

A Documented Life

by Frank Brownlow

Curriculum Vitae

by Muriel Spark

Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company;
213 pp., \$22.95



Muriel Spark (1992 winner of the Ingersoll Foundation's T.S. Eliot Award) is a prolific writer with some 19 novels to her credit as well as volumes of poetry, short stories, criticism, and biography. Yet she was a surprisingly late starter. She was nearly 40 when her first novel, *The Comforters*, appeared, its theme provided by a period of personal crisis to which she has returned more than once in her later books. This memoir, apparently a first volume, brings her life story up to the moment when *The Comforters* was published and, as she writes, "Everything changed."

It is a story of fair beginnings and ghastly mistakes, of misdirection and driving ambition culminating as it might have seemed at the time in breakdown and collapse, but then transformed by a providential confluence of forces into a new life and a long, successful career—not that Mrs. Spark, never the most straightforward of narrators, tells it that way. Instead, as she writes in her introduction, she has been seriously irritated from time to time by fanciful, sometimes fantastic accounts of her life, and the purpose of her book is to correct them, settling some scores in the process. "I determined," she declares on her first page, "to write nothing that cannot be supported by documentary evidence or by eyewitnesses." And it turns out that she is the owner of an enormous personal archive enabling her to do just that. It dates back to 1949, when she decided to preserve just about everything that concerned herself on paper: checkbooks, accounts, appointment books, notes, correspondence—the lot.

When she made that unusual, even eccentric, decision, she was emerging from a period of bruising employment as general secretary and editor to the Poetry Society of London, a coven of freaks,

as she presents them, whose behavior evidently convinced her that for the rest of her life she had better have everything in writing. As Mrs. Spark's readers know, her novels tend, almost obsessively, to be about the accumulation and use of knowledge about other people. Approached in that context, the existence of this massive engine of retaliation against trespassers on her life story is as fantastic as anything in the novels themselves.

Under the title *Curriculum Vitae*, then, backed by her archive and her old friends, Mrs. Spark presents the facts of her life and leaves the perception of its underlying plot or fable, if there is one, to her reader. The book falls into two parts that one can think of as Innocence and Experience. In the first part she is born Muriel Camberg in Edinburgh in 1918 to a fairly poor but close and happy family. Her father, Bernard, was a very nice, very good, utterly normal Scotsman, whose only peculiarity in that world was that he was Jewish. Muriel adored him; as she says, "He was no problem." Her mother, Cissy, was less predictable. She was an Englishwoman who disconcerted the young Muriel by speaking in an English accent and wearing nice things among the frumpy Presbyterians of Edinburgh.

Mrs. Spark tells the story of her Edinburgh childhood with an appealing mixture of love and candor, and her recollections of its sights, sounds, smells, and characters bring to mind a world that now seems nearly as remote as the Middle Ages. At the heart of her life in that world was the superb Scottish school that provided the original of Miss Jean Brodie. There Mrs. Spark was first encouraged to think of herself as a writer, and there she enjoyed her first successes. In fact, she won an Edinburgh schools' poetry prize, and, feeling "like the Dairy Queen of Lanark," was crowned Queen of Poetry, an aberration in local taste that her most admired teachers joined her in disapproving.

When she left school at 17, she could afford neither a university nor a secretarial school, so she enrolled herself in what sounds like a technical college to learn an economical, businesslike prose style. She did some school teaching in return for secretarial instruction and took a job in a

smart shop on Princess Street. But she leaves this period of her life in some mystery. It ended dramatically when, aged 19 and against her parents' wishes, she went out to Rhodesia to marry a man some ten years older than herself. In Britain in 1937, this was an extraordinarily strong-headed thing to do. Writing over 50 years later, she still doesn't know why she did it. Certainly, wanting to leave Edinburgh and see the world, and thinking the man "interesting," hardly explains so violent an act.

The marriage was a disaster. When she found herself thousands of miles from home and friends with a young baby and a mentally unstable husband, she set about extricating herself with the same strong will one suspects got her into trouble in the first place. Since the only grounds for divorce were infidelity or desertion, she deserted her husband, no doubt spurred to act by a truly bizarre coincidence. She found herself in the same hotel as a former school friend and her husband; the husband shot the school friend. Seeing the parallel with her own situation, she "escaped for dear life," as she writes, and one believes her. Her African experience contributed to her troubles with the Poetry Society after the war, when Marie Stopes, of birth control fame, wrote an "outrageously impudent letter" inquiring about the circumstances of her divorce. (Marie Stopes, says Mrs. Spark, had lived with Oscar Wilde's old lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, "an arrangement which I imagine would satisfy any woman's longing for birth control.")

Eventually, despite wartime suspension of normal travel between Africa and Britain, she succeeded in making her way home. With great good luck she got a job with a secret branch of the Foreign Office, broadcasting what would now be called disinformation to the Germans. She is reticent about her contributions. Rumor reports that she invented the story about the officers' bomb blowing Hitler's pants off, but perhaps this is one of the fictions she would like to squash. When the war ended she set about making a career for herself in London.

