

(Re)constructing the life and loves of Elizabeth Bowen: *The Shadowy Third: Love, Letters and Elizabeth Bowen* by Julia Parry (Duckworth, 2021) and *The Last Day at Bowen's Court: A Novel* by Eibhear Walshe (Bantry: Somerville Press, 2020).

At the beginning of 2020, the Elizabeth Bowen Society started to put together plans for a Bowen Symposium to be held in London at Birkbeck, University of London, on 29th February, a leap day and a day on which, traditionally, a woman can propose marriage to a man. There are various traditions about this day, which occurs just once every four years, one of which is that should he refuse the proposal, the man has to pay a financial penalty or, in certain European countries, buy the woman twelve pairs of gloves. In a flight of fancy, I wondered what would have happened had Elizabeth Bowen had the opportunities afforded by a leap day, and proposed to either (or both) Humphry House or Charles Ritchie (obviously leaving aside the fact that, at the time, she was married to Alan Cameron). Had she done so though, and had the proposal(s) been accepted, we would not have been in a position to have read the (re)constructions of her relationships with these two men written respectively by Julia Parry (*The Shadowy Third: Love, Letters and Elizabeth Bowen*) and Eibhear Walshe (*The Last Day at Bowen's Court*).

Nick Turner and I were delighted that Julia Parry accepted the invitation to talk at the Symposium about her forthcoming book. Layla Ferrández Melero's excellent report of the event was published in Volume Three of *The Elizabeth Bowen Review* (2020). But no written account of the event, however excellent, could completely capture the sheer delight of the talk, the excitement of hearing about this wonderful archive of correspondence between Humphry House and Elizabeth Bowen, the pleasure of seeing unpublished photographs, or the enjoyment of hearing the ways in which Julia Parry's journey of discovery was interwoven into the story of the affair between House and Bowen.

Already an admirer of Bowen's work (despite admitting that she hadn't read any of Bowen's work while she was an undergraduate), the re-discovery of Bowen's letters to House, and House's letters to Bowen, was an extraordinary moment in Parry's life. The story of the affair and the relationship between House and his wife (Parry's grandfather and grandmother) draws on her extensive knowledge of Bowen's fiction; it juxtaposes Parry's own physical journey with the places where Bowen and House lived and loved, and with her reconstruction of the love affair. It is a story that is told with wit and a certain amount of bathos, and will appeal to all those who have an interest in Bowen's life and fiction. Parry's enjoyment of her own engagement with the letters is clear to see; she tells the reader that she found herself 'bewitched' by the persona of Elizabeth Bowen (19), a sentiment that was also felt by House, who Parry describes as being 'dazzled by her status and stature as well as by her other qualities' (53).

However, Parry is unsparing when it comes to her portrayal of House, detailing, for example, his move to Calcutta for a job as Professor of English at the Presidency College in February 1936. This involved signing a contract for three and a half years

and leaving behind his pregnant wife and young daughter, and it was a job which ‘allowed him to slip the knot of marital and parental responsibility’ (176). The letters from House to Bowen are sometimes wrought with emotion and, with hindsight, seem particularly cruel. For example, in a letter written on 23rd July 1934, House berates Bowen for her accusation that he lacks ‘simplicity’ for not telling her that Madeline (now his wife) was expecting a second child. At the same time, he accuses Bowen of a lack of directness: ‘Why, Elizabeth, did you not tell me when we first slept together that you were a virgin?’ He continues:

I do not want to give a childish *tu quoque*:¹ but I want you to see that in urging ‘simplicity’ upon me as a criterion of letters and our whole relationship you are urging something which I cannot say I have found wholly in you. (132)

But Bowen could be equally acerbic, particularly when writing about Madeline; after visiting the Houses at ‘The Steps’, their home near Ashdown Forest, in August 1938, Bowen wrote to her friend William Plomer about the couple. She refers to House as ‘so nice’ with a ‘tendency to over-intellectualise things’ in his writing, ‘a form of indigestion (like acidity) I suppose’, as a man with ‘a rather inadequate stomach’ and to Madeline as looking ‘pop-eyed with anxiety the whole time, poor little creature: I always feel at once sorry for and depressed by her’ (236). Bowen’s comments about House are understandable, but those about Madeline seem both vicious and patronising. This visit is followed in the book by a trip by House and Madeline to Bowen’s Court, a visit captured in photographs that starkly depict the awkwardness of the occasion, which is clear on the faces of Elizabeth, Madeline and Noreen Colley (Bowen’s cousin), but which is not apparently shared by House, who hovers over the three women in a proprietorial manner.

