



Phyllis Bottome (1884-1963)

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Novelist; Story-writer.

Active 1902-1963 in United Kingdom

According to her biographer Pam Hirsh, Phyllis Bottome is “a literary insider’s tip, a gem waiting to be discovered by chance or through recommendation” (xv). From her childhood on, Phyllis Bottome was an avid reader, but soon she would also become a writer: she was an author of novels, novellas, short stories, biographies and an autobiography, but was also politically involved and interested in psychology.

Phyllis Bottome was born in Kent in 1882 to an American father, a clergyman, and an English mother, who was sickly throughout her life. Her childhood was marked by constant changes of their place of living: The family moved to New York when she was eight, only to return to England in 1896. This pattern of rootlessness, established early in her life, would remain symptomatic throughout.

Her first novel was published when she was 20 years old. *Life, the Interpreter* came out in 1902, after she had been diagnosed with tuberculosis a year earlier; her sister Wilmett died of the same illness in November 1901, aged 23. This illness forestalled Phyllis’s stage career which had been planned since she was 16. *Life, the Interpreter* is typical of her early fiction in that it is very much influenced by existing texts, e.g. George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (cf. Hirsch 20) as well as by the Edwardian period; at the same time it also fits into the genre of New Woman fiction and ends on a rather melodramatic note, with the two female protagonists finding a happy ending after moving away from home and going out to work in pursuit of an independent lifestyle.

Her second novel, *The Master Hope*, published in 1904, was written during a stay in Sheringham with her friend, the painter Elena Gurney, to cure her first bad attack of tuberculosis. As her illness became worse, however, she began to spend winters in Switzerland from 1903. In 1904, while staying in St. Moritz for the second winter, she met Ernan Forbes Dennis, who proposed marriage to her on her birthday in 1905. They would not, however, get married until New Year’s Eve in 1917. This was mostly due to the opposition of Ernan’s mother; when she died in November 1907, his family and friends continued to resent the match. Ernan left for Canada in December 1907, and they were still engaged; it was only in July 1910 that he formally broke off the engagement on the grounds that he could not be sure that Phyllis would survive the severe bouts of tuberculosis she was suffering from. After the end of the engagement, her health was somewhat miraculously restored and she was able to travel from Italy, where she had spent the major part of her illness, for further cures in Germany. In Italy, she had met the French pianist Charles Paul Frèrejean, with whom she wrote the novel *Broken Music*. When her publisher was dissatisfied with its rather bleak ending, she wrote a sequel: *The Common Chord* was published together with *Broken Music* in 1913.

As doctors recommended spending the winters outside of England, Phyllis Bottome would continue to mostly travel to Italy. In the winter of 1911/12, she met in Frascati the painter Lady Butler, a suffragette, who introduced Phyllis Bottome to feminist issues. In this context she next met the novelist May Sinclair, who introduced her to Ezra Pound; he would help her to get short stories published in the monthly magazine *The Smart Set*, of which he acted as sub-editor.

When her father died in May 1913, aged 61, this meant a renewal of her relationship with Ernan. He read the obituary and sent a letter of condolence, followed by flowers on the occasion of her brother's marriage in September 1913. When she moved back to London after spending the winter in Rome with her mother, she met him again and they became friends, before he left for Marseilles to work as an interpreter for the British army in September 1914. While he was at the front, she was helping Belgian refugees in London and then worked for the Department of Information of the British War Office, but they managed to meet repeatedly. He finally agreed to marry her in Paris in December 1917 and returned to the front after a short honeymoon.

In spring 1918, Ernan was wounded in Arras and subsequently spent five months in London. He was sent back to Marseilles to work in Military Intelligence in October 1918, where Phyllis Bottome followed him in 1919. A year later they first spent a short time in Paris, where he was working for Passport Control, and then moved to Vienna, where he continued the job.

During their time in Vienna, Phyllis Bottome suffered repeatedly from illnesses, which finally made the couple move to the small village of Mösern, near Innsbruck in Austria. This was an experience that she would put into fiction many years later in *The Heart of a Child*, written in 1940 and turned into a movie in 1958. It was in Mösern that she finished her novel *Old Wine*, published in 1925 and based on her experience in post-War Vienna. It is the novel that marks a major change in her writing. The story revolves around an aristocratic family and their various ways of dealing with the end of the monarchy in Austria, but what is different from her earlier works, e.g., *The Crystal Heart* (1921) and *The Kingfisher* (published in 1922 but written during Ernan's rehabilitation after his war injury), is that she moves away from a melodramatic storyline and tone to a more realistic one. This was a feature that would mark her greatest success as well, *The Mortal Storm*, published in Britain in 1937 and in America a year later.

