

BOOK REVIEW

Suzanne Robinson. *Peggy Glanville-Hicks: Composer and Critic*
Urbana, Chicago, Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2019
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Reviewed by Emma Townsend

[M]y task as a biographer was to present her complexities, contradictions and multiple selves, and to situate rather than to exonerate her. My version is surely as subjective as any other, but I would rather present the life in all its chromatic intensity than sidestep the flaws like puddles on the street.¹

In a recent article in the *Australian Journal of Biography and History*, Suzanne Robinson reflects on her writing of the biography *Peggy Glanville-Hicks: Composer and Critic* and on how she, as biographer, conceptually sought to represent her Australian-American protagonist. Robinson notes that her research revealed a character of ‘wit, humour, passion and stoicism’ who ‘very artfully conjured for herself a life that matched her concept of the life of a significant creative artist.’² She also found Glanville-Hicks to be flawed, with a propensity for mythmaking, and whose opinions and outbursts she found horrifying. Grounded in ‘new’ and feminist biography, Robinson heeds the call of Sara Alpern and colleagues for biographers to permit ambiguities and discrepancies,³ and is mindful of Liz Stanley’s view that the past ‘is a mythology created

¹ Suzanne Robinson, ‘Heroines and Their “Moments of Folly”’: Reflections on Writing the Biography of a Woman Composer,’ *Australian Journal of Biography and History* 3 (2020): 38.

² Robinson, ‘Heroines and Their “Moments of Folly”’, 22.

³ Sara Alpern, Joyce Antler, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Ingrid Winther Scobie, ‘Introduction,’ in *The Challenge of Feminist Biography: Writing the Lives of Modern American Women* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 11, cited in Robinson, ‘Heroines and Their “Moments of Folly”’, 26.

out of scraps and traces and partial interpretations⁴ of both the subject's and researcher's pasts. She shies away from biography's tendency to treat its central characters as heroes and heroines, and instead seeks to situate rather than absolve Glanville-Hicks and to depict her protagonist's complexities, inconsistencies, and manifold selves.

Robinson more than succeeds in her aims in this biography of Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912–1990), telling a chronological story of an extraordinary woman. It spans from her family origins and early years in suburban Melbourne, her rise to the centre of mid-twentieth-century American modernism and music via compositional studies in Europe with teachers including Ralph Vaughan Williams and Nadia Boulanger, to her lengthy periods based in Greece before returning to Australia for her final years in Sydney. That this is the third biography of Glanville-Hicks highlights the narrative attraction of her life, though none of the prior texts match the knowledge of their subject as extensively as Robinson's offering.⁵ Drawing on a vast array of source material, Robinson forensically explores a vibrant life in many ways far removed from the typical Western patriarchal plot. The monograph is well written and nicely pitched to suit both a specialist musicological and general readership, and contains numerous insightful music analyses that are woven into the fabric of Glanville-Hicks's biography.

Glanville-Hicks's public achievements are formidable. Robinson observes that, with hindsight and an awareness of her context, they are 'more momentous than she seemed to realize' (p. 258). These are placed within her broader narrative and then emphasised in summary in the Afterword. To mention only a few, these include: an extensive compositional output including many large-scale pieces; high-profile opera and ballet performances, with the opera *Nausicaa* premiering in Athens to an audience of thousands; being the first American-based woman to receive an opera commission; and working as a critic for eight seasons at the *New York Herald Tribune* under Virgil Thomson.

Robinson describes a witty, stylish, talented, and determined figure, and provides details of Glanville-Hicks's many personal and professional relationships with great male artists, her attendance at glamorous parties and concerts, and her holidays with members of the cultural elite. In 1950s Greenwich Village, New York, for example, she mixed amongst the likes of Paul Bowles, John Cage, John Latouche, and Charles Henri Ford. Her composition *Thomsonania* (1949), a work written in honour of (and centred on the peers of) Virgil Thomson, was performed alongside the premiere of Cage's *Imaginary Landscape 4* for 12 radios (1951) and a William Russell work featuring Cage performing at the piano with his elbows. A particularly notorious event within the history of American experimentalism, *Musical America* reported of this concert that 'cries of "It's an outrage ... insulting ... rank amateurs" were offset by lusty bravos. A storm of boos and hisses answered by applause and protests drowned out the second half of Peggy Glanville-Hicks's satire on Schönberg' (p. 104).

