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Sunday Telegraph (London, Greater London, England) · Sun, Jul 16, 2000 · Page 42
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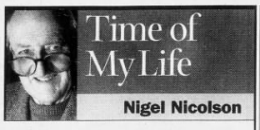
Features



Time of My Life

Nigel Nicolson

The most delightful of rebels

A new publisher, Short Books, which specialises in mini-biographies of lesser-known people, invited me to contribute to its series. Searching for a suitable subject, I fixed on Fanny (Frances) Burney, who led a scintillating life and recorded it brilliantly in her journals. I tried out her name on various friends, and to my relief discovered that while all recognised it, few remembered who she was.

"A novelist of the same vintage as Jane Austen" was the most I got. I would restore her to circulation. To encourage me, my children gave me as a birthday present a first edition of her novel *Camilla*, five little volumes bound in calf.

No sooner had I embarked on my research than Fanny Burney suddenly became famous and my plot was spoiled. My starlet had become a star. Three new biographies appeared in quick succession, one of them, by Claire Harman, only two weeks ago and, even more recently, a book by Hester Davenport which deals with only five years of Fanny's life, when she was Second Keeper of the Robes to Queen Charlotte, wife of George III.

Her play *A Busy Day* has been packing in the crowds at the Lyric Theatre in London, and Radio 4 is about to serialise her diary. The world is humming with Fanny Burney. What will I have new to say about her? Does she deserve all this adulation? Will my little book be still-born?

I console myself with the thought that the Burney story is inexhaustible. Fifteen volumes of her journals and letters are already in print, and they describe an adventurous life with unequalled wit and vigour.

She was the only diarist to record 18th-century talk exactly as it was spoken, with all the hesitations and omissions that other diarists tidy up before publication; such as this account of her French lover, General d'Arblay, proposing to her:

"*Vous me défendez de vous parler — de vous rien dire — n'est pas?* — *ainsi* — I will speak English! — and I may pray you — you can't refuse me — I pray you — that you be . . . ."

Reader, she did marry him. But her life was not confined by marriage. Nor was her gift simply a talent to amuse. She achieved fame in her early twenties with her novel *Evelina*, which so impressed Dr Johnson ("You little character-monger, you!") that he would reproach her for neglecting him when she, shy of intruding, kept away.

Gaining in confidence, however, she became a favourite in London society, the friend of Burke, Reynolds, Garrick and Sheridan, who encouraged her to write plays.

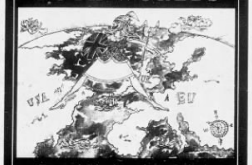
When I saw *A Busy Day* last week, I regretted that Fanny's conversational gift did not translate well into stage dialogue. The play mocks the manners of the newly rich and the impoverished aristocracy, but in such a way as to turn drama into farce; and of all forms of comedy, farce is my least favourite. I am not entertained by exaggerated grimaces and gestures. Regency quips and insults do not wear well. I smiled twice, but never laughed.

It is bad luck on Fanny Burney that her plays seem so dated when her novels and diaries are still such fun. She could convey to us exactly what it was like to be in the same room as Napoleon or the mad King George, to undergo surgery without anaesthetic, to wait anxiously in Brussels while the battle at Waterloo was fought, and to be in Bath at the height of its prosperity.

She was the best raconteuse of fact and fiction before Jane Austen excelled her, and experienced a variety of emotions, from exaltation to deep unhappiness, and of people, from the highest to the lowest, which makes her life one of endless fascination.

What a friend, what a daughter, she was! Short, shy and sometimes sharp, she resented men's low opinion of women, and women's waste of their talents. She was the most delightful of rebels. Oh yes, in spite of the competition, I shall enjoy writing my own version of her.

THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS



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Amongst women Zehra, left, Alev Croutier's grandmother, in 1901. Ingres' erotic 'Odalisque with a Slave' (1839-1840) shows how 19th-century westerners imagined harem life

Harem secrets laid bare

Alev Croutier, whose grandmother lived in a Turkish harem, has based her new novel on her family's extraordinary history. Here she reveals the truth behind the fantasy of the odalisque

I was born in an old house in Turkey which had once been the harem of a pasha. It was a household largely of women, ruled by Zehra, my paternal grandmother. Born in the final decades of the Ottoman Empire, Zehra had lived in a harem in Macedonia (then the last bastion of "Turkey in Europe") until polygamy and the isolation of women were abolished by Sultan Abdulhamid in 1909. The noise of my childhood is of people rushing about to no apparent purpose, the perpetual dripping of water in the *hamam* (Turkish bath), and the ghosts of bygone characters with veils and scimitars, causing havoc in the night.

Zehra would sit on her divan, spinning tales of her past. In retrospect, they could have come from *One Thousand and One Nights* but, in the way that children accept the peculiar without blinking an eye, to me these tales seemed perfectly prosaic, as did other aspects of this life.

One of the stories she told was of a young, handsome "Frank", as the Turks called the French, who came to Istanbul in the mid-19th century and fell in love with a beautiful harem girl. To win her heart and hand, he abandoned everything — family, fortune, country, language, religion — and became a Moslem and a Turk. They went to Macedonia together where she had many children and he made gunpowder. They grew rich and lived happily ever after.

These lovers were my great-great-grandparents.

Whenever I mention the word "harem", it always seems to evoke a lascivious response, the image of a paradise full of gorgeous, semi-naked, undulating women existing only to fulfil the sexual cravings of one master. But I'm using "harem" to mean the part of the house where women were kept in isolation. In reality, sex in the harems appears to have been rather disappointing, and orgies few and far between.

In the Imperial harem, couplings were highly ceremonial. The Sultan would express his lust to the Chief Eunuch. There followed a period of preparation of the girl, then a discreet journey into the royal bedchamber. The date of every sexual encounter was recorded in "The Book of Couching" to avoid the slightest doubt of paternity.

Of course, the ownership of so many women meant that the Sultans could indulge their fantasies. Ibrahim the Mad (1640-1648) filled his harem with unusually fat women. He ordered a royal search for the fattest woman in the Empire. When this vast-bosomed beauty was brought to him, he was so impressed that he showered her with gifts. She soon became the richest woman in the Near East.

There was much jealous competition to share the Sultan's bed, for the birth of a royal son would confer enormous power on the mother. Some of the mothers would not even balk at murder to secure the throne for their sons.

But most of these beauties, plucked from all corners of the Ottoman Empire, never shared the Sultan's bed, nor indeed any other man's bed, marooned as they were in their seraglio. Relief came for some from a surprising quarter. There are numerous accounts of odalisques — harem women — developing a voracious sexual appetite as a result of intimacy with eunuchs. Unable to perform standard sex, eunuchs excelled in other sensual forms more pleasing to women.

Other women turned to each other. The *hamam* was the natural domain for this. Nudity provided opportunities for physical intimacy. While washing and massaging each other, the women could become sexually involved. *Goriaux*, or matchmakers, also lurked in *hamams*, scrutinising young girls' bodies, looking for prey.

When I was a child, we had a small *hamam* in the house and every week women relatives and friends came to bathe and spend the day grooming each other with depilatories, pumice and henna. Then, they ate and gossiped.

Boys, up until puberty, would be allowed into *hamams* with their mothers. I once asked a male friend if he had recollections of the women's baths as a child.

"It was a Freudian nightmare," he told me, "having to trail behind enormous buttocks and folds of female flesh, in a hot steamy room with peculiar and pungent scents. I still have bad dreams about it." No resemblance there to the luscious beauties depicted on the 19th-century orientalist canvases. But I rather enjoyed the ritual of creature closeness and unselfconscious nudity, folds or no folds.

But most women of the 19th-century harems, like my grandmother, lived far from the excesses of the Imperial court in a closed garden among themselves. My grandmother almost never went out and when she did, she was always heavily veiled. She described how silk tunnels would be stretched from the door of the house to the carriages so the women could not be seen from the street.

