

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

***Shirley Hazzard: New Critical Essays*, edited by Brigitta Olubas (Sydney University Press, 2014)**

When Shirley Hazzard published her first short stories in the early 1960s in the *New Yorker* magazine, she was herself a New Yorker, working in a clerical job in the United Nations. As an emerging writer she became friends with the British novelist Muriel Spark, who was then living in New York, enjoying the success of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*. Spark introduced her, in 1963, to the man who would become her husband, the distinguished novelist, biographer and translator Francis Steegmuller. He was widowed, 24 years older than her, and possessed of a private income. For the next 30-odd years they lived a life rich in friends and literary work between New York, where their circle included Lionel and Diana Trilling, W.H. Auden, Christopher Isherwood, Evelyn Waugh and other literary luminaries, and Italy.

Born in Sydney in 1931, Shirley Hazzard spent her childhood there but at the end of the war moved with her family to Hong Kong, where her father had been appointed Trade Commissioner, and thence (after a short sojourn in New Zealand) to New York in 1951, where he had a similar appointment. The young woman's UN job took her to Naples for a year in 1956, a formative experience. During that time she made a lasting friendship with a family in Siena, with whom she spent her summers for years afterwards. So by the time she began publishing her writing, she was already a cosmopolitan New Yorker, whose experience of the post-war world had brought her into contact with both the British forces in Hong Kong, and the American involvement in the new UN. Her writing career reflects both her literary and her political interests. She has published several books on the UN as well as essays and works of fiction. Her last novel, *The Great Fire* (2003), which involves a revisionary perspective on Hiroshima and the aftermath of World War 2, was awarded both the US National Book Award and the Australian Miles Franklin Literary Award.

Perhaps because of some lingering belief that she is an expatriate writer, perhaps because her oeuvre is relatively small (over half a century, four novels, two books of short stories and several volumes of essays and memoir) Hazzard is not widely recognised as the major literary voice she undoubtedly is. Although there have been some significant essays on individual novels, her work has been relatively neglected by critics, and Brigitta Olubas's *Shirley Hazzard: Literary Expatriate and Cosmopolitan Humanist* (2012) was the first critical monograph to appear. In the book under review, Olubas has brought together a number of critical essays on Hazzard's fiction with two biographical pieces (by Jan McGuinness, based on her interviews with the writer, and by Spark's biographer, Martin Stannard). Her intention is to expand the critical conversation on this important writer.

Hazzard's allusive, subtly layered prose invites critical readings that are attentive to its literariness, and to its characteristic movements forwards and back in time. Interestingly, her early novellas, *The Evening of the Holiday* (1966) and *The Bay of Noon* (1970), both set in Italy, have attracted more readings in this collection than the later novels. They yield up their riches to various approaches. *The Evening of the Holiday* is read through its use of irony (John Frow, 'Future Anterior') and through genre (Fiona Morrison on rites of passage and pastoral elegy). *The Bay of Noon* (1970) has Brigid Rooney reading for the reciprocity between landscape and character and Sharon Ouditt focussing on the representation of Naples itself, while Lucy Dougan explores many of its intertexts from the verbal and visual arts, beginning with Rossellini's 1953 film, *Journey to Italy*.

There is already a significant body of critical analysis of *The Transit of Venus* in existence, but the two essays on it in this collection offer entirely fresh approaches: Gail Jones performs a virtuoso account of the way Hazzard imagines great historical forces at work in ordinary lives through her 'bold wedding of stars, glass and human bodies' (76); in his essay 'Returning to the scene of the

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crime', Robert Dixon takes up the challenge of re-reading this text as a highly literary detective story where the clues all point to questions of ethical responsibility.

Claire Seiler's essay is the only one to tackle *The Great Fire*. She begins by recounting some of the reservations expressed by reviewers when it appeared – 'romantic in plot but retrograde in politics, rooted in postwar East Asia yet evidently "anti-post-colonial"' – but she goes on to argue convincingly that these reservations 'echo the defining ambivalence of the novel itself' (100). This ambivalence she relates in turn to the trope of 'suspension' which distinguishes postwar Anglo-American fiction. Alongside this contextualising of Hazzard in mid-century literature, Nicholas Birns contextualises her UN stories, *People in Glass Houses* (1967), in mid-century Cold War politics. Highlighting the idealist roots of Hazzard's satire on bureaucratic failure and American entitlement, he also points out that the Italy of her Italian stories is not only a literary construct, but also a Cold War terrain, which she examines as 'a backdrop for psychological self-questioning and tragic romance' (119-20).

This collection, together with Olubas's monograph, will prove invaluable for readers and critics who want to explore the power and subtlety of Hazzard's fiction. A bibliography of her work, including the non-fiction, would have been a useful addition.

Susan Sheridan