

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Reading Lady Rhondda

In August 1932 George Bernard Shaw read a copy of 'That Gadfly', Margaret's enthusiastic reaction to his latest play 'Too True to be Good'. He liked what he read, telling her: 'What a magnificent article! You CAN write. Even the best of the men's articles are intolerable and unreadable piffle after it.'

Shaw's reaction was not a stock response to a flattering discussion of his work. He, of all people, was hardly in need of publicity or praise, and anyway Margaret had not written a straightforward appreciation of his talents. Her *Time and Tide* article opened with the claim that '[p]robably the most significant thing about Shaw... is that at seventy-six he still retains the capacity to exasperate almost beyond endurance both the world at large and half the younger writing men of today'. As Margaret knew, he was more than capable of taking her to task if he felt she deserved it. His personal letters to her frequently proffered advice. But here he was praising

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her for a penetrating and intelligent understanding of his work. She was delighted. In a letter to Holtby she quoted his words, remarking that this was '[s]uch [underlined twice] a thrill!'

Margaret is usually seen as the person who, as a newspaper owner and editor, enabled others to write. It is, however, worth considering her as an author and journalist in her own right, not least because, as Shaw recognised, she was capable of some fine writing. She had been penning articles for the press for many years and had become an influential editor who wrote rather more in her paper than was acknowledged. She also published three books.

She edited and wrote a substantial part of her first book, a memoir of her father. It was another dozen years before her best known work appeared. *This Was My World* is an autobiography with a difference: like Margaret's biography of D.A. it did not quite adhere to the conventional format. More than three hundred pages long and divided into four parts, it focused on the early part of her life. The final section is on 'The War – and After' but this was the First World War. It can hardly be called Margaret's life story. She lived for a further quarter of a century after it was published but chose not to produce a second volume. It concludes with a chapter called 'The Future' that, by the time it was written and read, was actually about the past.

Margaret's title was retrospective. It *was* her world. Her account ends in 1919, before the start of what is justifiably seen as her greatest achievement, the creation of *Time and Tide*. It could be argued that her paper then took her story forward and that by the time of its

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publication on 17 March 1933 (when she was in her fiftieth year) she was such a public figure that an account of her early life might seem more intriguing for the reading public than a focus on the present.

Margaret's explanation was the reasonable one of needing distance and perspective. She thought that she was too close to recent events to write about them: 'they have not yet arranged themselves into any pattern. They are still all tangled up.' But there was more at stake here. Despite a need to keep her paper and causes in the public eye, Margaret was not keen to address publicly her private life. Writing about earlier days was safer and at a time when the future seemed uncertain both financially and personally, deflecting attention from the present and turning the spotlight on the recent past must have seemed appealing. To her alarm and annoyance, when the book appeared, 'RW' (probably Rebecca West) telephoned to 'sound me about any possible scandals in my family'.

It was the fashion for former suffragettes to tell their stories in the interwar years. Titles were similar: Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence's *My Part in a Changing World* (1938) is not unlike Margaret's. Suffragette memoirs helped validate earlier activities and claim a historical role and hierarchy of authentic suffrage militancy, enabling the construction of a narrative that made sense of more recent feminist politics. Margaret's story was an exemplar for the continued advocacy of equal rights feminism.

Robins' 'autobiography' a few years later covered only the years 1888 to 1890, when the young American actress first arrived in England. At first glance her focus on the least auspicious period in the eminent life of this

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multi-talented international actress and writer seems perverse. But Robins knew what she was doing and by highlighting the ingénue waiting in the wings rather than the Ibsenite star, her *Both Sides of the Curtain* not only shielded her private (as opposed to professional self) from the public gaze but also revealed – though it was never spelt out – just how well-known she subsequently became.

An advance notice for Margaret's book in *The Times* claimed that it would show 'how a shy, dreamy Victorian child developed by the force of unusual circumstances into one of the outstanding personalities of post-war England'. Its end leaves her poised for her bold step into journalism. By concentrating on a period prior to *Time and Tide*, before women had the vote, she demonstrated how dramatically the world had changed post-war and the impact made by forward-looking women through this review and organisations such as the SPG. Like Robins, Margaret used the past to illuminate the present, to show how women's lives and expectations were changing by implicitly contrasting the interwar years with the world she had known, a world that was being lost.

Margaret's introduction stressed that this was 'the autobiography of a normal person'. She was always critical of the idea of the exceptional woman. Her involvement in a popular movement like suffrage permitted identification with others of like mind, though there is little sense of sister suffragettes in the book beyond family and Prid. But her privileged and supportive family meant that there was never a neat fit between Margaret's story and the opportunities provided for most women. And, as so often in her life, the shadow of D.A. was omnipresent. The *Monmouthshire Review* noted that here was the story of

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two people. It was evident that ‘she shares the drama of living with her father, that she unfolds the secret of his psychology no less than her own. It is a remarkable achievement.’

A number of reviewers specifically mentioned Margaret’s candour, courage and frankness. This was intended as a compliment, recognising that although she was a Victorian by birth, she was refreshingly modern in her approach. Yet candour was surely an impression that she carefully sought, rather successfully, to suggest by her tone, which was one of assumed directness with Dear Reader. In practice she did not reveal much and what she did say tended to be about the young Margaret. Although she might not have been as disingenuous as Robins who openly admitted to ‘cooking’ accounts of her life, Margaret’s little confessions about, for example, being greedy about food, served to endear her to readers at the same time as occluding more important revelations about her personal and business life. This experienced journalist seems to have been crafting her words and narrative strategies rather more assiduously than many imagined.

There are significant silences. The young Margaret might be prominent and her Haig aunts depicted with tender, loving care as well as an adoring and adored father but there is a notable sublimation of the self as the narrative proceeds. Margaret’s war work is especially conspicuous by its absence. The chapter on the war is called ‘London in War-Time’ as though deliberately shifting attention from the self to the city. The wartime atmosphere is beautifully conveyed as is the story of the sinking of the *Lusitania* (largely reproduced from an earlier account), which could not fail to move readers, but

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Margaret selected and shaped carefully what and how she wished to divulge.

Not surprisingly, it was Holtby who understood how little Margaret had revealed. Her review for *The Schoolmistress* was entitled 'The Unknown Lady Rhondda'. It praised her writing but whereas one review called it 'a memorable piece of self-portraiture' Holtby recognised that it betrayed remarkably little about Margaret.¹⁵ Unusually for an autobiography, Margaret's emphasis was on the word 'World' rather than 'My'.