Marriages were arranged, sometimes from birth. Zehra was promised to one of her father's friends when she was born, and when she turned 14, they were married. He was 40 and a scholar. She could barely read and write her name. On their wedding night, when he removed his turban, exposing a shiny skull, she wept. She had never seen a bald man, as all her male relations had mops of luxurious hair.

Ten years later, she was widowed, and moved into the harem of one of her brothers-in-law — it was common practice for a man to accept a woman in need into his household. Soon after that, leaving everything behind in Macedonia, the family fled to Istanbul to escape the ethnic violence in the Balkans.

FOR YEARS, the story of Zehra's grandparents — the Frank and the beautiful harem girl — was a riddle that I wanted to solve. How could these two have met when it would have been impossible for a woman to have contact with any man other than the members of her own family — especially a foreigner? (Unless, of course, she was a prostitute, but knowing my family, that seemed pretty unlikely.) And how could anyone renounce everything? Could it be that he was running away from something? I never discovered the truth, but a fictionalised version of my family's history became my new novel, *The Palace of Tears*.

With the dissolution of harems, the eunuchs no longer had a function.

There was a man, the colour of molasses and with no facial hair, who lived down the street from us. He was called Suleyman Aga and he had found himself a job at a railway company. He was always affectionate towards my family and visited often. Once, as I was sitting on his lap, he covered each of my fingers with a ring of a different coloured gem. He brought each ring out of his pocket slowly, very slowly and with great ceremony, each time showing his great amusement his eyes fixed on my face, observing every hint of delight. No one has since spoiled me to such a degree.

On other visits he would be carrying the most seductive box of chocolates. "Open sesame, open," he would cry in his falsetto voice, his golden front teeth flashing at me. He appeared more like a woman than a man in the way he slouched forward and cared in right around his belly, and in the softness of his face. He had a flesh, hourglass figure, and to me he felt like an old aunt, a far cry from the image of muscled, semi-naked black men with gorgeous turbans and flashy daggers depicted in film, ballet and opera.

In his absence, my parents referred to him as *hadim*, or "eunuch". The word, my mother told me meant "beardless." "Some men were just that way," she said. Another time, I overheard my father saying that there weren't many of *them*, left any more.

Even more pathetic than the fate of the eunuchs was that of many of the women of the harems. When the Imperial Harem was dissolved, in 1909, families were summoned to the Topkapi palace in Istanbul to claim their daughters and sisters. Circassian mountaineers and peasants came in droves — as most of the beautiful girls were brought from the Caucasus — wearing the picturesque costumes of country people. They were ushered into a large hall of the Palace where the ex-sultan's kadins, concubines and odalisques gathered to greet them. The contrast between the elegantly dressed ladies of the court and the rugged peasants was profoundly dramatic as they fell into each others' arms in tears.

But most heartbreaking were the faces of the women for whom no one came. Many of them ended up as prostitutes, "managed" by the eunuchs who used to guard them. There is a photograph of six of them, going to Vienna with their eunuchs, to exhibit themselves as curiosities: former inmates of a royal Turkish harem. Even in their freedom, they remained trapped. Kismet had left them to the hollow echoes of a dead institution.

Alev Croutier is also the author of Harem, the World Behind the Veil. The Palace of Tears (Bantam, £12) is available for £10 post free in the UK from Telegraph Books Direct. To order phone 0870 155 7222 or write to 24 Seward Street, London EC1V 3GB. Quote ref NB 684

PHOTOGRAPH: ROGER VIOLLET

After the dissolution Homeless Imperial harem women with two eunuchs, on the way to Vienna to exhibit themselves, 1909

Sultans could indulge their whims. Ibrahim the Mad ordered a royal search for the fattest woman in the Empire

The women in my life

Continued from previous page

to Larry. It isn't easy being married to a star.

But I'll tell you someone who took to it like a duck to water — Primula, David Niven's wife. Everyone adored Prim. We had so much fun and she was awfully good for Niven. They were divinely happy. Then she died — playing Sardines in Hollywood in 1946.

