

Foreword

‘One of our really distinctive talents, a true original,’ Rebecca West said of Penelope Gilliatt. ‘She does not turn away from the dark disorder of existence but defiantly brings to bear on it a powerful intelligence, a benevolent wit, passion, style and pure sanity. She leaves us exhilarated,’ William Shawn wrote. ‘As a critic and journalist,’ Katharine Whitehorn commented after Gilliatt’s death in 1993, ‘she was one of the most sparkling personalities of her time.’ Yet only fifteen years after her death almost all of Penelope Gilliatt’s work is out of print and she is hardly remembered by the reading public.

So much for posterity, then: you can sense the sanguine Gilliatt shoulder-shrug at what happens when intelligence, adaptability and versatility meet, head on, the stupefying shortness of cultural memory. As a writer that’s what she was: immensely clever, adaptable, versatile and likeably urbane; a writer of novels, short stories, a great deal of wide-ranging critique, even an opera libretto, and an award-winning Oscar-nominated screenplay for John Schlesinger’s *Sunday Bloody Sunday* in 1971, probably the piece of work she is most remembered for (and, as she wrote in her introductory essay to the script’s publication, ‘a straight progression from a novel of mine that had lately come out, *A State of Change*’). In the 1960s she’d also strutted the boards at the *Observer* as twin cultural commentator with Kenneth Tynan, Gilliatt on cinema and Tynan on drama (except, fascinatingly, for when they temporarily took on each other’s critical roles). After this she went to the States and was a staff writer on the *New Yorker*, where she and Pauline Kael split the cinematic year between them, an ideal arrangement giving Gilliatt time to write her fiction, which she’d begun pursuing in the mid-sixties.

Alongside her several very poised collections of short fiction, and a critical oeuvre ranging from monographs on French cinema directors Jacques Tati and Jean Renoir, to essays on

cinema, theatre, music-hall and the nature of comedy, she produced five distinctive novels, of which *A State of Change* (1967) was her second. Each of these is characterised by her sharpness of ear and eye, her great wit, her discursive fictional structure, and her always pertinent, never prescriptive, commentary about the joins and the cracks between history, contemporary culture, and perceptions of these. *A State of Change* packs a particular Gilliatt-like punch, one whose combination of calmness, subtlety, humaneness and blasting intelligence epitomises the great powers of this writer.

Penelope Gilliatt was born in 1932 in London; her mother, Mary Douglass, and her father, Cyril Conner (who worked his way up from lower-class roots to become a barrister and a BBC Radio controller), both came from Newcastle and had family connections with the north-east shipping trade. They bequeathed her her great understanding of the shifts, connections, prejudices and goals of the British class system; much of her writing, too, plays on the differences and connections between the north and the south in Britain and reveals her own great affection for and knowledge of Northumberland, where she and her younger sister, Angela, spent some of their time growing up (her sister later became a renowned sculptor).

The young Gilliatt was a brilliant pianist and was sent to the Juilliard School in New York. But the strain of performance left her unwell and anorexic; she went to college in Vermont instead, then returned to London when she won a *Vogue* talent contest, part of the prize for which was a journalism job with *Condé Nast*.

Red-haired and vivacious, 'chic, petite, almost pixie-like, with a wicked smile, vivid wit. . . she became a star of the media scene that was just emerging as "swinging London"', Katharine Whitehorn remembered. Left wing all her life, she was also one of the founder members of the Anti-H-Bomb Committee Of 100, and marched against nuclear proliferation with her first

husband, the neurosurgeon Roger Gilliatt. She left Gilliatt in the 1960s for the playwright John Osborne, with whom she had a daughter; when this marriage ended in 1968, she went to the States with her daughter Nolan. In her later years she became alcoholic and her work suffered greatly; her very first novel, *One by One* (1965), is poignant in this hindsight, a story of an apocalyptic London in the grip of a fatal epidemic, whose symptoms have the appearance of severe alcoholism.

