Reviews

DESMOND AND MOLLY

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Hugh and Mirabel Cecil. *Clever Hearts. Desmond and Molly MacCarthy: a Biography.* London: Gollancz, 1990. Pp. 320. £18.95.

Desmond MacCarthy had a talent for friendship. His friends were so numerous that it is no surprise to find Russell among them. They had met as students at Cambridge, both were members of the Apostles and both had a place on the fringe of Bloomsbury,[1] and they remained friends (though hardly close) until MacCarthy's death in 1952. In 1936 it was MacCarthy who was called in to cut *The Amberley Papers* down from the 400,000 words the Russells had written to the 280,000 the Hogarth Press was prepared to publish. The two men were very different by nature, especially in their early years: MacCarthy was easy-going to the point of being lackadaisical; he seems to have made few demands on himself or other people. Russell, by contrast, driven by strong emotions, a merciless intellect and an unsparing conscience, made extreme demands on both. Such differences were exactly the sort that could be bridged by MacCarthy's easy-going tolerance—Russell (even in his early years) was very far from the most difficult person MacCarthy had to deal with. Even so, it is easy to see why MacCarthy was closer to G. E. Moore.

Russell and MacCarthy were closest in 1904 when both were in romantic difficulties: Russell, famously, had fallen out of love with Alys and was trying to find some mutually tolerable way of going on living with her; MacCarthy had been turned down (after much tantalizing) by Irene Noel, the heir to an

[1] It is hard to find anyone or their biographer who will admit to membership in Bloomsbury. Really central Bloomsbury figures, those who could not plausibly claim that they were outside the group, usually deny its existence. Hugh Cecil, true to form, claims in a recent interview that MacCarthy "wasn't absolutely a member of Bloomsbury" (*Observer Mag.*, 21 Oct. 1990, p. 47).

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estate in Greece, whom he had courted optimistically through 1902, and in 1904 he got engaged to Mary ("Molly") Warre-Cornish whom he married in 1906. In 1904 MacCarthy often sought Russell's advice on unspecified, but probably romantic, matters: "I look to you to help me more than anyone else just now", MacCarthy wrote to Russell on 11 October 1904.[2] In the spring of 1904 they had been on a walking tour together and confided their troubles to one another. Russell, at least, came away much more cheerful and went on immediately to do some good work with Whitehead on denoting functions.[3] MacCarthy's easy-going ways seem to have persuaded him, for a while, to "act more on impulse" (as he put it to Lucy Donnelly, 13 Sept. 1904). But the longer term effects of this were equivocal, for Russell's impulse led him into a closer friendship with Ivy Pretious than his friends thought was good for her reputation.[4] The awkwardness which resulted cost him much soul-searching in the autumn of 1904, though his relationship with Ivy Pretious was always platonic. Nonetheless, he found with Desmond MacCarthy an easy intimacy that he could not achieve with others, and something of MacCarthy's optimism and warmth rubbed off onto him. "You always manage to cheer me up when I see you", Russell wrote to him (13 Oct. 1904).

So what makes this sympathetic joint biography of Desmond and Molly MacCarthy written by their grandson, Hugh Cecil, Professor of History at Liverpool, and his wife, Mirabel, such cheerless reading for the most part? There are several answers, and they take us to the heart of Desmond and Molly's life together. Life seemed to offer Desmond a great deal. Intelligent, well educated, widely interested in life and literature, his friends expected him to write a great novel, and the hope that he would do so seems to have sustained him into middle age. In the end nothing came of it, and the only fiction he published was a few rather flat fragments of what was supposed to be his *magnum opus*. Likewise nothing came of his alternative scheme to write a great book of scholarly criticism—for several years he planned a book on the then-unfashionable poet John Donne.

Quite why these schemes came to nothing is open to debate. In the case of the book on Donne, MacCarthy seems to have lost his sympathy for the poet. In the case of the novel, it is suggested that he was over-awed by the grandeur of his ambitions. He intended to write not merely a novel, but a *great* novel, in the same class as Henry James or Tolstoy or George Meredith (who was highly rated indeed in those days). Finding that everything he

[2] *Auto.* 1: 193.
[3] Not the theory of descriptions itself, but one of the unpublished intermediate theories between *The Principles of Mathematics* and "On Denoting".
[4] See Clark, pp. 102–4.

wrote fell short of the standard he'd set himself, he gave up—or so it is claimed. More likely, he was the victim of his own gregarious good nature. He found conversation and friendship so easy, and available to him in such wealth, that he had neither time nor inclination for much serious writing. Instead he devoted himself to literary journalism, first with *The New Statesman* then with *The Sunday Times*.[5] His role in both places was significant, but it fell far short of his early ambitions. He was never one to push himself hard and, after a while, neither did his friends, who preferred talking to him over reading him. An exception was Molly, who for years berated him mercilessly on his lacklustre performance. In the face of her criticisms, Desmond seems merely to have withdrawn.