In the game one person goes off to hide and everyone else goes looking for them. Prim was the first to hide. She found this door that looked as if it opened into a cupboard, but instead it was the entrance to the cellar. She fell down the stairs head first and died the same day in hospital.

For my seventh choice, I'm giving half a place each to **Jessie Matthews** and to **Madonna**, my first leading lady and my latest. I got my chance in movies with Jessie. It was 1932, I was playing in Noël Coward's *Words and Music* and a talent scout from Gaumont British came to the show looking for a young man who could sing and dance. In the dressing room afterwards I was offered the part of Midshipman Golightly opposite Jessie, who was an enormous star, very sweet and very versatile. Years later during the war, I was asked to do some Ministry of Information pictures. In one of them Dulcie Gray was my co-star and we turned up at Shepperton to find that Jessie Matthews was the director. I had a love scene with Dulcie. Jessie said, "This isn't very convincing. The kiss isn't working properly. Do you mind if I show you?" Jessie took over and played the love scene with Dulcie, kiss and all.

Madonna is great fun. The film we did together was called *Who's That Girl* and it flopped because the young director fell madly in love with Madonna and simply couldn't bear not to have her face on the screen the whole time. It was meant to be a comedy and I'm afraid you've got to cut away to get laughs.

Celia Johnson is on my list because she was one of our truly great actresses and had this no-nonsense gift of being able to turn it on and turn it off. When we were making *In Which We Serve* she had this very moving speech. She played it beautifully, the tears coming to her eyes at just the right point. Noël said, "Cut. Perfect. Goodnight everybody."

Celia was rushing off to catch her train when the cameraman called out, "Hair in the gate," and she had to come back and do it all over again. She did it precisely as she had done it before, tears and all.

In all the world the most enjoyable actress to work with is **Judi Dench**. The nine months I spent with her in the musical of *Good Companions*, 1974, was the happiest time of my life in the theatre. She is a great practical joker. In the first act there was a big routine where we all danced round the stage and I had to lift a huge suitcase and carry it round while half-conducting the number. When the moment came to pick up the case, I simply couldn't shift it. It was full of bricks.

I have kept the best till last. On 16 January 1941 I married **Mary Hayley Bell**. It was the most marvellous day of my life.

I had been married before, when I was 19, much too young. We really weren't right for each other and rather than carry on we decided to part. To marry Mary I had to be divorced, which wasn't so easy then. You had to go through the "getting caught in the act" scene for the solicitors.

Mary didn't want me going off to Brighton with some blonde, so we used my sister's flat in London. Very decent, in pyjamas and dressing gown, Mary and I lay side by side on the large double bed. There was a knock on the door and in came this chap from the solicitors. He said, "Good morning. Are you Mr John Mills?" I said "Yes." "Are you Miss Mary Hayley Bell?" She said "Yes." Then he said, "You're in bed together." I said, "It looks like it." He said, "Naturally in bed together?" I said, "Yes." He said, "That's fine. Thank you so much. Good morning, good luck."

Before we got married, Mary and I had a good talk. I said, "I think the way to make it work is to keep it romantic and sentimental and sloppy." "And for 60 years we have.

I tell Mary I love her at every opportunity. If we're at a dinner and we're seated apart, I always send a note down the table for her. Once we were at a charity lunch with Princess Diana.

I wrote out a note saying, "Darling, did I remember to tell you that I love you?" and said to the head waiter, "Give this to the very attractive lady down there with the golden hair." Moments later, I'm tucking in to my soup and I look up and there he is handing the note to Princess Diana.

Every evening Mary and I sit in here together and have what we call Happy Hour. Mary always has a Horse's Neck. It's a famous navy drink: a small brandy with a lot of ice and a little lemon and ginger ale. I give her the news of the day. Tonight I'll tell her all about talking to *The Sunday Telegraph* and I might let her hear me practise my speech for the Queen Mother. And I shall tell her how happy she makes me, and how lucky I am, and how much I love her, because it's true.

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