

A life in writing: Fiona MacCarthy

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'Burne-Jones suffered many setbacks but still produced work of tremendous power. This book has got me through a difficult time'



Fiona MacCarthy ... 'I didn't want to lie in bed until 11 in the morning talking to my friends.' Photograph: Eamonn McCabe for the Guardian

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Fiona MacCarthy's first full-length book caused a sensation.

A [biography of Eric Gill](#), it broke the news of the artist's unorthodox (and now rather famous) sexual behaviour, as detailed in his diaries – numerous affairs with the women who lived in his saintly commune, incest with his sisters and his daughters, and even over-familiarity with the family dog. A previous biographer, [Robert Speaight](#), who had published in the mid-60s, had seen the same material, but MacCarthy, as she has pointed out, was writing in 1989, well after Michael [Holroyd's ground-breaking life of Lytton Strachey](#), so that "the conventions of biography were considerably altered, frank discussion of the sex life of one's subject being well on its way to becoming de rigueur". The book's exposure of Gill's predilections caused outrage partly because he was celebrated as a Catholic artist; MacCarthy

herself came under attack for her cool treatment of the material – for not denouncing him strongly enough. Bernard Levin, writing in the Times, called Gill "a revolting criminal".

MacCarthy was shaken by this response to the book and, more particularly, by the reaction of the Gill family. She received a "barrage of letters and phone calls for a couple of months", and then a letter from Walter Shewring, an elderly former schoolmaster and Gill's literary executor, with whom she had struck up a warm friendship. He had evidently been contacted by Gill's grandchildren in the wake of the media storm. When she received a note from him telling her that "our acquaintance and correspondence must cease", she "shook with sobs ... then tore it into strips".

It was, MacCarthy has recalled, "a baptism of fire": she began the book "in a state of naivety, imagining my only loyalty lay with Gill himself and the truth relating to the bizarre contradictions of this single human life. What I had not been prepared for was the fact that in searching out the truth, especially the truth of a near contemporary, you impinge on other interconnected lives as well."

Only after a few months did something else appear properly in focus – what a tremendous success the biography had become. Praised, as all her books are, for its vivid depiction of key scenes in its subject's life and for the scrupulousness of the research, it was also a big commercial hit for Faber, and this gave her "more freedom to choose" her next move. What has followed is a series of renowned biographies of idealistic, anti-establishment English artists and writers – William Morris, Stanley Spencer, Byron (itself a controversial study, owing to the emphasis she placed on the poet's homosexuality), and now Morris's close friend and partner in business, Edward Burne-Jones, whom MacCarthy describes as "the great figure of British art in the second half of the 19th century", and whom she loves, as she loves Spencer, for his "visionary oddity".

She has remarked that she doesn't choose her subjects so much as wait for them "to claim me ... always creative people of one sort or another for whom I feel a deep affinity. I have loved Burne-Jones's work ever since I saw *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid* on a visit to the Tate with my mother as a child of nine or 10." Writing the book, she has been determined to get to the heart of what George du Maurier called the "Burne-Jonesiness of Burne-Jones".

But her choice of the artist was also determined by a more personal consideration: her husband, the well-known designer [David Mellor](#), suffered from dementia for 10 years before his death in 2009. "It was terribly hard. With dementia, people get more and more remote from you. Being absolutely truthful, I was glad to be back in that period, glad to be back in a familiar world that I knew, because so much that was puzzling

was happening in my own world. It was wonderful to come back to that territory which was familiar from my researches into Morris. Burne-Jones is such a complicated and interesting character, and I liked getting to understand his work ethic: he suffered many setbacks, emotional problems and depression, yet still produced work of tremendous imaginative power and range. So thinking about him helped me to recuperate. The book has got me through a difficult time."

MacCarthy has always cared passionately about retracing the steps of her subjects, travelling to see what they saw: "Things dawn on you just being in the place." With her Morris book, for instance, she followed him to Iceland, and visited at least 50 churches with Morris and Co stained-glass windows. Writing *Byron*, the travel – to Italy, to Greece, and to all the archives where relevant papers were held – was particularly exhausting: after the publication of *Childe Harold*, the poet was such a celebrity that "every tiny little note he wrote was kept". For a number of years research trips were impossible because of her husband's illness, so before going back to the "thundering 19th century" with Burne-Jones, MacCarthy decided to write a memoir about her experiences as a debutante in 1958, the final year debs were presented to the Queen.

