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**ALLUSIVE SPARK: *THE PRIME OF MISS JEAN BRODIE* AND O.**

**DOUGLAS**

In Chapter 2 of Muriel Spark's *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1961) in one of Spark's characteristic time switches, the narrative suddenly moves to a middle-aged Sandy Stranger, now in a convent where she is known as Sister Helena of the Transfiguration.<sup>1</sup> She is talking to one of the numerous visitors permitted, by special dispensation, to speak to her after the publication of her 'psychological treatise on the nature of moral perception, "The Transfiguration of the Commonplace"', 31. Her present visitor is a man who grew up in Edinburgh at about the same time as Sandy. Asked by him about the influences of her teens she invokes, of course, Miss Jean Brodie: 'there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime', 32. And Sandy's mind goes back to an educational trip with the charismatic teacher through some of the seedier parts of Edinburgh. In a witty Sparkian layering, Sandy's childhood mind is only half-engaged with the Edinburgh streets because in her imagination she is 'composing a formal invitation' that she will send to Alan Breck, the dubious hero of Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, 'a year and a day after their breath-taking flight through the heather', 34. In a manner not untypical of young readers, Sandy has replaced Stevenson's David Balfour, a rather replaceable protagonist, with herself, calmly changing gender and status as she does so. Sandy imagines sending out her invitation to dinner 'on Tuesday the 6<sup>th</sup> of January at 8 o'clock' from her new address. She expects that the address will surprise Alan. The invitation will come from a 'lonely harbour house on the coast of Fife – described in a novel by the daughter of John Buchan – of which Sandy had now by devious means become the mistress', 35. It is not explained what the devious

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<sup>1</sup> Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, 1961; ed. Alan Taylor (Edinburgh, 2018).

means are, but, then, nothing can be more devious than the imagination. Alan Breck's address is not given.

Sandy, or more likely Spark herself, whose voice slips in and out of the narrative, is wrong to identify the author as John Buchan's daughter, for the author of the novel Spark obliquely invokes, was John Buchan's sister Anna who wrote under the pen name O. Douglas. Two of her novels, *The Proper Place* (1926) and *The Day of Small Things* (1930), are set largely in Harbour House, Kirkmeikle, a fictional east coast town. Nicole Rutherford and her mother Lady Jane Rutherford, forced to sell their ancestral seat in the Borders, have retired to Kirkmeikle. The house and town with its socially mixed population becomes Nicole's 'proper place', even though the love of her life, an explorer, has died on an expedition. Nicole rejects all other suitors but she is unembittered and becomes absorbed by the daily life around her: 'a new bit of work, old books to read – small things ... small things but certainly not to be despised'.<sup>2</sup>

Thus Spark extends the hinterland of her novel by quietly pulling in these middle-brow domestic novels. For Sandy, Sister Helena of the Transfiguration, clutching the bars of the grille of 'the dim parlour', has never found her proper place, her Harbour House. And although she understands the notion of the transfiguration of the commonplace and can write about it, she never, unlike Nicole, achieves the peace of transcendence in her own life. Spark uses her allusion, rather cruelly, for that is her way, to suggest that while sentimental fiction may allow its heroines the daily enjoyment of small things, her own tougher kind of writing will only offer Sandy intellectual comprehension of this enjoyment – from behind bars.

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<sup>2</sup> O. Douglas, *The Day of Small Things* (London, 1930), 304.

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