

Stella Benson: a life of reading, writing and publishing

Unpublished conference paper for SHARP July 2016, Paris

Nicola Darwood, University of Bedfordshire, nicola.darwood@beds.ac.uk

Stella Benson - feminist, diarist, novelist and travel writer - published her first novel, *I Pose*, in 1915. Her last book, a collection of short stories, was published posthumously in 1936. Although her diaries might suggest some reservations about the reception of her earlier novels, in a letter to Marie Belloc Lowndes,¹ Benson's husband James O'Gorman Anderson said of her work: 'Stella was quite happy about her writing, was sure of herself there, and had no thought of not being sufficiently appreciated.'² Others shared that opinion; for example, her 1932 novel *Tobit Transplanted* (titled *The Far-Away Bride* in America) won the Femina-Vie Heureuse Prize and the silver medal of the Royal Society of Literature.³

Drawing on Benson's diaries and her correspondence with her publisher, Macmillan, this paper discusses the connections between Benson's reading, her writing and the subsequent publication of her early novels, *I Pose*, *This is the End* (1917) and *Living Alone* (published in 1919). It also considers the role of the recent republication of her fiction by Michael Walmer in a possible reclamation and re-examination of Benson's work in the twenty first century.

Writing in 1934, just a year after Benson's death, Phyllis Bottome stated '[w]hen Stella Benson died last year, the world lost one of its most truthful inhabitants'⁴. Commenting that Benson never really felt sure of her literary skills, Bottome records a conversation with Benson: 'A few months before her death she said to me "I feel I have got my tools now but I'm only just beginning to know how to handle them!'.⁵ This is something that Benson also alluded to in her essay 'About my Books' published in 1933:

If one could live on a consistent plan, I suppose it would be possible to write on a consistent plan. But short of this ideal - if it be an ideal - I do not know how anyone can discuss his or her work as though it had followed any conscious path of development through the changes of youth and middle age. I wonder if many writers, as they approach middle age, feel that all

¹ Prolific author and sister of Hillaire Belloc

² Anderson, J C O'G (1934) quoted in Grant, J (1987). *Stella Benson: A Biography*. (London: MacMillan, p.xiii).

³ Baldwin Davis, Marlene (2004) "Stella Benson". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. [online] <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=369> (accessed 25 November 2015).

⁴ Phyllis Bottome (1934) *Stella Benson* (San Francisco: Albert M Bender), 1

⁵ Phyllis Bottome (1934) *Stella Benson* (San Francisco: Albert M Bender), 3

the writings of their youth were written by mistake, or under the influence of moods that seemed to lead nowhere and to prove nothing.⁶

On 24th August 1915, Benson sent the manuscript of her first novel, *I Pose*, to Macmillan.

This novel follows the story of a gardener and a suffragette (both unnamed) as they travel across the ocean. While actively promoting the rights for women to vote, the suffragette is also aware of the limitations of her gender in early twentieth century society. In her first meeting with the gardener, she speaks of the inequalities that she faces; railing against a system in which a home becomes 'a prison', she tells the gardener that she is running away from those restrictions stating:

I am living a wide and gorgeous life of unwomanliness. I am trying to share your simplest privilege - the privilege you were born to through no merit of your own, you silly little boy - the privilege of having interests as wide as the world if you like, and of thinking to some purpose about England's affairs. My England.⁷

The novel then follows the suffragette and the gardener as they travel to Trinity Island, posing as husband and wife, and details the gardener's pursuit of love and the suffragette's contemplation of traditional marriage or freedom from societal constraints. Throughout the novel the suffragette rehearses arguments about equality and about votes for women commenting at one point that, when women do have the vote, 'men will see what a small gift it was, and future generations will ask why it was grudged so bitterly'.⁸ On the very cusp of marriage, the suffragette decides that she cannot continue to live a life of imprisonment, choosing death instead.

Suggesting a level of self-confidence and perhaps following the advice of her aunt, the author Mary Cholmondley,⁹ Benson, in her first letter to the publisher, asks that they provide an opinion as to its suitability for publication within 'the course of the next three or four weeks at most' for, if they didn't want to publish the novel, Benson continues, 'I intend to take it New York, where I shall probably go next month.'¹⁰

It's possible that Macmillan were aware of Benson's position as Mary Cholmondley's niece, although Benson doesn't make the connection explicit until her second letter to the publishers, written on 3rd September 1915: 'I am much pleased [she writes] that my book interests you, and it would be a great satisfaction to me to bring out my first novel with you, especially as you own several of my aunt's books.'¹¹

⁶ Stella Benson, 'About my Books' in John Gawsworth (ed) *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Toward their Definitive Bibliography* (London: Joiner and Steele Ltd, 39-43), 39

⁷ Stella Benson (1915:2013) *I Pose* (Adelaide: Michael Walmer), 14. (Future references will read *IP*)

⁸ *IP*, 300.

