

Foreword

Rose Macaulay's *Non-Combatants and Others* is an original. I remember looking up the publication date when I first read it, and being astonished to find that it was published in 1916, pre-dating by more than ten years those novels and memoirs – by Edmund Blunden, Siegfried Sassoon, Erich Maria Remarque, Robert Graves and Richard Aldington, all of them published in 1928 and 1929 – that have become *the* interpreters for us of the horrors of the Great War.

In May 1915 Rose Macaulay had signed on as a VAD nurse at a military convalescent hospital near her home in Great Shelford, just outside Cambridge. She was thirty-three years old, and already the author of seven novels.

'Oh, it's you that have the luck, out there in blood and muck: You were born beneath a kindly star,' she'd written the previous autumn in 'Many Sisters to Many Brothers', after her younger brother Will, a farmer in Canada, had sailed back to England to sign up with the King's Royal Rifles. The poem was immediately and widely anthologised. Rose longed to be out there with the men; but at the same time was hopelessly squeamish. Her sister Jean, nursing in France with the Red Cross, thought VAD work 'a mad choice' for Rose. Indeed she found the experience so gruelling and dispiriting that she stuck it out for only a few months. What she witnessed in that short time, however, tore into shreds the romantic veil through which she had viewed the fighting in Europe, and fed straight into her eighth novel. Dedicated 'to my brother and other combatants' the fiercely anti-war *Non-Combatants and Others* picks apart and satirises a society that prefers not to listen to the testament of the soldiers sacrificing their lives on its behalf.

Like many other Macaulay protagonists Alix Sandomir is blessed - or cursed - with an artist's vision. She reads the truth about the war in the broken bodies of the combatants returned

from the front: in her cousin John Orme's haunted eyes and 'the queer way his throat worked' as he struggles to speak, in the artist Basil Doye's shaking hands, in the missing leg of an eighteen year old boy from whom she averts her eyes in Richmond Park.

Alix's response is visceral: she faints, she vomits, and, tries, in desperation, to flee. But she finds that the war has infected the whole of society with lies and corruption; she herself is not immune to the infection.

Her chance discovery of the true story of how her brother Paul – aged eighteen and straight out of school – died in the trenches provides the fulcrum of the novel and the turning-point of her trajectory of flight.

As children in Italy in the 1890s the Macaulay girls and boys, 'the five' as they called themselves, were a close-knit gang. A number of Rose Macaulay's early novels have at their hearts closely loving relationships between sisters and brothers. The tragic events depicted in *Non-Combatants and Others* signify an end to that innocent childhood relationship and suggest, too, a major shift in gender relations within British society. The women of Rose Macaulay's generation identify strongly with their brothers at the front. As a result they feel able to challenge the routine presentation of soldiers' deaths as crucial to a heroic narrative. Macaulay's novel offers a fictional foreshadowing of Vera Brittain's 1933 memoir, *Testament of Youth*, in which Brittain searches for the truth about how her own soldier brother met his death. After World War One the traditional separation between the men who fought and the women who stayed behind would weaken; women ceased to be the passive recipients of news from the front lines. Alix Sandomir exemplifies this change. Pulled apart by horror and desire, she ends up, as Rose Macaulay herself did, campaigning for peace.

Also reprinted here is 'Miss Anstruther's Letters', a short story set in World War Two, and one of Rose Macaulay's only three published short stories. Twenty-six years separates its

publication from that of *Non-Combatants and Others*. Almost twenty-six years of peace, and almost twenty-six years of the most significant relationship in Rose Macaulay's life. *Non-Combatants and Others* was the last piece of fiction Rose Macaulay wrote before she met Gerald O'Donovan; 'Miss Anstruther's Letters' was the last piece of fiction she wrote before he died, and the last she would write for some years afterwards.

Gerald O'Donovan, Irish ex-priest and novelist, best-known for his strongly autobiographical *Father Ralph*, was married with two children and a third on the way when he and Rose Macaulay met in 1918. He would be her lover, soulmate and companion for the next twenty-five years.

