The Daphne du Maurier Companion

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Extract

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Sir Christopher Frayling

I first encountered Daphne du Maurier's fiction through film adaptations: first on the big screen, *The Scapegoat*, starring Alec Guinness, then Hitchcock's *Rebecca*, *The Birds* and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now*, then on television *Jamaica Inn* and *Hungry Hill*. I read the Truffaut/Hitchcock interview book to learn more about the background to *Rebecca* and *The Birds* and discovered that the old rogue considered Daphne du Maurier to be a 'novelette' sort of person who belonged to 'a whole school of feminine literature' and whom he already deemed to be 'old fashioned' and lightweight as early as 1940. On delving deeper, I discovered that literary critics tended on the whole to say similar things. Daphne du Maurier's novels and short stories were filed away under 'romantic fiction' and sometimes 'Gothic fiction', which meant that the author did not begin to qualify for entry into English literature's almost all-male county cricket eleven. Great for train journeys and rainy days by the seaside but that was about it.

I don't know why, maybe because I grew up in a house full of popular fiction, but I have always felt queasy about the critical reflex which tends to patronise a writer just because she/he is popular. It is as if, in the eyes of some parts of academe and the literary establishment, a wide readership automatically confers pulp status. At least that was the orthodoxy then. In the case of Daphne du Maurier, the verdict was particularly unjust – as I discovered when I began seriously to read her books in the

1970s, starting with *Rebecca* (who doesn't?), then most of her other novels, then writings on the Cornish landscape, the biographies and autobiographies. This coincided with my researches into Gothic literature, another genre of fiction that was despised in those days. Since then, there has been an ever increasing critical focus on both categories – 'romantic fiction' and 'Gothic fiction' – what they mean and what they don't mean, as well as deep reappraisals of their most substantial authors. In the United States, the most dramatic reappraisal has been of the work of Mary Shelley. In Britain, of Daphne du Maurier. It has been a spectacular transformation scene.

Criticism of purple prose about crashing waves on the Cornish coast has made way for careful and scholarly readings that stress just how gently subversive she could be – challenging, among other things, her own family legacy 'bequeathed to me by people long since dead', idealised images of the family, conventional sexuality, the point of view of the narrator, the fantasy worlds of childhood, and the clichés of landscape and heritage. Indeed, *Rebecca* no longer seems to be seen as a 'romance' at all. Her work looks increasingly rich and dark. In 1996, after completing my *Nightmare* series for BBC television, I proposed a fifty-minute documentary on Daphne du Maurier, to coincide with the first transmission of the two-part Portman productions/Carlton version of *Rebecca*, starring Faye Dunaway, Charles Dance and Diana Rigg. The programme would explore her changing reputation, and would include her hand-written notes for *The Progress of Julius* (Julius was to be presented as a kind of Citizen Kane before his time), family photographs, and a rare piece of film directed by her son, Christian Browning, of Daphne du Maurier at the age of seventy.

The programme was never commissioned, perhaps because it was not at all what ITV expected. Not a smuggler in sight, and it was absolutely not a travelogue. All the more reason, then, to welcome this timely and exhilarating centenary collection, *The*

Daphne du Maurier Companion, which sensitively examines, from a wide variety of perspectives, the person, her places, her writings, the adaptations of her work, and finishes with a short story that has never been published before. Alfred Hitchcock did concede that the dark, open-ended and uncharacteristic final sequence of *The Birds* owed much to Daphne du Maurier, and that she wasn't, after all, a writer of happy endings. He was right. The story of this remarkable, still underrated writer is far from over.

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Introduction

Helen Taylor

Daphne du Maurier's writing deserves a fresh look. She has long enjoyed national and international fame, primarily for her best-selling *Rebecca* (1938), and remains one of Britain's most popular novelists, her books translated into many languages and read all over the world. The renowned film versions of her stories, including Alfred Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940) and *The Birds* (1963), and Nicolas Roeg's *Don't Look Now* (1973), have brought her a global reputation, which is continually enhanced by television, radio and theatre adaptations.

However, her status as a household name has sometimes led to patronising commentary, the tag of 'romantic novelist' repeated relentlessly. She deployed – indeed transformed – the romance genre, but the term has been used to diminish her achievement. Aware it was used demeaningly, implying a form of writing for women readers of limited intelligence, she fiercely repudiated it. Without doubt, the extraordinary success of *Rebecca*, mistakenly classified as a 'romance', led to the neglect of her generically varied and thematically wide-ranging body of fiction and non-fiction writing. Happily, in recent decades, distinguished international critics and biographers have paid serious attention to, and offered challenging perspectives on, a complex writer and her work.