⁹ Author of best-selling *Red Pottage* published in 1899

¹⁰ Letter Stella Benson to Macmillan, 24th August 1915, Macmillan Archive, British Library, 504972/362H/96

¹¹ Letter 24th August 1915 - 504972/362H/97

“ May 0¹⁶

It is evident that some reviews were less than positive and she notes, wryly in her diary entry for 7th July 1916 about the ‘double faced Pall Mall Gazette’ who gave her ‘[t]he most crushing & brutal review they could think of [but] now they write to ask whether I would write occasional light articles for them at £2.2 each. I was rather pleased at the thought.’

While obviously engaged in the publication of her first novel, Benson’s attentions turned to her second and she writes in her diary on 13th January 1916 that she had ‘thought of a new story to write which made the day seem a little fruitful’, and, a few days later on 16th January, refers to ‘a Margate story’. She continues,

I don’t know how its [sic] going to end, & yet I never have any doubt about what to write, & the story picks up all its own threads. It isn’t a particularly inspired story, yet I think it just must have been floating about on the Margate wind. I have never felt quite the same sort of blind certainty about my writing before. Perhaps it is a story that somebody thought of and died before they wrote down.

Through Benson’s diaries we can get a real sense of her tastes in literature and the arts, tastes which can be seen to influence her own writing. So, for example, on 17th January 1916 she writes that she felt ‘rather stunned’ by H G Wells’s *New Machiavelli*. Considered a literary scandal, the book was serialised in *The English Review* in 1910 and then published in novel form in 1911. The novel is allegedly based on Well’s own affair with Amber Reeves (a member of the Cambridge University Fabian Society)¹⁷ and also satirises two prominent Fabians, Beatrice and Sidney Webb. Benson writes that Wells is ‘inhumanly clever’ and continues that she feels ‘somewhat silenced in spirit by the New Machiavelli, I must think a bit, and then read it again.’ It is possible to surmise that Benson drew on Wells’ satire when she wrote her third novel, *Living Alone*, which can be read, in part, as a satirical attack on the work of various charitable organisations which operated during the First World War.

At this time Benson was working with some of these charitable organisations, seeking to work with the women who lived in great poverty in the East End of London. However, she found time to read, often reading a book in a day: in her diary she notes that on 25th January 1916 she was reading Compton Mackenzie’s *Carnival*,¹⁸ and “*They that Walk in Darkness*”: *Ghetto Tragedies* by Israel Zangmills.¹⁹ The very next day (26th January) she notes that she’s reading another novel by Compton Mackenzie, this time *The Passionate Elopement*.²⁰ Just one day later on 27th January she writes about *The Fool Errant*, Maurice Hewlett’s 1905 novel which discusses the culture and attitudes of the English aristocracy. Benson notes her admiration for Hewlett’s ability to ‘put electricity into [his] first-person hero’, and commenting that a ‘peculiar thing about Maurice Hewlett is that he

¹⁶ 504972/362H/113

¹⁷ And daughter of Maud Pember Reeves, author of *Round about a Pound a Week*

¹⁸ Published in 1912

¹⁹ Published in 1899

²⁰ Published in 1911

never tells you a word about the look of the land in which his story lies, and yet somehow you know. At least I seem too exactly.'

In the midst of this reading, Benson was thinking about her second novel: 'I made a mild and tentative beginning to a new book. I am still haunted by the same ideas that have persisted in me all summer, but the thing seems some *outré*,²¹ some inspired impertinence which I pray is on its way.' (Diary entry, 27th January 1916)

Her writing continues for the next week but Benson finds on 2nd March that she is unable to write. Consumed with her thoughts about the war and, perhaps, as a result of the death of a close family member, Evelyn Benson, she writes 'It is no good trying to write a book now, it couldn't be as cheerful as the last [...] I can't sleep for men lying out in the cold in pain, with no chance of any comfort.' (Diary entry 2nd March 1916)

Benson's mood deepened and then the direction of her thoughts changed following her attendance at Alfred Sutro's play *Freedom*. This play made Benson consider her own views on sexuality and the inequalities inherent in the perception of male and female sexuality. These thoughts surfaced again on 9th April when she visited Sutro; this day was, for Benson, 'a disheartening day', a day in which she 'shot the new book through the head. It is disingenuous and wearisome. Besides Sutro has sullied it with his questions'.

