Beyond the interstices of Russell's life

by Jo Vellacott

Sybil Oldfield. *Spinsters of This Parish: the Life and Times of F.M. Mayor and Mary Sheepshanks*. London: Virago, 1984. Pp. 334. $10.95 paper.

SYBIL OLDFIELD HAS attempted something unusual in this book, a dual biography of two women who knew each other but were never close friends. Flora Mayor and Mary Sheepshanks were both daughters of clergymen, both were born in 1872 (the year also of Bertrand Russell's birth), Mary went up to Cambridge (Newnham) in 1891, Flora in 1892, both supported the suffrage movement, both numbered among

their acquaintances members of the Cambridge and Bloomsbury groups. Despite all this, their lives were very different. Even the vicarages of their childhoods contrasted sharply. Mary was the oldest daughter in a family which lived bleakly, quarrelsomely and austerely (but not perhaps austerely enough, since the Reverend Sheepshanks made his wife pregnant "almost every year for twenty-two years"). Flora was one of only four children in a comfortable, amiable, almost indulgent home. Although both women were given an exceptionally good education, Mary was on her own shortly after she left Cambridge, while Flora returned to her close family and the twin sister who always seems to have lovingly shared her experiences, but only vicariously, as in a mirror.

Someone commented to me that the author manifestly favours one of her subjects over the other. I do not find this borne out; Oldfield has done an excellent job of selecting, interweaving and presenting facets of the lives and personalities of the two women. Certainly, for those who believe that adversity forms character, this series of two offers confirmation. Perhaps the more significant difference lay in Mary Sheepshanks' well-developed social conscience and breadth of vision. Neither woman had a comfortable life. Flora's early shallow self-confidence made her all the more vulnerable to the bitterness of failure when she could not break into the acting world. Mary experienced lasting pain from her perception of herself as unlovable; yet I see her as having taken control of her own life more completely than Flora was able to do. However, I should confess that my own bias was toward Mary, who came to me in this book as an old acquaintance might; I had come across letters from her and references to her in Catherine Marshall's papers and had already found her appealing, not only because of her impressive achievements but because of her toughness, angularity and a certain determination to act as she thought right, and to maintain her own sensitivity without expecting any reciprocation of longed-for love.

Flora was engaged briefly and tragically; her loved and loving fiancé died in India. Mary the intimidating loved Theodore Llewelyn Davies, who probably never suspected it; Russell alone was in her confidence, after Theodore's tragic death, and offered her understanding and comfort. Mary shared many beliefs, causes and principles with Russell. Her contribution to international understanding, especially among women, through her wartime editorship of *Ius Suffragii*, was quite exceptional. Flora's gifts differed, and she left a small legacy of impressive fiction, making use of her ability to enter her own feelings and to understand those of other women trapped by contemporary expectations.

I would be unhappy to fit the lives of these women into the interstices of Russell's life, laying stress only on what seems relevant to Russell scholars and Russell buffs. For me, the interest lies in what is added to our knowledge of women's history. The book is not, I think, like any book that could be written about the lives of any two men. I have been trying to define for myself something of where the difference lies, and believe that one essential is that when a man dies, generally speaking, his life has been lived sufficiently in public for it to be already known whether anything will pass into recorded history. The writing of that history may take much research and many years (*vide* the Russell Editorial Project), and may provide surprises and reassessments, but the outline is already drawn. For a variety of reasons, women's history has not been like this. The encompassing cause, of course, is that until very recently history has been both written and defined by men. The lives and the writings of women have disappeared; not only has the private sphere to which much of women's lives was confined been seen as not part of the matter of history, but when women have entered the public sphere, their sex has rendered them forgettable or at best subject to belittlement by male historians.

Marvellously, we are finding that women have left more record of themselves behind them than we had supposed possible, so that we are now watching the huge blank canvas of women's history and seeing, bit by bit, small (and sometimes larger) spaces being filled in with intense colour and dramatic detail. Flora Mayor's works are being republished. Not only is Mary Sheepshanks visible to us, but we are learning again about organizations such as the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, the International Women's Suffrage Alliance and the Women's Cooperative Guild, which had in their time significance for vast numbers of women, and whose impact on human society should have continued and can be picked up again only when they are painted in on the historical canvas.

Women historians of scholarship and originality now abound (witness the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians), though they are still lamentably thin on the hallowed ground of traditional university history departments. Together with determined and enterprising feminist publishers, such as Virago, Women's Press and Pandora, to name only a few examples, they are restoring the history without which we, women and men, cannot function fully. This book is a fine contribution.

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