The Last Curtsey conjures a bizarre lost world of finishing schools, tedious parties and encounters with men deemed "NSIT" (not safe in taxis); it is full of stories of the likes of Sally Croker-Poole, who was always set on bagging a lord and managed to hook the Aga Khan. But it is also a work of social history that documents a moment of transition, when a set of rituals associated with the aristocracy and monarchy finally seemed outdated in a country that had just woken up to the end of empire. (Though the official "season" was brought to a close also because, as Princess Margaret put it, "every tart in London can get in.")

Thanks to *The Last Curtsey* we already know something of MacCarthy's early years. She was born in 1940, in Sutton, Surrey: Sutton because her mother insisted on using the gynaecologist who had "delivered the royal children". Her father was killed in the North African desert in 1943; MacCarthy and her sister were taken by their mother back to London, to live in, as she now describes it, "a conventional upper-class household" which included her nanny – "nannies were kept on for ever, like in *Brideshead*, up in the attic". When South Kensington was badly hit by bombs, she was evacuated not to the country, but to the Dorchester hotel, built a decade or so before, which was thought to be the safest building in London (Churchill and Eisenhower both stayed there). As a result it was teeming with people, and mattresses were laid out along the corridors and in the ballroom. MacCarthy remembers being a "hotel child", stalking "the vast green and gold foyer", her sense of belonging in the palatial structure made more complete by the fact that her family actually owned it – her mother was a McAlpine – and called it "the Dorch".

She went to Wycombe Abbey, a boarding school attended before the war by another biographer of Burne-Jones, [Penelope Fitzgerald](#). It was an academic school, where the girls were encouraged "to be civil servants, or to join the BBC". It was clear that MacCarthy was not to follow the example of her mother, an intelligent, artistically inclined woman who "simply didn't have enough to do. I didn't want to lie in bed until 11 in the morning talking to my friends – and this perhaps turned me into a workaholic." (She had "a slightly frenzied need to be taken seriously".) As one of only four debs from the season of 1958 to go to university, she remembers Auden's "eccentric but wonderful lectures" at Oxford, as well as those of Edgar Wind, the university's first professor of art history, which had a cult following among those students, like MacCarthy, who had already developed a marked interest in visual culture.

Marriage to an Oxford contemporary followed soon after graduation but didn't last. "The life of the young married Mrs Ian White-Thomson, wife of the rising young business executive in a firm called Borax, came less and less to suit me," she wrote in *The Last Curtsey*. "I hated the monotony ... Most of all I loathed the weekends with Ian's sociable military family in Essex. The shoots, the tennis parties, the before-lunch Sunday drinks parties. The routine became anathema."

After a stint on House and Garden under the editor Robert Harling, who "ran his office as an amiable harem" and who, as a typographical expert, introduced her to the work of Eric Gill, MacCarthy joined the Guardian, which in 1964 [see footnote] relocated from Manchester to London. She was, by this time, in severe reaction against her "ridiculous" privileged background, and kept very quiet in the office about being a deb whose first crush had been on the master of the Eton Beagles. MacCarthy seemed "a good candidate as a 'Swinging Sixties' correspondent". She was taken on to write about design – it was a time when Festival-of-Britain modernism had finally made its way on to the high street with the opening of [Habitat](#) (in 1964) and other design shops, but found herself interviewing not only [Alvar Aalto](#) in Helsinki but David Hockney, John Lennon and Betty Friedan. A 1965 advert for the paper features a close-up of the young MacCarthy looking like Mary Quant and biting into an apple; underneath is the question "Should women have teeth?" The copy below reads: "Fiona MacCarthy may look like a fashion model. But there are times when she writes like a sabre-toothed tiger. Particularly at the expense of pretension and plagiarism in Design."

In 1964 she went to Sheffield to interview Mellor, who had trained as a silversmith but was already "fairly famous" as a modern industrial designer, and who drove an E-type Jaguar. There followed a "big upheaval" in her domestic life, and two years later they were married. When a new job as women's editor of the Evening Standard didn't work out, MacCarthy escaped to Sheffield, "a city in which no deb has ever danced". "I liked the idea of the north. It had a romantic allure; it seemed a 'real' place." In *The*

Last Curtsey, MacCarthy refers to Mellor as her own "working-class hero ... I liked feeling a part of this environment of *making*. We had two children and sent them to Sheffield comprehensive schools."

Mellor had an arts-and-crafts sense of the integration of life and work.

"There was an idealism there, and I was swept up in that," MacCarthy says.