While best known for *Rebecca*, du Maurier produced an impressive range of work during a writing life that spanned six decades. Her biographer, Margaret Forster, wrote that at least

three of her novels deserved a place in any literary canon: *Rebecca, The Scapegoat* (1957) and *The House on the Strand* (1969).[1] While there is general agreement about the first and last, others admire different works, including the short stories, demonstrating the broad scope of her considerable output. Her appeal to readers lies in her strong narrative drive, superb use of suspense and horror, a psychologically astute gothic and romantic sensibility, and the creation of an array of unforgettably luminous and haunting characters. 'Last night I dreamt I went to Manderley again' is one of literature's most quoted first lines.

Born in 1907, the granddaughter of George du Maurier, renowned artist, *Punch* cartoonist and author of three novels (including the celebrated *Trilby*) and daughter of famous actor-manager Gerald du Maurier, Daphne seemed destined – and was urged on strongly by her father – for a brilliant career. Following the immediate critical and popular success of *The Loving Spirit* (1931), her first novel published when she was just twenty-three, she went on to produce a varied body of writing, including eighteen novels, two plays, two family biographies and an edited collection of letters by her grandfather, three literary biographies, an autobiography and a collection of autobiographical essays, an illustrated study of Cornwall, and dozens of short stories and articles. As part of a well-known bohemian theatrical London-based family, the fledgling writer received considerable attention and found first publication relatively easy. After three novels with Heinemann, she was contracted by respected publisher and New Left Books founder, Victor Gollancz, whose editorial and personal support offered the writer a lifetime's worth of advice and help, and with whose company the books were successfully published until after her death. In 1969, she was made a Dame of the British Empire.

Her family owned a holiday home in Fowey, Cornwall, where the young Daphne discovered her earliest literary subjects and began to write novels. It was also in Fowey that she met and

married Major Tommy Browning, with whom she had three children. Although Tommy's Army career involved international travel and a London home, Cornwall was where Daphne settled and took out long leases on two houses, first Menabilly, then Kilmarth, where she died in 1989. It is often suggested that the writer went to live in deepest Cornwall to escape from a contemporary world she dubbed as one of 'meagre mediocrity',[2] immersing herself in wild scenery, seascapes and large houses. To a certain extent she colluded with this, engaging in projects such as *Vanishing Cornwall* and *Enchanted Cornwall*. The narrow perspectives of such a life seem borne out by her autobiography, *Myself When Young* – a personal and intimate account, making only passing reference to events beyond her immediate circle. It is worth remembering, however, that she lived in Britain during an eventful and often traumatic century, including two world wars: in the first, she had to leave London to escape Zeppelin raids, while in the second, her husband was a key figure in the Battle of Arnhem. After the war, Tommy assumed a public role, working for the royal family, and she herself travelled widely in Europe, living for significant periods abroad and in London. Long residence in a small Cornish town, perceived to be peripheral to the nation's heart, did not isolate her from those complex political and social changes, which appear allusively or metaphorically in her writings. Furthermore, her correspondence, especially with publisher Victor Gollancz and writer Oriel Malet, reveals a lively interest in a wide range of matters, an eclectic reading programme, and engagement with matters of the day. Inter alia, there are lively discussions about the death in 1963 of John F. Kennedy, the rise of Cornish Nationalism, Zionism, spirituality and gender politics.[3] And, despite being continually identified as a very 'English' – indeed a specifically 'regional English' – writer, du Maurier had a broadly European sensibility that is manifest in her fiction's many European settings and characters.

As is clear from her name – maintained as nom de plume,

despite the married name, Browning – du Maurier's family tree may be traced back to eighteenth-century Anglo-French alliances. Sent by her parents in 1925 to finishing school in Camposena, near Paris, the eighteen-year-old got to know the city she continued throughout her life to adore – enjoying everything from the cobbled streets and lights of Place de la Concorde to the cultural delights of the Opera, the Louvre and Versailles. Daphne du Maurier was enchanted by the sensual and cosmopolitan atmosphere of the city, and she felt a new affinity with her grandfather, George, and part of a truly European legacy – all of which she mined throughout her writing career. She developed a passion for French writers, such as Guy de Maupassant, whose influence may be felt within her work. In Paris, too, she enjoyed her first 'Venetian' (her term for lesbian) feelings which would recur later; at that time, they were for her sophisticated older teacher, Mlle Fernande Yvon, who became a long-term close friend and guide to the impressionable and restless young woman. As the years went by, she became absorbed in her French roots and made several research trips (also requesting friends and paid researchers to investigate) in order to prepare her fiction and biographies focused on that French history. Apart from her ancestral life story, *The Du Mauriers* (1937), many novels and stories included French settings and characters, while *Mary Anne* (1954) and *The Glass-Blowers* (1963) are fictional accounts of her ancestors' lives, expressions of her passions for that country and her own genealogy.