Before she published this major bestseller, Phyllis and Ernan changed homes many times. In 1925 they moved to Kitzbühel, another mountain town, to set up a school for boys; among their pupils were Ian Fleming, Nigel Dennis, and Ralph Arnold. In the context of his work as a teacher, Ernan met the psychologist Alfred Adler in spring 1926 to consult him about problems he encountered with some of his pupils, an encounter that would transform their lives in so far as both Ernan and Phyllis afterwards became deeply intrigued with Adler's individual psychology. Phyllis was later on even asked by Adler to write his biography, a task she accomplished two years after his sudden death in 1937; the concept of individual psychology also went into her novels from *Private Worlds* (1934) onwards.

The couple moved to Munich in 1930, and, a year later, Phyllis spent a few months in America to meet her new publisher, while her husband was training as a music teacher in London. After a short interval back in Munich, they left the city in May 1933 as they found the political situation and Hitler's presence increasingly threatening; they moved to California in spring 1934 and to Italy later that year to spend the winter there. In the late summer of 1935, they moved to Vienna, then to England, where they encountered a widespread ignorance of what was happening in Germany and Austria. It was against this background that Phyllis Bottome began to write *The Mortal Storm* with the aim to make people in Britain (and America) aware of the political situation in Germany in general and the living conditions of Jews in particular.

The Mortal Storm was an immediate success and became a bestseller; it was turned into a movie by MGM in 1940 directed by Frank Borzage and starring Frank Morgan, James Stewart and Margaret Sullavan. It was to

become one of the first movies to overtly criticize the Nazi regime in Germany, and it was a major success, thus also obliterating Bottome's earlier experience with Hollywood film makers who turned her novel *Secretly Armed* (published in 1917), a novel concerned with the Great War and the experience of soldiers in the trenches, into the unauthorized movie version called *Dark Victory*.

After a lecture tour for propaganda purposes in America, where she also saw the movie version of her novel, she and her husband returned to Britain in the early summer of 1940, where she was immediately asked by the Ministry of Information to write a book about the British War effort against Germany. Her *Mansion House of Liberty* came out in 1941, written chiefly for an American audience but reissued by Faber & Faber in 1941 as *Formidable to Tyrants*. This shows that Bottome became more and more political not only in her novels, but also began to write more non-fictional works.

In 1940, they moved to Cornwall, where they bought a house in 1941. In the same year, Phyllis was diagnosed with breast cancer but recovered quickly after surgery and set on to write a refugee novel as both she and Ernan were very much involved in helping refugees from Germany and Austria. *Within the Cup* was published in 1943 (its American title was *Survival*), her first novel with an autodiegetic narrator. She also continued her propaganda work until 1944, when a conflict erupted over one of her lectures which was censored by the Ministry of Information, in the wake of which she resigned from her work.

With the end of the war, Phyllis Bottome not only became a member of the Liberal Party but also continued to write and to get even more involved in the artistic community of St. Ives, among them Ben Nicholson, Barbara Hepworth and Daphne du Maurier. But it was her increasing political involvement that was to mark the after-War years. Through her friend Freda Troup (Ernan's former secretary who helped him organize lecture tours for Adler), Phyllis Bottome became aware of the political problems in South Africa and began to write stories about racial conflict. In 1947, she decided to visit Jamaica to get a first-hand impression of colonialism, an experience she turned into *Under the Skin* (published in 1950), a novel of education about a young woman who becomes head-teacher at a girls' school in the colonies; in the same year, *Fortune's Finger*, a collection of short stories, some of them also based on her experience in Jamaica, came out. They returned to Jamaica in 1949, when Ernan became acting headmaster of the newly founded Knox College. Upon their return they continued to live in St. Ives, with regular visits to London, where they moved definitively in October 1957. All the while, Phyllis Bottome continued to write and publish long short stories and novels, among them *Against Whom* (*The Secret Stair* in America; 1955), *Eldorado Jane* (*Jane* in America; 1956), the short story collection *Walls of Glass* (1958) as well as her autobiography (its third volume, *The Goal*, appeared in 1962, following *Search for a Soul* in 1947 and *The Challenge* in 1952).

Phyllis Bottome died of a heart attack on August 22, 1963. In the same year, a collection of the *Best Stories of Phyllis Bottome*, edited by Daphne du Maurier appeared. Largely overlooked today (albeit currently experiencing renewed interest), Phyllis Bottome's writing is noteworthy for her aptitude to turn personal experience and observation into fiction as well as for her belief that "the purpose of art was to bring out the truth of history" (Hirsch 237).

Works Cited

Hirsch, Pam. *The Constant Liberal: The Life and Work of Phyllis Bottome*. London: Quartet, 2010.

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