"It was part of David's mystique and characteristic of the whole craft revival in the 60s and 70s." In 1969 Mellor opened a high-end kitchenware shop in Sloane Square, which sold Solingen knives and Duralex glasses; and his factory was "a version of William Morris's, a place very beautiful and orderly that relates to domestic life, too".

It was a coming-together of MacCarthy's and Mellor's interests that produced her first, short book, *A Simple Life*, about CR Ashbee, a Victorian designer and dreamer who, in 1902, led a band of 150 craftsmen – cabinet-makers, jewellers, blacksmiths, weavers, printers – from the East End of London to set up a utopian community in Chipping Campden in the Cotswolds. Mellor's friend and rival silversmith Robert Welch worked in a studio in the market town; when MacCarthy visited him in 1965 to write an article, "the sense of continuity was almost tangible".

She now says that *A Simple Life*, published in 1981, "seems under-researched, rather thin". But its subject-matter points forwards to the Gill and Morris books. Ashbee, who was gay and a devotee of [Edward Carpenter](#) but who in his 50s became the father of four daughters, even offered an initiation into writing about unusual sex lives.

In 1973 MacCarthy and Mellor had bought Broom Hall in Sheffield, a large part-Tudor, part Georgian building that was "terribly dilapidated but potentially beautiful". Mellor converted the Georgian wing to make cutlery workshops: it became, Stephen Bayley has written, "a rare example of a family house containing a 55-ton blanking press, a 180-ton coining press and two grinding machines". MacCarthy wrote the Ashbee and Gill books in the coach house. In 1990, they moved to the Round Building, a converted gasworks in Hathersage. According to Bayley, "their homes and workshops could be read like books: fastidiously restored character architecture or bravely commissioned new-build, always beautiful, comfortable, well-considered, but also disciplined and, perhaps, a touch austere."

The first book to be written in the Round Building was *William Morris* (1994), a biography that took equally seriously its subject's designs, writing and socialism. MacCarthy regards him as a "time traveller", still with us not only thanks to his wallpaper but his politics and environmentalism. *News from Nowhere* became "a kind of handbook for the romantic-intellectual English socialism that has only just ended with the death of Michael Foot". She was, however, "never convinced by Tony Blair pointing out how *News from Nowhere* was one of his favourite books: there's simply no meeting point between Blair and Morris the anti-

parliamentarian, who wanted to turn the Houses of Parliament into a dung-house." At the end of a new edition of the biography, she asks how Morris would react to celebrity worship, parliamentary sleaze, bankers' bonuses, body enhancements, air kissing and numerous other modern horrors, in a long list that ends with "mass descent into illusion and banality".

MacCarthy answers: "'Damn'd pigs! Damn'd fools!' You can hear Morris expostulate," and it's clear she is cheering him on.

Stanley Spencer: An English Vision, published in 1997, was praised by the FT for revolutionising "our ideas about this very English artist, emphasising his landscapes, his politics and his search for a new expressiveness of sex." (Spencer's surviving family wasn't best pleased.) But by this time MacCarthy was engaged in the monumental research that went into the book she is most proud of, her life of Byron. Although it made headlines for the argument that the poet's relations with men were his true "emotional focus", *Byron: Life and Legend* was also recognised as the first John Murray-authorised biography since [Leslie Marchand](#)'s three volumes back in the 1950s; the publisher's archives, she says, gave her "access to some really wonderful material". He stands out among her subjects as not a visual artist, but fits in other ways: "he did see a different kind of society, and was even a sort of visionary. He was radical, anti-civilisation."

The Last Pre-Raphaelite, her study of Burne-Jones, is unlikely to stir up controversy in the way her books on Gill and Byron did, though it emerges that the artist did have a penchant for young girls, whose hands he would hold; he was distraught when they grew up and got married. But his only real "savage passion" was work – the goal, imbued with great moral seriousness, to advance the cult of beauty.

Her next book, however, will bring her back to the 20th century, and so she'll risk once more impinging on lives "interconnected with her subject". It will feature [Walter Gropius](#), founder of the [Bauhaus](#), who during the mid-1930s lived in Hampstead and worked with the modernist architecture firm Isokon; at the bar of the celebrated Lawn Road Flats he met Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth and Ben Nicholson. For MacCarthy, it means an exhaustive acquaintance with another influential utopian and another experimental artistic community, this time one that hoped to build a modernist new world. A fascinating subject will have "claimed" its ideal biographer once again.