Parry’s writing owes much to her study of Bowen’s fiction and non-fiction: ‘My sense of an uncanny correspondence with Elizabeth takes many forms’ she writes, ‘But there is also a sense of being a pupil under her tutelage, inevitably influenced and inspired by her as a writer’ (243). One way in which the ‘uncanny correspondence’ can be seen is in Parry’s ability to describe place. In ‘Pictures and Conversations’, an essay published in 1972, Bowen wrote about the importance of ‘showing scene in fluidity, in (apparent) motion’, continuing that

‘the beholder must be in motion himself, on foot or on or in a conveyance of whatever kind, of whatever speed. The greater the speed, the more liquefying the process. [...] He does not merely — as he would were he at a standstill — see scene, he watches it compulsively like a non-stop narrative’ (‘Pictures and Conversations’ 40).

Julia Parry’s fascination and engagement with Bowen’s writing, her sense of *locale* and the notion of being in transit, is very evident in this book. It is not an overt condemnation of the behaviour of Bowen and House, although neither are depicted in a particularly positive light; it is rather an exploration of the complicated personalities involved: Bowen, House and Madeline. Indeed, Parry’s own journey to Kolkata in the footsteps of her grandfather, visiting the places where he lived and worked and hearing about the high renown in which he was held, found her ‘being forced, gently, kindly, into a reappraisal’ of him (226), as she considered and wrote

¹ *Tu quoque* – ‘you too’: discrediting the opponent by accusing them of inconsistent behaviour.

about the relationships between the three people. She concludes her story of these lives by reflecting on her own pilgrimage, her own sense of being in transit: 'On these exhilarating travels – carried by boat, bike, tuk-tuk, and train – I have been accompanied both by my grandparents and by an extraordinary writer obsessed with journeys; the heightened sensibility they bestow, the spells they cast, their dramatic, transformative potential' (335). Julia Parry writes about the debt that she owes to her family and to Elizabeth Bowen, about the importance of the archive to literary scholarship, and of her feelings of responsibility, a debt that she has fully repaid in this book. This is more than an edited collection of the correspondence between Bowen and House: it is a memoir of a family, woven around those letters but also around memories and personal reflections. In writing about these three people, Parry has helped transform my understanding of the complexity of that relationship and, even more, of the complexity and the contradictions inherent in Elizabeth Bowen.

Over the summer I was very fortunate: first I read Julia Parry's book and then (in order to preserve some sense of chronological development) I read Eibhear Walshe's latest novel, *The Last Day at Bowen's Court*. In this novel, Walshe evokes the heightened emotions felt by many during the Second World War and its aftermath, and the growing love, with its many pitfalls, between the two main protagonists, Elizabeth and Charles, from the very early days of their relationship through to the heartbreak felt by Charles following Elizabeth's death. His retelling of the love affair between Bowen and the Canadian diplomat Charles Ritchie draws on letters, diaries and Bowen's fiction, producing a tightly woven novel which focuses on a love affair that started during the War, following a chance meeting at the christening of John Buchan's grandchild, continued through the height of the Blitz and post-war period, and ended with Bowen's death in 1973.

The novel opens with a heartfelt cry from Charles as he recalls his dream, some years after the death of his lover: 'Elizabeth!'. All I want to do', he says, 'is dream of you again while I lie here and wait for the dawn. My dream. It's very simple. The roses in Regent's Park, a summer's day, you lying on the grass, elegant, smoking gracefully, telling me about your latest book. My dream of you. Of us.' (9). In the succeeding chapters we learn of the beginnings of their affair, from the moment they met at the christening through the heady months of spring and summer 1941. In his diary entry for 10th February 1941, Ritchie notes: 'Met Elizabeth Bowen, well-dressed, intelligent handsome face, watchful eyes. I had expected someone more Irish, more silent and brooding and at the same time more irresponsible. I was slightly surprised by her being so much 'on the spot'.' (1974: 88) It was a chance meeting that was to spark a love affair that lasted twenty-eight years.

