M A R Y J O A N N O U

.......................................................................................................

The Constant Liberal: The Life

and Work of Phyllis Bottome

PHYLLIS Bottome was born in 1882 in Kent, the daughter of an

English mother and an American father, and uneasily became aware of

the tensions between the two sides of the family from a very young age.

Afflicted with the tuberculosis that claimed the life of her older sister,

Phyllis travelled to St Moritz in 1905, where her husband to be, Ernan

Forbes Dennis (whose eldest brother had died of the disease), was also

wintering. Despite fears of her tuberculosis recurring, Phyllis and

Ernan lived contentedly into old age, making France, Germany and

Austria their home at various times, until Phyllis’s death in Hampstead

in 1963. In London, as in their European homes, they were part of a

community of writers and intellectuals, dividing their time between

the metropole and Cornwall, where they had moved in 1940. Their

acquaintances included sculptors, potters and artists of the Penwith

Society of ‘‘moderns’’, such as Peter Lanyon, Ben Nicolson and

Barbara Hepworth. The novelist Daphne du Maurier also became a

friend.

Pam Hirsch’s compelling literary biography of Bottome is crammed

with incident. Bottome and her husband, who had become devotees of

Alfred Adler and individual psychology, started a school in Kitzbu¨ hel,

Austria, teaching French and German to their charges and combining

Adlerian methods of psychology with progressive educational theory and

practice; Ernan worked professionally as an Adlerian psychotherapist.

Adler, who broke away from Freud in 1911 and emphasized the

individual’s social and individual responses to their situation, and the

importance of equality and democratic family structures in the upbringing

of a healthy child, proved a magnet to some feminists of the day, such

as Winifred Holtby. Holtby wrote: ‘‘if Freud is right, we none of us

know what we are really like. But if Adler is right, we have a pretty good

chance of knowing’’.1 The young Ian Fleming (the creator of James

Bond), fresh from Eton and a troubled adolescent, sought refuge in the

school and came to regard Phyllis as his surrogate mother. Phyllis was

1 Winifred Holtby,

‘‘Letter to Margaret,

Lady Rhondda,’’ Time

and Tide 4 Apr. 1936:

470.

Pam Hirsch, The

Constant Liberal: The Life

and Work of Phyllis

Bottome. London,

Quartet Books, 2010, 296

pp., 978 0 70437 160 6,

£25

R E V I E W

.......................................................................................................

....................................................................................................................................

Women: a cultural review iFirst

ISSN 0957-4042 print/ISSN 1470-1367 online

http://www.tandfonline.com http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09574042.2013.787788

Downloaded by [University of Cambridge] at 07:14 14 June 2013

always tenaciously loyal to old friends, of whom there were many: Edna

St Vincent Millay, Max Beerbohm, Ivor Novello, Upton Sinclair, Sinclair

Lewis and Ezra Pound (she campaigned for Pound’s release from prison

when he was interred on the charge of having fascist sympathies). Later,

there were Pamela Hansford Johnson and Colin Wilson. Visiting Fleming

in Goldeneye, Jamaica, in 1947, where Ernan was to act as head of the

multicultural Knox College for a short time, Bottome wrote: ‘‘it does not

seem a solution to Jamaica’s problems to turn the Island into a Paradise

for white tourists, set in a Hell of dark people’s poverty and unemployment’’

(307). Her novel Under the Skin (1950) is about racial tension in

Jamaica.

It is a fascinating history, the telling of which is made possible by the

acquisition of a cache of Bottome’s papers by the British Library.

Hirsch’s meticulously researched biography makes excellent use of this

material and many archives across the world to trace the ways in which

chance encounters with continental fascism changed Bottome dramatically,

while making her life a barometer of the troubled times. In 1932,

just before Hitler seized power in Germany, Phyllis often saw the

Fu¨ hrer lunching in the Cafe´ Heck in Munich, which was also

frequented by a group of individual psychologist students, of whom

she was one. Events in Germany, where she lived in the 1930s, horrified

Bottome, who, as Hirsch stresses, remained a ‘‘classic’’ liberal throughout

her life. Like Storm Jameson, the subject of an insightful biography

by Jennifer Birkett (2009),2 Bottome took the responsibilities of authors

to preserve freedom of speech to heart, particularly in her work for

Jewish refugees and central European intellectuals who fell foul of

fascism and turned to organizations like Poets, Essayists and Novelists

(PEN) for help as the map of occupied Europe changed fast. Bottome

stayed true to her anti-racist principles after the war, espousing

progressive causes in apartheid-riven South Africa after 1948 and across

the world as Britain’s former imperial glories decayed.