In 1945 Mrs. Spark was a young, modestly educated divorcée from the provinces, without money, influence, or friends. Being heroically free of self-pity,

she never mentions a fact that must strike anyone who knew that world: for someone in her situation to make a writing career in postwar London was so difficult as to be virtually impossible. She experienced some appalling times in the next 12 years, struggling to make a living on the fringes of the literary world, writing poems, essays, reviews, and biographies. Her experience with the Poetry Society seems to have been one of a number of traumatic encounters. She took up with some odd birds, including Derek Stanford, with whom she published a couple of books (he cashed in on their friendship by writing an offensive booklet about her and selling her letters to a shady dealer who later stole her earliest manuscripts). She was so poor that she just about starved, a process she compounded by taking appetite suppressants that eventually caused collapse and hallucinations.

Yet eventually she enjoyed the luck that seems to visit gifted people who work unremittingly. In 1954 she was received into the Catholic Church and by that means evidently acquired the friends who came to her rescue when she was overtaken by illness. Another friend seems to have passed her name to an enterprising young editor at Macmillan's, thus producing a commission for her first novel. Perhaps her most extraordinary stroke of luck occurred when Evelyn Waugh, "someone quite out of my orbit," who had also been turning hallucinations into a novel, saw her book in proof, praised it warmly, and reviewed it in the *Spectator*.

As one might expect from a woman who has amassed an archive to ward off uninformed gossip and hypothesis, Mrs. Spark maintains a strict control over the materials of her life. She likes to be the heroine of her stories, and she chooses carefully the stories she tells. In a way that strikes me as very Scottish, she is reticent about just the things her readers will be curious about: her religion, her art, and her private life. The result is a memoir that fairly begs to be read between the lines; yet it also tells unsentimentally, and with strict discipline and reserve, a genuinely heroic and romantic story. As one leaves this neat-minded, tough, intensely ambitious, and combative little Scotswoman in safe harbor with a new publisher, a cat, and a landlady who sounds like a fairy godmother, one has no doubt that she has earned the right to end her book with a sentence

borrowed from another great, high-spirited artist: "I went on my way rejoicing."

And now we can look forward to her next volume.

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Discovering Japan

by Gregory McNamee

Pacific Rising

by Simon Winchester

New York: Simon & Schuster;
512 pp., \$14.00

Learning to Bow: Inside the Heart of Japan

by Bruce S. Feiler

New York: Ticknor & Fields;
321 pp., \$10.95

The Japanese Chronicles

by Nicholas Bouvier

San Francisco: Mercury House;
240 pp., \$11.95

Following the Brush

by John Elder

Boston: Beacon Press;
176 pp., \$12.00



A way on the western brink of the Pacific Rim lies a land so mysterious to most Americans that it might as well be mythical. There, according to popular understanding, thrives a breed of 122 million fantastically rich people who through black magic have siphoned off the wealth of the Western world. They need no sleep. They work 24-hour days the week long. They have mastered technologies we may never see. They replace their stereo systems and televisions once a year. They are the shortest and most dangerous people on earth.

The trouble with mysterious places is, of course, that most mysteries dissolve when someone bothers to look at them up close. In the case of Japan, closer looks are exactly what is most needed. The literature, from Ruth Benedict's

bizarre (if useful) *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* to James Clavell's pot-boiling novel *Shogun* and Michael Crichton's xenophobic thriller *Rising Sun*, is hopelessly fabulistic, part of a great disinformation campaign waged by both nations. For whatever reason, very few Americans have taken the trouble to look carefully at the land whose economy and industry is bound up with our own, whose future will inescapably shape ours. With the Atlantic century drawing to a close and the Pacific century just dawning, a better understanding of Japanese culture—and of the ideas that lie behind Japanese actions—is essential.

Four years ago, the Dutch journalist Karel van Wolferen gave interested readers a fine start at such an understanding; his *The Enigma of Japanese Power* is still the best book on Japan in recent literature. In it, Van Wolferen revealed a Japan alternately awed and disgusted by the world beyond its shores and governed by a puppet emperor in the service of the *zaikaijin*, a gerontocracy of businessmen (women do not figure in the scheme of Japanese power) who control the national economy and maintain an inflexible hierarchy that embraces every citizen from cradle to grave. Despite its present democratic facade, Van Wolferen argued, Japan's power structure was scarcely altered by the Second World War; while the state's religion remains Shintoism, its *de facto* ideology is an offshoot of the same Nichiren Buddhism that propelled the martial caste toward the conquest of Asia, a war that proceeds today by economic means.

Simon Winchester, a British journalist and longtime correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian*, continues Van Wolferen's alarm. In his *Pacific Rising*, Winchester argues that the Atlantic century is truly finished, basing his conclusion on such facts as: that since 1985 the Pacific powers have constituted our largest trading bloc, exceeding Europe by billions of dollars; that Los Angeles will soon become the world's busiest port, taking the lead from New York, while Rotterdam has given way to Hong Kong as the world's busiest container port; that Taiwan's economy is growing at a rate five times faster than Germany's and many more times faster than our own; and that while the United States has become the world's leading debtor nation, Japan is its leading creditor.

Though Winchester surveys the whole of the Pacific Rim, his gaze rests