Molly MacCarthy also disappointed the hopes of her friends. She did publish one reasonably successful novel, *A Pier and a Band* (1918), though her best book was her autobiography, *A Nineteenth Century Childhood* (1924). But it is difficult to find evidence for David Garnett's claim that she "might be another Jane Austen" (p. 262) in her collection of stories, *The Festival, Etc.* (1937), which inspired it. In retrospect it seems likely that Molly's autobiography was the only good book in her, and that Desmond did not have a good book in him at all.

This general failure of anticipated talent casts a pall over the second half of the Cecils' biography, but hardly, on its own, accounts for the faint sense of melancholy and futility that pervades the second part of the book. After all, no one's life becomes meaningless just because of failure to write a better novel than Henry James, however strongly he or she was tipped to do so. Other factors were involved.

The Cecils point out that the MacCarthys' marriage, despite its longevity, was not a particularly happy one. Molly had had a breakdown during their engagement when "sex [loomed] before her with something approaching horror" (p. 85). Three unhappy pregnancies followed, despite precautions, in five years. Sexual relations between them ceased early in the relationship. Though the Cecils do not say as much, the evidence they give makes it reasonable to conjecture that this was Molly's desire: the evidence is for an aversion to sex on Molly's part, not on Desmond's. Nonetheless, Molly suffered from the prolonged abstinence as a heartfelt letter from her to Desmond makes painfully clear (pp. 159–60). The letter, however, seems not to have led to any change in their relations. Extramarital affairs for both of them were few and rather unsatisfactory, though Desmond in his fifties did enjoy a prolonged relationship with Betsy Reyneau, an American artist—the only relationship, according to the Cecils, from which he derived any serious sexual satisfaction. Hugh Cecil, in the *Observer* interview quoted earlier, said that Desmond was "less sexually experimental than others in the Bloomsbury world.... I think he rather envied the others their sexual freedoms." Both of them suffered more from jealousy of the other's affairs, however unsatisfactory, than they were prepared to admit.

[5] Most of the books he published—*Remnants* (1918), *Portraits* (1931), *Criticism* (1932), *Experience* (1935) and others—were collections of journalism. (A good selection was edited by his son-in-law, David Cecil, in 1984: *Desmond MacCarthy: the Man and His Writings*.) An exception was a biography of Russell's grandmother, *Lady John Russell, a Memoir*, compiled very largely from correspondence with the help of Russell's aunt, Lady Agatha Russell, which appeared in 1910 after six years' dilatory labour.

Their alienation from each other, however, was more than merely sexual. Molly, from early in the marriage, was a formidable scold, berating Desmond for his failure to write his great novel, for his failure to earn money, and generally for his failure to take a serious grip on life—in fact, for all the traits that made him so agreeable to others. Molly's efforts to galvanize him into action predictably had little success. Nothing, it seems, could galvanize Desmond. In the face of her formidable barrage of criticism, Desmond reacted with a good-natured withdrawal, taking, as always, the line of least resistance. A further serious blow hit them in middle age, when Molly started to go deaf. Hearing-aids did little good and Molly, the deaf wife of a gregarious conversationalist, suffered agonies of isolation as a result.

The MacCarthys' early story is driven along by their ambition, especially Desmond's, to produce important literary works. After it became clear, even to Desmond, that no such work was likely to be produced, the story falters. This is not entirely the Cecils' fault. Inevitably a good deal of what made Desmond memorable has been lost. Harold Nicolson attempting to give his wife an account of Desmond's conversation gave up: "I cannot reconstruct the thing. No wonder that people like Sydney Smith seem to enjoy ... an exaggerated reputation. Dr. Johnson is the only conversationalist who triumphs over time." (p. 268). Accounts on all sides testify to Desmond's abilities as a conversationalist, but the context in which he spoke is lost, and most of what he said also, and the Cecils cannot reconstruct it any more than Harold Nicolson could.