Following the christening, the relationship between Elizabeth and Charles grows. As they walk through Regent's Park one evening after dinner, Elizabeth is reminded of Andrew Lang's poem based on Rider Haggard's story *She*, a novel which had so entranced Bowen as a child (for a time in her childhood, Bowen says 'I read *She*, lived *She* for a year and a half ... [1962: 113]). The discussion between Elizabeth and

Charles forms the basis for a short story, later completed by Elizabeth (and a story that incenses Sylvia, as she recognises herself as the character Callie). The scene is taken from 'Mysterious Kôr' (one of Bowen's most anthologised short stories, published initially in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* in 1945), in which Bowen captures the emotions of those living in London during the Blitz. As Neil Corcoran notes, the story is 'poised with ironic delicacy between farce and pathos' (2004: 156), and this is a balance played with by Walshe when the lovers go back to Charles's flat where his cousin (and later wife) Sylvia is staying.

The love affair between Charles and Elizabeth continues through a trip to Hythe, where Elizabeth goes to visit her mother's grave, and a summer at Bowen's Court, which includes a short stay in 'The Shelbourne' in Dublin in 1942. But something goes awry with their relationship. In his diary entry for 12th November 1942, Ritchie notes, 'E came to see me for a few minutes. I was rather at a loss with her. Where will it end?' (2008: 35). It ends with Charles's decision to marry his cousin, Sylvia. Bereft by this news, and then later by his marriage, Elizabeth crumbles and finds that she's no longer able to write, despite pressing deadlines. As she struggles through her grief, she and Alan move back to Bowen's Court and Alan's health deteriorates as he falls into a 'rapid slide into old age' (104): 'Overnight, the capable man who managed the dismantling of their London life with such speed, is dwindling into a bewildered invalid, looking to her with increasing irritation, wondering where his life has gone' (ibid). Elizabeth's desire to write is stimulated by the sight of swans flying overhead, 'thrilling her with their strength and their nearness' (125), and she rushes back to the house to write to Charles and to continue writing the novel which will become *The Heat of the Day*, focusing particularly on the scenes in which Stella confronts Robert, and his subsequent death. Those very swans appear in the final scene of *The Heat of the Day* as Louie holds her new son up, 'hoping that he might see, and perhaps remember' (1948: 372), providing a sense of hope for them both in an apparently senseless world, a vision perhaps shared by Elizabeth as she tries to make sense of her relationship with Charles.

The novel ends with Charles reminiscing about the many times over the years that he and Elizabeth met: the snatched hours in Rome, London or Paris; the time when he 'could play at being master' of Bowen's Court, following Alan's death (184); his feelings of despair when Elizabeth sells Bowen's Court—'a cruel end' (185)—and his final realisation that he loved Elizabeth as much, if not more, than she loved him—'I stand up and summon you. The living apparition I long for. Elizabeth, if you ever thought that you loved me the best, now you have your revenge' (190).

Walshe's integration of scenes from the short stories in *The Demon Lover and Other Stories* (published in 1945) and *The Heat of the Day* (published in 1948), together with 'nods' to her other fiction and non-fiction writing, adds to the sense that we are hearing Bowen's joyful voice as the love affair unfolds, her distress when the relationship faltered and then her desire to grasp happiness following Alan Cameron's death, even though Ritchie had, by then, married Sylvia. While it isn't necessary to be familiar with Bowen's fiction, Ritchie's diaries,² or Bowen's letters to

² These were published in three volumes: *The Siren Years: A Canadian Diplomat Abroad 1937-1945* (London: Macmillan London Limited, 1974); *Diplomatic Passport: More Undiplomatic Diaries 1946-1962* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1981); and *Storm Signals: More Undiplomatic Diaries 1962-1971* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd, 1983).

Ritchie³ in order to enjoy the novel, an extra layer of pleasure is probably added if the reader has some knowledge of Bowen's language and her ability to describe place and emotion. It is, as Walshe notes, 'a fictional version of the interconnected lives of Elizabeth Bowen, Charles Ritchie, and of Bowen's husband, Alan Cameron and Ritchie's wife Sylvia Ritchie' (6), but by rooting it in the events that took place over the many years of their relationship, Walshe provides a real sense of verisimilitude. Walshe is, of course, a well-regarded Bowen scholar and this novel benefits from that scholarship. But, while we know that many of the conversations and events probably didn't take place, we are left with the impression that we could be eavesdropping on an extraordinary romance between two extraordinary people, a story that is told with a style that Bowen would have recognised and would probably have much appreciated.

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³ Some of these letters can be found in *Love's Civil War: Elizabeth Bowen & Charles Ritchie: Letters and diaries from the love affair of a lifetime*, edited by Victoria Glendinning with Judith Robertson (London: Simon & Schuster UK Ltd, 2008).