Tessa, her oldest child, recounts being taken to Paris at the age of sixteen, fêted there by a young American Doubleday editor, who took them to 'the best restaurants, the Ritz Bar, even nightclubs'. She describes being 'enchanted' and claims, '[I] had never seen my mother in such good spirits. She seemed to shed her years and we became girls together.'[4] Du Maurier described her grandfather George's attitude towards his family as 'deep and strong and very French',[5] and joked to her friend Oriel about

a special feeling for her son, Kits ('my French blood, I expect'). Indeed, when Kits married in 1964, she was pleased by his growing maturity, commenting that 'all that French family thing will come out in him, when they have children'.[6]

Her grandfather's example, and the artistic milieu of Paris, charmed her. She told Victor Gollancz how much she enjoyed visiting galleries, and imagined herself painting, whenever in London or other European cities. Du Maurier's powers of observation are formidable; her ability to capture the essence of particular places may be seen in more than one creative art form. During the 1950s, she tried her hand at oils, secretly working on canvas while ostensibly writing in her hut in the grounds of Menabilly. She claimed painting as a displacement or therapeutic activity for a disturbed mind: at the time, her husband was drinking heavily and their marriage was troubled, while she was also empathising with the depressions and breakdowns of her biographical subject, painter and writer Branwell Brontë. 'Therapy for schizophrenics!' was how she described painting to her writer friend Oriel Malet, relishing the joy of 'slap[ping] onto canvas what my mind sees, especially the deep, ruddy earth!' and 'getting smothered in oil . . . covering these boards with great smears!' She claimed her paintings 'have a sort of power, like paintings done by madmen. (Perhaps I am!)' but later dismissed them in a television interview as sharing the qualities of American folk artist, beloved of Hallmark cards, Grandma Moses.[7]

In the eight oil paintings that survive from this period, there is evidence of a competent amateur, creating atmosphere through shape and colour (albeit with an unsophisticated use of perspective) – very far from the 'mad' scenario she suggests: one of the glass-blowers' cottages later featuring in her novel of that name, one a French château for *The Scapegoat*, others depicting rural and watery landscapes. Significantly, none of these is a recognisably *English* setting.

By all accounts, Daphne du Maurier was a voracious reader who welcomed recommendations from friends, editors and family. In her autobiography and correspondence, she alluded to Katherine Mansfield as a great favourite; by delightful coincidence, as she discovered in adulthood, the window of her childhood Hampstead home nursery overlooked Mansfield's Acacia Road house bedroom.[8] In 1964, she took the trouble to find the writer's grave in the cemetery at Fontainebleau. Other women writers also feature in her letters. Provocatively, she urged Victor Gollancz to include in an anthology Sappho's famously erotic poem to Aphrodite. Her contemporaries, such as Rosamond Lehmann, Mary Webb and Agatha Christie, feature briefly in correspondence, sometimes suggesting an uneasy rivalry. She did not mingle with these writers, and referred fairly rudely to those who spoke at literary events and who reviewed her books (though she was very encouraging to younger women such as Oriel Malet and Julie Myerson). She followed her own sales and those of others, perhaps seeing women as more direct competition than male writers. In 1965, she confided to Malet that there was 'a new person who has rather taken over from me called Mary Stewart, who sells a lot. I don't now.'[9] When feverishly writing *Hungry Hill* in 1942, she predicted it would be her longest book, 'probably longer than *Gone With the Wind*', and in her last years, with failing memory, she asked Malet, 'Do tell me, did I write *Gone With the Wind*, or was it someone else?'[10]

As many critics have observed, the Brontës were extremely important to du Maurier and, from the first novel, *The Loving Spirit*, with its title and five epigraphs taken from poems by Emily Brontë, she transformed and adapted their work into her own. She was delighted to be invited to write an introduction for the 1954 Macdonalds Classics edition of *Wuthering Heights*, and increasingly felt proprietorial about the Brontë sisters and their brother Branwell. In 1973, repeating her earlier criticism of Brontë biographer Margot Peters, she berated Margaret Drabble's