But it is not entirely the fault of the subjects that the biography falters in midstream. As told by the Cecils, the MacCarthys' later life tends to become a catalogue, first of meetings with friends, then, increasingly, of the deaths of friends, and finally of illnesses. No doubt events of all three kinds figured largely in their last two decades, and maybe the life which resulted did really have the sort of vague emptiness which the Cecils' account suggests. Yet there is much evidence, even from the later years, that Desmond still pursued his life with some gusto. It is hard to see from the biography what sustained him.

The Cecils say surprisingly little about the work he actually did. Occasionally an achievement is noted, but rarely do they consider what he might have been trying to do in the vast mass of reviews he wrote over the years. They give the impression that he wrote them merely to earn money. Of all the motives which activate human beings, making money is probably the most boring. If this was Desmond's sole interest in his work—and for all I know it may have been—then the feeling that his last two decades were rather flat is probably accurate. But somehow one doubts it. The trouble is to see what it was that gave his reviewing significance. Certainly he didn't review in order to introduce the new writers of the first half of the century. He had very little sympathy for any but the most traditional of them. In his literary tastes he remained an Edwardian, sneered at by the Leavisites and pilloried in Geoffrey Grigson's *New Verse*. Yet one feels that there must have been some point of view, some set of values, underlying his weekly appearances in print. The Cecils give us little sense of what his point of view might have been.

As far as his politics are concerned, their silence seems to have been deliberate. Desmond did have some early connection with the Fabians, and he seems always to have been somewhat on the left—perhaps a "New Liberal" rather than a socialist. The Cecils are fashionably conservative. They sneer on a couple of occasions at Betsy Reyneau's "simplistic left-wing views" (pp. 240, 273), claiming that "they would have annoyed Desmond considerably if he had not ignored them" (p. 273). But they don't deign to explain what her views were, nor why they were simplistic, nor to justify their claim that Desmond would not have liked them. Likewise, though the writings of Desmond's wealthy patron, G. A. Paley, are generally condemned as worthless, the Cecils find his criticisms of socialism "not unintelligent" (p. 95). Indeed, though the Cecils are anxious to declare their political opinions they are disinclined to enter into discussion of them either with their subjects or with their readers. They seem to have the standard English reason for not rejecting socialism: it is one of the many things that are just not done. If weightier reasons are required, they are on offer, too: nationalization, we are told, made the railway porters insolent. (I kid you not: it's on p. 288.)

On a rare occasion when the Cecils broach political issues head-on they are carried away into incoherence: "The frightful cruelties of the twentieth century, the cynicism, the mass delusion and the belittlement of human values by Hitler and Marx [*sic*] were beyond anything that Meredith could have imagined" (p. 289). What agile and provocative minds these conservatives have—when everyone expects "Stalin" they write "Marx"! Unfortunately, such conspicuous bravado only draws attention to the absurdity of the sentence which results—if for no other reason, on grounds of anachronism: why should Meredith have been unable to imagine the ideas of an author who died while Meredith was still in his prime? They are similarly incautious when they offer evidence that Desmond in later life would have agreed with them. The only passage they quote for this, from a letter to Vanessa Bell, reads (in their presentation): "socialism[,] which aims at getting rid of the harshness of competition, is going to prove the greatest disappointment since Christianity" (p. 288). Now I have no idea whether Desmond wished to condemn all socialism or only those forms of it which aimed at getting rid of the harshness of competition. But the comma that the Cecils insert is crucial; without it, the "which"-clause is restrictive, whereas with the comma it is not. The Cecils may be quite right in their interpretation, but one wishes the sentence had been left in its original ambiguity. Their anxiety to make their point (and have Desmond share it) is slightly irritating and manipulative.

Perhaps the MacCarthys were not very political people, though Molly was involved in the women's suffrage movement and in the interwar peace movement through her friend Dick Sheppard. (Neither concern is mentioned in *Clever Hearts*.) Or maybe the MacCarthys didn't have very interesting political ideas—women's suffrage and pacifism perhaps being, in the Cecils' opinion, merely two simplistic left-wing causes. But, one feels, surely they had *some* interesting ideas about something. It is on this point, however, that the Cecils, for all their sympathy for Desmond and Molly, leave us in doubt. And it is for this reason that the second half of their book makes such disheartening reading.