It is reputed that Penelope Gilliatt had a higher IQ than that of Einstein, and it's interesting that in all her copious journalism it's very hard to find anything much actually about Gilliatt herself; she seems a bit wrong-footed when she interviews Buster Keaton and he starts asking her questions back about her. We know, for instance, that she was very slim because in her book on Jean Renoir and his films, *Renoir*, in interview, notices it, comments on how she'd have found surviving the war easy, being so 'easy to ration,' then breaks off into a perfect war anecdote about how he (the son of the Impressionist painter, Auguste Renoir) hired a car just before the fall of Paris, filled its boot with priceless Cezanne canvases and drove them safely to the Midi. This is just one of the examples of how Gilliatt's use of the self, present and observant yet one step removed, allowed her subject the space to talk – the sense of her subject's voice, her subject's self, in her interviews and monographs, is always whole and intimate. Likewise, a reader of her work will only find out how linguistically skilful she herself was by reading an off-the-cuff remark in an interview Gilliatt did with Nabokov: 'we spoke together in several languages. . . I think he was startled and gleeful to find someone out of the blue who spoke Russian.'

Like all the best critics she pretty much keeps herself out of the picture in her critical work; this generosity gives her the gift of a liberated and unpartisan observation; as she commented on Buster Keaton's work, 'Keaton's characters are outsiders in the sense of spectators, not nihilists or anarchists.' Her cinema and

theatre criticism reads like a kind of intellectual florescence. Glenda Jackson is, to Gilliat, 'the only Ophelia I had ever seen who was capable of playing Hamlet.' She saw, in *Waiting for Godot*, an equally strong benign ambiguity: 'Beckett's characters are anything but pure-dyed pessimists: like most people in real life, they are capable of feeling at one and the same time that existence is both insupportable and indispensable, and that they are both dying and also amazingly well.' She was one of the few critics to notice, on its release, how good Kubrick's *2001* is. Her perceptiveness about Arthur Miller is a relief, 'sometimes so sentimental as to be unintelligent'; she spotted a strong class impetus in Hitchcock's work, the "wonderful vivacity of social report" in his early British films; and she wrote with grace about Chaplin, for whom comedy 'is choreography: placing, movement, the intricate classical disciplining of vulgar energy.'

She was always profoundly interested in 'wits, comics, disturbers of the peace' (the subtitle to her 1973 collection of essays, *Unholy Fools*), revealingly articulate on Cary Grant's 'style of unwounding mockery' and superb on Katherine Hepburn, whose 'faultless technical sense makes one feel that she could play a scene with a speak-your-weight machine and still turn it into an encounter charged with irony and challenge.' Any reading of Gilliat's fiction will reveal why she was particularly drawn to the comedic: 'comedy never explains,' is how she put it in one of her last critical books, *To Wit* (1990). In fact, one of her fictional modes is what might be called a mode of unexplaining; she uses an episodic style, sudden time shifts which might seem to court obliquity but actually re-structure narrative reality so that life, and randomness, and especially dialogue, make the world, not plot device or fictional closure. She quotes Renoir in her monograph, *Jean Renoir* (1975): 'in the cinema you can do all too much. For example, when the hero of a modern film has a phobia, you are obliged to explain it by flashbacks: I mean, to go back to the time when he was beaten by his father, or whatever

thing is supposed to have had such a result. This freedom can be quite enfeebling.' The affinity between them is clear; in her own work Gilliat understood just such an aesthetic discipline.

She was particularly shrewd, in her critical journalism, about the new British cinema and theatre of the 1960s. She found Richard Lester's *A Hard Day's Night* 'the first film in England that has anything like the urgency and dash of an English popular daily at its best. . . produced under pressure, and the head of steam behind it has generated something expressive and alive.' On Joe Orton's 'slumberous savagery' in *Entertaining Mr Sloane*, 'a revenge tragedy going on among the antimacassars and the doilies,' she is nothing short of brilliant; the troubled language of the text is, she writes, 'like parquet over a volcano: its trouble is the time's, not Orton's in particular. It can't quite find its own voice. Not only the characters but also the text itself seems to be speaking in quotation marks. Nothing is said directly; everything is on the bias, spoken at a tangent to make suspect "sincerity". This may be one of the few specifically modern characteristics. . . the contemporary problem of utterance that belies his work is the problem of his not seeming to mean a word he says.'

