the English Tripos, as ever, was under discussion. Outsiders referred to it scornfully as 'the novel-reading Tripos', and something had to be put in to stiffen it. Up to then it had been Anglo-Saxon, and the English school at Oxford also included Anglo-Saxon. But while Oxford was ending its syllabus with the Victorians, Cambridge considered itself far superior because it studied T. S. Eliot and other moderns. It also considered that a love of literature did not necessarily coincide with an ability to read Anglo-Saxon. So the literature students were allowed in their third year to change to history or French. Queenie however, adhered to the hard Anglo-Saxon and got the high mark of a II.I in the difficult examination. This choice may also have helped a little to cut her off from her contemporaries.

But before I got to know Queenie well we were introduced to Dr Leavis. Miss Hilda Murray, our white-haired, icy but good-hearted tutor, announced that we were to meet him for weekly essay-coaching in the annexe, a wooden hut that remained from the First World War. She thought that we should find him interesting, and she seemed to admire him as somebody of special talent. Actually we did find those late-afternoon coachings of our group of nine a pleasure.

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