Within the Cup (1943), a novel about an Austro-Jewish doctor living as

a refugee in England, and London Pride (1941), about a working-class

family during the Blitz, enjoyed some success during the war. But the

novel for which she is best remembered is The Mortal Storm (1937). A

graphic attempt to wake the world up to the dangers of the Nazi regime

by dramatizing the havoc its anti-Semitic policies wreaked upon one

academic family early in the 1930s, the Penguin special edition of The

Mortal Storm had sold 100,000 copies by January 1939. Indeed, such was

the impact of the subsequent Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film starring James

Stewart and Margaret Sullavan when it was first released in an isolationist

United States in 1940 that Bottome and others came to believe that

2 Jennifer Birkett,

Margaret Storm

Jameson: a Life

(Oxford: Oxford

University Press,

2009).

2 \_ WOMEN: A CULTURAL REVIEW

.......................................................................................................

Downloaded by [University of Cambridge] at 07:14 14 June 2013

American citizens could no longer plead that they did not know what was

happening in Nazi Germany, although the irony was that what was

‘‘known’’ about fascism in Europe had often been learned from works of

popular fiction. Indeed, her understanding of the suffering of the Jewish

people was so strong that Hirsch bestows Bottome with the accolade of

‘‘Righteous Gentile’’.

As historian Jonathan Steinberg wrote in the Times Literary

Supplement in July 2012: ‘‘biography can be proper history if it asks

the kinds of questions that an academic historian can define and offers

evidence to support the answers’’.3 Dismissed by Stanley Fish as

‘‘minutiae without meaning’’,4 the popularity of biography among

the general public shows no signs of abating, but appears inversely

proportionate to its lack of prominence on the university curriculum.

While literary biography might appear to be indispensible to any

academic engaging in any depth with its subject’s life and times\*

Hermione Lee’s definitive Virginia Woolf (1996) comes to mind\*

literary critics very often respond professionally to the genre of

biography with suspicion. It was D.H. Lawrence who cautioned:

‘‘Never trust the artist. Trust the tale. The proper function of the critic

is to save the tale from the artist who created it’’.5 Thus, university

courses on biography (as opposed to those on autobiography and lifewriting,

which have proliferated in recent years) remain regrettably few

and far between. What a biographer is trying to do with the verifiable

‘‘facts’’ of a life is inseparable from (and arguably just as telling as)

the ‘‘facts’’ themselves since the ‘‘facts’’ amount to nothing without the

imposition of external order and meaning. Hirsch argues strongly for

the kind of middlebrow writing that ‘‘intermodern’’ writers such as

Bottome came to represent in the period leading up to, and in the decade

or so after, the Second World War.

Bottome needs to be placed alongside writers such as Vera Britain,

Winifred Holtby, Ethel Mannin, Storm Jameson, Sylvia Townsend

Warner and Naomi Mitchison, whose political consciousness was also

shaped by the traumatic events of the 1930s, for a full understanding of

her significance to become possible. The Constant Liberal makes relatively

modest claims about the quality of Bottome’s writing, unlike other

comparable biographies of early twentieth-century liberal-left women

such as Birkett’s Jameson and Nicola Beauman’s The Other Elizabeth

Taylor (2009).6 In their different ways, Birkett and Beauman argue that the

importance of their respective biographical subjects is largely literary\*

both Jameson and Taylor continue to be read and Taylor, in particular,

has an appreciative literary following. In contrast, Bottome, who was

too prolific for her own good, is now virtually unknown. While

3 Jonathan Steinberg,

‘Cult of Personalities’,

The Times Higher

Edeucational

Supplement, 19 July,

2012 http//www

timeshigher

education.co.UK/

420588/.article. Accessed

April 2 2013.

4 Stanley Fish, New

York Times, 1 Sept.

1999, p.28.

5 D.H. Lawrence,

Studies in Classic

American Literature

(1924; London:

Heinemann, 1964) 2.

6 Nicola Beauman, The

Other Elizabeth Taylor

(London: Persephone

Books, 2009).

REVIEW \_ 3

.......................................................................................................

Downloaded by [University of Cambridge] at 07:14 14 June 2013

Bottome’s socially committed feminism and liberal humanism may not

be fashionable, The Mortal Storm certainly repays rereading, and Hirsch’s

compelling study persuasively demonstrates her biographical subject’s

passionate integrity.

Mary Joannou

Anglia Ruskin University

# 2013 Mary Joannou

4 \_ WOMEN: A CULTURAL REVIEW

.......................................................................................................

Downloaded by [University of Cambridge] at 07:14 14 June 2013