However, buoyed perhaps, by receiving some good reviews of *I Pose* and then two royalty cheques for the book, Benson returned to writing her second novel and, on 13th October 1916, she wrote to Macmillans to tell them that the book, *This is the End*, was finished. In a departure from her earlier negotiations with the publishers though, Benson tells the company that she's appointed Mr Curtis Brown to act as her agent.

Macmillan were obviously happy to accept the book in the UK, however, the New York branch of the firm refused to publish this book. Writing to her publisher on 21st January 1917, Benson states: 'I do not myself think there would be much chance of the book's being very acceptable in the United States, but I hope that this will not make any difference to publication in England.'²²

A brief synopsis of the novel may give an indication of why the New York branch didn't want to publish the book. It is a novel which discusses issues such as the savagery of war and female independence and opens with a startling statement: '[t]his is the end, for the moment, of all my thinking, this is my unfinal conclusion.'²³ Benson develops her discussion voiced in *I Pose* of a woman's desire to be allowed to live independently during a time of war, the narrator telling the

²¹ weird, queer, outlandish, offbeat, far out, freakish, grotesque, quirky, zany, eccentric, off-centre, idiosyncratic, unconventional, unorthodox, funny, bizarre, fantastic, unusual, extraordinary, strange, unfamiliar, unknown, unheard of, alien, foreign, peculiar, odd, curious, atypical, irregular, anomalous, deviant, abnormal, quaint, out of the way, ludicrous, preposterous ...

²² Letter 21st January 1917 - 504972/362H/121

²³ *TE*, 1.

story of Jay Martin who has escaped the restrictions of her 'Family', a family with whom she has quarrelled.

Working as a bus conductor and living in Brown Borough, Jay sends the Family postcards and letters which purport to provide evidence of her location, but these letters are complete fabrications, comprising of her own dreams of secret friends and houses. Jay's 'Secret World' is one which is inhabited by '[f]ragments of untold stories [which] are familiar to her'.²⁴ Jay,

knows how, walking in the mid-day streets of London, you may cross the path of some Great One who had a prior right by many thousand years to walk beside the Thames. These are the ghosts stories that never get told. Few people can read them between the lines of press accounts of inquests, or in the dignified announcements of the failure of hearts [...] But Jay knows, because of her intimacy with the House by the Sea. There she meets her fellow-ghosts.²⁵

The promise of the 'Secret World' and Jay's 'House by the Sea' is, however, shattered when she learns of her brother's death.²⁶ Following a proposal of marriage in which her suitor tells her that there can be 'no death in Spring', Jay responds '[t]here is a thing called death. And death has no romance and no reason. The rats died, and Kew died, and the secret world died, and there is nothing left ...'.²⁷

It wasn't long before Benson started work on her third novel which was to become *Living Alone*. Compared with her first two novels, the writing of this one caused her some concern, on 8th March 1917 she writes: 'I wrote a first page of a new book, but it is very laboured.'²⁸ The book isn't mentioned again in her diary until 14th January 1918 when she notes that she's feeling a little more hopeful. On 16th January, she records that she's spent the day 'writing a good bit of the new book "Living Alone", and then on 19th March she says that she 'got a sudden jump done further of the new book, and was rather pleased.' This book took a long time to write - she was still writing in May 1916:

This next book is going to be a roeg [rogue] & will annoy people. I don't know whether to call it Living Alone or Witches and Wizards. I think the latter.

She changed her mind soon after this and the book was subsequently published as *Living Alone*.

Although working on her book, Benson, as always, found time to read: on 15th March 1917 she records that she's been reading Edith Wharton's short story 'Xingu'²⁹, and reads *Pointed Roofs* by Dorothy Richardson on 4th October 1917 - a

²⁴ *TE*, 54.

²⁵ *TE*, 54-55. Similar themes are expressed in T. S. Eliot's notion of the 'Unreal City' of *The Waste Land*.

²⁶ 'The House by the Sea' also features in Benson's diaries, for example she mentions the 'House' while writing about a dream in her diary entry of 1st March 1918.

²⁷ *TE*, 233.

²⁸ Diary entry 8th March 1917

²⁹ A humorous short story published in 1916 which parodies a ladies' lunch club

book which Benson did not particularly like. She notes that she read Maude Royden's *Women and the Sovereign State* on 27th November 1917.³⁰ Benson's interest in modernist writers which is apparent from her reading of *Pointed Roofs* is in evidence again when on 3rd January 1918 she read Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier*. The reading of this novel comes at a time when Benson was feeling desperate about the ongoing war, a time when she felt that 'the world has lost the trick of being real'.³¹

Having suffered from ill-health throughout her life, Benson got special leave to sail to America in July 1918 - the sailing, however, meant a hiatus in the writing of *Living Alone*. She wrote to Macmillan in June 1918 to explain that the book was about two thirds complete and asking the publisher's advice about taking the manuscript with her to America because of the laws on censorship. She obviously succeeded in getting the manuscript to America: in June 1918 she writes to Macmillan from California where she was staying with the American writer, Bertha Pope, to say that she's delighted that they've decided to publish *Living Alone* in London although she's disappointed that the New York branch had decided, once again, not to do likewise.