A State of Change, very much a critique of words and what they mean, and of Britishness in the 1960s, is concerned straight away with the concepts of seeing and survival. 'Kakia Grabowska, aged twenty-three, cartoonist and citizen of Warsaw, travelled to Moscow in 1949 with an electric lightbulb in case the hotel lamps were too dim for her to draw by, and a bathplug saved from her own house after it was destroyed.' To escape 'the rot of subterfuge,' Kakia comes to England and settles in London, a city 'full of closed circles and bitterness about income tax'. She is a caricaturist because 'any other sort of drawing seemed a suavity, like writing fiction about the corpses not yet buried'. East comes west looking for truth and openness, and what happens? 'Do you think you're any good?' an art editor, only scant pages into the

novel, asks this woman who's been through hell and back. 'In Warsaw she had belonged to a class that the Nazis had vowed to wipe off the earth; merely to be bored from nine to five in a menial job was not very much.' Her cartoons, the art editor says, just 'don't add up to a person.'

This is the novel's interest too: what does 'add up to' a person, in history, in art, in life? Gilliatt traces a path through the years from 1949 up to the time of the novel's publication in the late 1960s and examines how this new post-war world looks. It's a very funny novel, even in its gravity and quietness, its own refusal of suavity. Kakia, in her 'style of frosty stoicism,' is one of Gilliatt's comic observers, an outsider, a 'displaced' person. She changes her Polish name to Gibbon, the name of the great 'observer of history.'

The novel also traces the existential shift from a time of war to a time of relative stability. Its concerns are post-war health, rebirth and art – embodied, more or less, in Kakia's two lovers, the fine Gilliatt double-act of Don, the dilettante TV executive, and Harry, the well-meaning obstetrician; she has a passion, in her writing, for three-way relationships, and this is one of her most subtle and benign portrayals of the vicissitudes of such a relationship.

The book's other double-act is a formal one: on the one hand history's darkness and on the other Gilliatt's extraordinary lightness of touch, in a novel whose heroine comes totally alive from the very first elegant sentence, armed only with a single lightbulb, and her own material lightness. *A State of Change* is at one and the same time an excoriating analysis of media cynicism, a profoundly pessimistic view of a dilettante time, a time when 'we should be frightened of ourselves,' and a vision of light-footed survival against the odds.

A little like Ivy Compton Burnett in her intellectual drive? A little like Muriel Spark in her economic talent, her way with the ironic sting of a sentence? A little like DH Lawrence in her determination to demonstrate how important the discursive nature is to art and to life? In truth, the Gilliatt combination of verbal elegance, wit,

observation, politics, generosity, openness of mind and urbane craft, is unique.

She was a fan of Nabokov's fiction, and quoted, in her own critical work, his comment from *Speak, Memory*: 'in a first-rate work of fiction, the clash is not between the author and the characters, but between the author and the world'. What would Gilliat have made of the surveillance society we live in now? She would recognise it – she knew it all already; from her first novel onwards she was critiquing spin and soundbite; from the start to the end of her oeuvre she was both mourning the loss of dialogue and celebrating the fact that humans will never ever stop playing with words, testing the borders, giving weight to the seeming insubstantiality of everyday life, and asking the important questions. Redefinition – of words, of love, of history, of societal shape, and of the novel itself – is at the very heart of *A State of Change*.

The subtlety of its open ending, which explains nothing, simply displays the numbness of 1960s culture and the daftness of individual selfishness beside the hard-won revolutions, the crucial communalities of British history of the last hundred years, is – like the novel itself – a piece of structural perfection.

Ali Smith
London, June 2009