television documentary of the Brontës for its silence about the childhood legendary land of Gondal that constituted their first literary landscape. For du Maurier, this was a magical, secret world of the imagination that spoke powerfully to her own creative impulse; the word 'Gondal' itself became a code for a welcome escape from reality into make-believe and pretence.[11] Its profound influence on her may help explain the many code words and names used by the family: as a girl, du Maurier adopted the persona of a schoolboy, 'Eric Avon', and in adulthood referred to herself variously as 'Bing', 'Tray', 'Track', 'Scroop of Masham', while all the family had nicknames ('Moper' for Tommy, 'Kicky' for George du Maurier, 'Piffy' for her sister Angela). This play on names was also characteristic of her ancestors – not least the master glass-blower, Robert Mathurin Busson, who fled France for England, adding 'du Maurier' to his name to create a fictional aristocratic history. The Brontës' world of make-believe suited Busson's fellow fantasist, his great-great-granddaughter, very well indeed.

Du Maurier has been the subject of several biographical and autobiographical accounts. But it was only when Margaret Forster was commissioned that the writer found her ideal biographer. Forster's previous studies were of long-dead figures (Charles Edward Stuart, William Thackeray and Elizabeth Barrett Browning) and she was seeking a new subject. One day in 1989, idling through her bookshelves, she accidentally knocked down *Rebecca*, a novel she had not read since early teenage. Rereading it with fascination, she wrote to her editor, Carmen Callil, suggesting that, if no one else had done it, she should write the life of Daphne du Maurier. Callil replied by return with a post-card that briefly said no such book existed and it was a brilliant idea. The very day she received the postcard, BBC Radio 4's arts programme, *Kaleidoscope*, and the *Sunday Times* newspaper, rang to ask – since Daphne du Maurier had just died – would she provide obituaries? Daphne's children were impressed by the

Sunday Times obituary, so when Callil talked to agents and executors, they were receptive to the idea. In due course, Callil commissioned the biography. Margaret Forster jokes that her decision to write this biography was finally confirmed when she bought a new red jacket at the London store, Fenwick's, to promote *Daphne du Maurier* during a book tour. On the label listing its price, she found the garment's individual maker's name listed: Rebecca.

Forster has said that writing the biography was 'wildly exciting' – so much so, she has accepted no subsequent biographical commission.[12] Daphne du Maurier's children and editor considerably admire the book, though all share a regret that it focuses on the writer's 'dark' side rather than her 'life-enhancing' lightness, wicked sense of humour and fun. Forster acknowledges this, saying that it was the brooding, secretive elements of the writer that most attracted her, and that she may well have contributed to a more serious and sombre portrait than that of the woman they all knew. However, she shares with scholars the view that a further biography – probably outlining the true nature of du Maurier's relationship with her father, children and (particularly) women friends and employees – will need to be written when du Maurier's early diaries, embargoed until 2029, are released for public scrutiny, and when more letters and other materials are openly available.

Literary and cultural critics are increasingly engaging with Daphne du Maurier's work and its screen versions from new theoretical perspectives, analysing a wide range of her fiction and biography in terms of psychoanalytic, feminist, Gothic and cultural materialist studies. Since the 1980s, critics such as Roger Bromley, Alison Light, Richard Kelly, Avril Horner and Sue Zlosnik, and Nina Auerbach have offered significant insights into du Maurier's recurrent themes of incestuous desire, doppelgänger figures, dynastic and dysfunctional families, polymorphous or multiple sexualities, and fractured notions of appropriate class

and gender roles, as well as drawing attention to her literary experimentation with narrative voices and inconclusive endings.[13] These have helped transform a writer pigeon-holed as romantic and parochially regional into a significant literary figure. Nevertheless, it must be remembered that – for many readers – the du Maurier who has brought alive an idyllic pastoral Cornwall through her atmospheric settings and precise descriptions is infinitely precious. One reader, Sue Miller, speaks for others when she relates the experience of reading du Maurier while living abroad: 'I needed to live a fantasy life of wet green hedges and cool stone corridors and read read read about Englishness. I loved *Rebecca* and *The House on the Strand* because they enhanced my fantasy of living in a cool damp climate amongst ghosts from English history.' Several enthusiasts have told me they can 'smell the hedgerows' when reading her work.[14] An enhanced sense of place is one of this writer's great qualities, to which her readers – yearning for the 'otherness' of a Celtic Eden – respond with great enthusiasm.