Having experimented with the supernatural world in her collection of poems, *Twenty* (published in 1918), Benson suggests that *Living Alone* is a rather more sophisticated approach to fairies and this was the first of my books the writing of which interested me impersonally - the first in fact, that was in some measure a book about other people, not only about myself in different masochistic or romantic or inverted guises. Now [1933] I think that no novel is worth reading unless it is about other people - with oneself (if one must enter at all) only as one centre among many centres.³²

Living Alone is the most optimistic novel of Benson's first three novels. Although she claims in the foreword, '[t]his is not a real book. It does not deal with real people, nor should it be read by real people',³³ the novel deals with both real people and real issues. It follows the story of Sarah Brown whose life and that of a witch become entwined. Sarah visits the witch at the House of Living Alone on Mitten Island with the intention of returning Harold, the witch's broomstick. She is persuaded to stay at the house in the company of the witch and Peony, an older woman, who is expecting a child. Following an altercation in which the witch and her German counterpart fly over London and argue about the rights and wrongs of war, Sarah persuades the witch to flee with her to America to escape prosecution for an offence against the 'Defence of the Realm Act', and interfering with the work of 'His Majesty's Forces during enemy attack'.³⁴ As they approach the Statue of Liberty, the witch leaves Sarah and the novel ends with Sarah stepping 'over the threshold of the greater House of Living Alone.'³⁵

³⁰ Maude Royden was a suffragist – this book was published in 1917

³¹ Diary entry 1st January 1918

³² Benson in Gawsworth, *Ten Contemporaries*, 39-40.

³³ *LA*, v.

³⁴ *LA*, 213.

³⁵ *LA*, 264.

In a sense, the novel marks Benson's own final stage of independence, her own stepping over the threshold; it marked a change in her writing and also marks a time when her personal life changes as, on her journey home to England, she met James O'Gorman Anderson, the man who was destined a few years later to become her husband.

And so, the postscript to my paper.

Although very popular in her lifetime, interest in Stella Benson waned considerably following her death. A few biographies have been written about her and she has been the focus of a handful of academic essays. I would argue that her work should be re-evaluated, reconsidered, reclaimed even and, as a postscript to this paper want to talk briefly about a publisher who has been attempting to do just this, Michael Walmer,³⁶ who established his own publishing company after working with Marian Boyars in the 1990s. His publishing ethos is to select texts which he considers to be original and erudite. So far he's published work by writers such as Ada Levenson, George Sand, Ronald Firbank, Mary Webb, Winifred Holtby, Katherine Mansfield and, of course, Stella Benson.

He first read Stella Benson's work in 1987 when he came across a copy of *Poems* (published in 1935) and then, in 1988, found Benson's fourth novel, *The Poor Man*. Walmer describes Benson's writing as economic and concise, a writer who had 'a capacity for of extraordinary poetic reach [... an] astounding playfulness with concepts, both serious and humorous'.³⁷ His customers have expressed surprise that Benson isn't better known or hasn't been republished by Virago and, like many of his customers, Walmer believes that the time is right for a renewed interest in Benson's fiction.

Although the epigraph to *I Pose* - 'Sometimes I pose, but sometimes I pose at posing' - and the epigraph for *Living Alone* - 'This is not a real book [...] nor should it be read by real people' - might suggest that Benson may well have believed that her work should not be taken seriously. However, there is a wealth of material in her diaries about the times in which she lived, and her novels provide a rich portrait of those times. I would argue therefore that her fiction, poetry and diaries do merit serious academic study. I hope that this paper may have convinced you too.

Reference list

Benson, S (1933) 'About my Books' in John Gawsworth (ed) *Ten Contemporaries: Notes Toward their Definitive Bibliography* (London: Joiner and Steele Ltd, 39-43)

Benson, S (1915:2013) *I Pose* (Adelaide: Michael Walmer)

Baldwin Davis, M (2004) "Stella Benson". The Literary Encyclopedia. [online] <http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=369> (accessed 25 November 2015).

³⁶ Dodo Press have also started to republish her work.

³⁷ Private email 24th June 2016

Bottome, P (1934) *Stella Benson* (San Francisco: Albert M Bender)

Grant, J (1987). *Stella Benson: A Biography*. (London: MacMillan).