During the 1920s and 1930s Rose Macaulay rode high in public opinion. After a string of high-spirited, wide-ranging, clever novels she branched out as an essayist and biographer, and enthusiastically embraced the broadcasting opportunities offered by the BBC. During these years she and Gerald took regular holidays abroad, travelling in France and Italy, hidden from prying eyes and wagging tongues, their liaison remaining for years, according to the publisher Victor Gollancz, 'the best-kept secret in London'.

Over twenty years of travel and companionship ended when Gerald fell ill. He had a stroke, and a year or so later was found to be dying of cancer. Rose's beloved elder sister Margaret was ill, too. She died early in 1941. Returning to London from Margaret's house in Hampshire on 11th May, Rose found that her flat had taken a direct hit from a high explosive bomb, during what turned out to be the very last bombing raid of the Blitz. She wrote to one friend: 'House no more – bombed and burned out of existence, and nothing saved.' To another she said: 'I have been up alone, climbing somewhat precariously (stairs all gone) and mocked by the charred pages of my books... It seems to mean a clean break with my whole past,

and I am still dizzy with it.' Sifting through the blackened ruins she found her May and June marmalade ration, a few bits of glass and china, a little tea, some whiskey, and a silver mug.

Storm Jameson, then president of PEN, saw Rose that autumn at the PEN London Congress of Writers, some months after the destruction of her flat. Reflecting on the trace of sadness she detected in Rose's usually lively voice, she wondered whether Rose was mourning the loss of more than her books and manuscripts. Storm Jameson commissioned her to write a short story about the war to be published in an American anthology.

'Miss Anstruther's Letters', published in 1942 in *London Calling*, draws on autobiographical experience even to the date of the bombing, 'the night of May 10th 1941', which 'cut in two' Miss Anstruther's life. Like Miss Macaulay, Miss Anstruther finds in the midst of the ruins the month's marmalade ration, and, as with Miss Macaulay's books, all that is left of Miss Anstruther's are drifts of paper, 'charred and black and damp'. And the letters? Miss Anstruther desperately tries to recall the words and phrases of love and desire, but she hasn't recently reread the letters, not since her lover died the year before. She's been saving them as a solace for when she would be able to read them without unendurable weeping. Miss Anstruther's lover's handwriting is like Gerald's, with lines 'running small and close and neat down the page, difficult to decipher, with the o's and the a's never closed at the top', which now have 'run into a flaming void and would never be deciphered more'.

Rose Macaulay wrote 'Miss Anstruther's Letters' while Gerald was dying. We can read it as an elegy for their lives together and especially for 'the secret stolen travels of twenty years', but it's also a sombre meditation on memory and the mutability of the past. In this heartbreaking story the past is destroyed by the words on a scrap of charred notepaper that Miss Anstruther finds in a battered saucepan amidst drifts of burnt rubbish,

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words which, each time she reads them, 'seemed to darken and obliterate a little more of the twenty years that had followed them'.

Rose Macaulay the fiction writer took the events of her own life and transformed them into something different. When Gerald O'Donovan died in July 1942 she wrote: 'The story has been a good one, it might have ended worse – perhaps in weariness, faithlessness, or nothingness, or a mere lessening of love. It never did ...' The events of Miss Anstruther's story may be different, but it was Rose Macaulay's own experience of love and loss that provides its extraordinary emotional intensity.

The years of Miss Anstruther's life with her lover become, finally, 'a drift of grey ashes'; this too, perhaps, is how Rose Macaulay saw the fate of the years of hoping for peace. Although separated by a quarter of a century, 'Miss Anstruther's Letters' shares with *Non-Combatants and Others* the subject of the 'bitter hell' of war. In both of them Rose Macaulay has shown us art's capacity to bear witness to death, grief and the loss of innocence.

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