

The life of Julia Strachey

by *Barbara Strachey Halpern*

Julia: A Portrait of Julia Strachey. By herself and Frances Partridge. London: Gollancz, 1983. Pp. 308. 12 plates. £10.95.

JULIA STRACHEY WAS my half-sister. She was eleven years older than I—an enormous difference in childhood and adolescence, and as appears in the book, she was never really part of my own close family. Indeed, the sense of not belonging, which dogged her from childhood, poisoned her whole life, though it did not prevent her from being one of the most entertaining—if also one of the most bitingly critical—of companions.

Hers was a genuinely moving story, as her lifelong friend, Frances Partridge, has so delicately and truthfully conveyed.

Her first five years were spent in India, in a setting she idealized and fantasized as the heaven whose loss had ruined her forever. When her father, Oliver Strachey, an elder brother of Lytton Strachey, divorced her mother, Julia was banished to an England she found cold and unloving. When he returned to England himself and married my mother, Ray Costelloe, in 1911, Oliver was in bad health, while Ray was new to housekeeping, determined to go on working and anxious to start her own family. This was a stiff programme to combine with a difficult ten-year-old step-child, and when Ray's aunt, Alys Russell, offered to take Julia in, the offer was too convenient to refuse.

At ten Julia was already beginning to wander in the cloudy exile which constituted her "Cosmos". Alys, on her side, had just lost her adored husband, Bertrand Russell, whose love affair with Ottoline Morrell had driven him to leave Alys for good, and thus break her heart. She had gone to live with her brother, Logan Pearsall Smith, the writer, and was trying stoically to rebuild her smashed life by devoting herself even more frantically to "Good Works" than she had in the past.

Julia's descriptions of the life she lived with Alys and Logan are extraordinarily brilliant. They are wicked caricatures, of course, but there is sympathy there as well as laughter, and so vivid and so true are the likenesses that in reading them the very physical presences of those remarkable beings, and the sound of their voices, come back to me, together with the mixed affection and horror their memory arouses.

Julia was sent to Bedales, one of the first coeducational boarding schools in the country, and her chapter on the ghastly falseness of the school spirit is another comic masterpiece.

She was a writer of very considerable talent, although she only completed two books: *Cheerful Weather for the Wedding* and *The Man on the Pier*, and a number of short autobiographical and reflective sketches published in various English and American periodicals. The individual nature of her vision of life appears in everything she wrote: books, letters, diaries—even her conversation as reported here by Frances Partridge. It was tart and unexpected, like an olive, and immensely fresh and sharp—myopic, I used to call it. She, like almost all the Stracheys, was very shortsighted. She was also (unlike most other Stracheys) very lovely and possessed of a natural vanity which made her for many years refuse to wear spectacles, a procedure with which Alys and my mother had absolutely no sympathy.

Her descriptions of things and people seem to reflect the close approach of the myopic, the way in which details seem to come forward and generalities, clichés and preconceptions vanish in the fog. Everything—a cat in the snow, for instance, or a person laying a table—seems to have been newly washed and encountered for the first time, and found both fascinating and funny.

She was, as Frances Partridge says, highly intelligent but not brainy; far from uninterested in abstract and philosophical questions, but approaching everything from an emotional angle combined with a passion for detail. My brother and I used to call her “Name Six” because of her habit of insisting, if one remarked for instance, that this or that person had some particular characteristic such as kindness or malice, that one gave several examples of their behaviour to support the claim.

Poor Julia. She was never really happy, never felt safe with life except for very short periods. Her fantastic practical incompetence, unpunctuality and vagueness were, I am sure, part of her retreat from what she saw as “the rejection of the Cosmos”. Her social life when she was young was colourful and varied, and she kept her friends to the bitter end, but her inertia had prevented her from acquiring much formal education or keeping such jobs as she was given. When her affairs became too complicated she would retreat to our house in Bloomsbury, where my mother, try as she might, found it literally unbearable to share a house with her. The relief all round when Julia got married for the first time at twenty-five was great, but the marriage was not a successful one, and Julia’s happiness did not last.

Frances Marshall had been Julia’s closest friend at two schools. One of her sisters had married a cousin of Julia’s and another had married David Garnett, author of *Lady into Fox*. Frances herself married Ralph Partridge, close friend of Julia’s uncle, Lytton Strachey, and after Lytton’s death Ralph and Frances lived on in his house, Hamspray. Julia renewed

her friendship with them and became a constant visitor there.

After her friend’s death Frances Partridge tried to reorganize the mass of papers Julia had left, including the beginnings of what was to have been an autobiography. It was a monstrous task which has been most lovingly and skilfully completed.

To know Julia was at once alarming, delightful and maddening, and all these qualities appear most clearly in this book, together with the tragedy which increasingly overtook her. Whether the reason for this was a real rejection by others or a self-destructive retreat by Julia herself, one sorrows for her, and is grateful that her work and character have been so sympathetically preserved for us.

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