As you drive down into the Fowey area, a sign greets you: 'Du Maurier Country'. In Fowey, the town she adopted as her own, there is a postcard on sale, 'Daphne du Maurier in Cornwall', depicting a map of the county, annotated with references to the writer's personal associations and works: Pendennis Castle featured in *The King's General*; Frenchman's Creek, where Lady Dona St Columb fell for her French pirate; Bodmin Moor's Jamaica Inn, inspiring the eponymous novel and now a themed inn incorporating a Dame Daphne du Maurier memorial room; Kilmarth, setting for *The House on the Strand*; and of course Menabilly, transmuted into *Rebecca*'s Manderley. This phenomenon is not unique to du Maurier's neck of the woods – there are also 'Shakespeare', 'Catherine Cookson', even '*Pride and Prejudice*' countries/counties, together with themed tea towels and coffee mugs linking particular areas of the nation with writers who lived and set their works there. Literary tourism has a long

history. Tennyson visited Lyme Regis because Jane Austen had set an incident in *Persuasion* there, and the seaside resort Westward Ho! was named after Charles Kingsley's 1854 eponymous novel.[15] Cornwall has had famed literary associations since the early twentieth century, from the *Troytown* tales of Arthur Quiller-Couch (also based in Fowey) to Winston Graham and the Poldark sagas, Susan Howatch's *Penmarric* and Rosamunde Pilcher's novels – all designed to 'provide a text for the glove compartment of the tourist's car'.[16]

The Daphne du Maurier Festival of Arts and Literature was established in 1996, and quickly became an established part of the Fowey tourist calendar. According to Festival Coordinator, Jonathan Aberdeen, its eponymous name 'opened a lot of doors for us because everybody knew Daphne du Maurier – everybody recognised the name, so we didn't have to explain what the Festival was about.'[17] This naming a Festival after a writer rather than place is increasingly in tune with the branding of tourist sites; in the early years of this century, for example, neighbouring county Devon's holiday town Torquay participated in an annual 'Agatha Christie Week'.

Fowey is an exquisite small town built into a steep cliff, and the majority of events at the Festival take place in marquees erected on the Fowey Community College cricket pitch. Perched high above the main streets, exposed to the vagaries of wind, weather and shrieking rooks, the Festival site seems to chime perfectly with du Maurier's own anarchic land- and weatherscapes. The fact that you must sometimes strain to hear a talk in the town hall because a band starts playing a little too soon on the quay suggests to Festival-goers that they are an intrusion (albeit welcome) into a compact Cornish coastal town. Reminders in local shops and publicity material that London-born Daphne du Maurier embraced this rather inaccessible part of Cornwall as her home lure visitors to steep themselves in the du Maurier 'spirit'. Particularly popular during the Festival are guided walks

('*Rebecca* and the du Maurier Coastline', 'Daphne du Maurier's Fowey', 'Castle Dor', etc.). As Jonathan Aberdeen says, 'Daphne du Maurier used to walk the coastal footpath and aficionados love the fact that they can literally follow in her footsteps and see the sights that inspired her. That gives them a great buzz and it's a point of contact. The fans of du Maurier do get a real sense of her being here in this area.'

This Companion is published in the centenary year of Daphne du Maurier's birth. Between 2003 and 2007, Virago reissued almost all of du Maurier's works, commissioning new introductions, mostly by well-known contemporary women writers. It seemed a fitting commemoration to combine these very personal, original introductions into a single volume. They are complemented by new chapters and interviews; the Companion is thus a tribute to a much-loved but often critically underestimated writer, offered by members of her family, her editor at Gollancz, literary critics and established writers from different backgrounds. It focuses on both the most familiar and also lesser-known and neglected novels, stories and biographical writing. Its aim is to demonstrate the scope of her concerns and achievements – hopefully to quell for ever the myth of a humourless, Cornish cliff-walking upper-middle-class recluse who wrote only one good novel.

The Companion closes with a forgotten short story by Daphne du Maurier, discovered by Fowey-based bookseller, Ann Willmore, in the American journal, *Cosmopolitan*. 'And His Letters Grew Colder' is one of du Maurier's earliest publications and contains the elements that were characteristic of the young writer's work, and came to permeate all her fiction: an edgy, cynical tone; grim humour and a shocking conclusion; an account of unreliable and ruthless male desire. It is an example of her youthful stories that are startling for a woman of fairly limited experience – in Margaret Forster's phrase, 'bleak, bitter and sad',

revealing a profound disillusionment with male-female relationships.[18] It serves to warn us that this is no writer of idealistic and optimistic romance; from her earliest years, with acute observation and irony, Daphne du Maurier plumbed the depths of human betrayal, exploitation and despair, while at the same time evoking life's unpredictable moments of intense pleasure and desire, often with a wry wit. It also reminds us that, when we curl up to read anything written by this chameleon and versatile writer, we are often in for a disconcerting, subversive, as well as hugely enjoyable, surprise.