Robinson also teases out the parts of Glanville-Hicks's story that are at odds with her own desired life narrative as a successful composer and critic who married the genius composer

⁴ Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), 86, cited in Robinson, 'Heroines and Their "Moments of Folly"', 38.

⁵ These biographies are: Wendy Beckett, *Peggy Glanville-Hicks* (Pymble, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1992); James Murdoch, *Peggy Glanville-Hicks: A Transposed Life* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002). Additional books devoted to Glanville-Hicks are: Deborah Hayes, *Peggy Glanville-Hicks: A Bio-bibliography* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) and Victoria Rogers, *The Music of Peggy Glanville-Hicks* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

Stanley Bate (a man who died before reaching his potential), and who was intricately linked to her great love, Paul Bowles. Glanville-Hicks's private world was often marred by fraught intimate relationships, poverty and poor health, and she could be nasty and vindictive. Possibly due to the hurt he had caused her, in a *Musical America* article, she describes Bowles as being 'potentially an extraordinary composer' (p. 96, emphasis added by Robinson), criticises him for writing for financial gain, and suggests that his compositions gravitate towards unemotional pastiche. She had a habit of concealment, of telling 'artfully contrived stories' (p. 3), and of mythmaking and her own 'immortalising process' (p. 257). Such was her desire to shape her own narrative, unsurprisingly little of her private correspondence still exists (although over fifty years of 'nakedly revealing' (p. 3) annual pocket diaries are extant), but many hundreds of letters relating to her associations with great men remain.

The protagonist for the vast majority of the monograph's main twenty-two chapters is 'Peggy.' Interestingly, the central character is very occasionally 'Glanville-Hicks' or 'Peggy Glanville-Hicks.' 'Glanville-Hicks' is the subject in moments such as when the central character is recounting her biography, when Robinson is reflecting on the broad brush strokes of her protagonist's life in the Introduction and Afterword, for reviews of prominent compositions, and for some landmark public-sphere events including significant premieres. Within the main body of the biography, this figure appears only fleetingly, before Robinson swiftly returns to 'Peggy.' This division disentangles the private world of 'Peggy' as Robinson's research suggests it was lived, from the public personage of 'Glanville-Hicks.' Glanville-Hicks's married identity is also on occasion emphasised through references to names such as 'Mrs Stanley Bate,' 'Peggy Bate,' or 'the Bates' to refer to both Glanville-Hicks and her then-husband, Stanley Bate. This unravelling plays an important role in feminist biography. Alpern and colleagues note that a 'woman's struggle [is] sometimes to fuse, sometimes to sever, the private and public dimensions of her life,'⁶ and in Glanville-Hicks's case, she privileged her public-sphere persona. It also somewhat inoculates the composer 'Glanville-Hicks' from 'Peggy's' more odious qualities, and facilitates a subtle foregrounding of tensions between the titular character's differing selves.

These multiple selves are shown to influence Glanville-Hicks's compositional output. During her marriage to Stanley Bate, her identity was tied to her husband's artistic success and her composition was sidelined. Lower pay due to her gender resulted in less time to compose. Robinson, however, highlights that her opera *Sappho* (1963) provided a space to unify these selves and to affirm the 'recognition of herself as a *woman* composer' (p. 210). Based on the Lawrence Durrell play centred on the ancient Greek female poet Sappho, *Sappho's* story is one of conflicted relationships between work and love and of a central character constantly questioning 'her place and gift' (p. 210). These were internal divergences that Glanville-Hicks intimately understood. Her score reflects this and includes sections that Robinson evocatively describes as containing 'eerie string harmonics and pentatonic and palindromic melodic patterns [to create] an exotic sound that signals Sappho's uniqueness' and, for a romantic interlude, as 'freighted with foreboding in the form of a grating descending semitone slur' (p. 213). Such was Glanville-Hicks's level of identification with Sappho that she moulded Durrell's words to convey a psychological portrait that she considered more realistic.

⁶ Alpern, Antler, Perry and Scobie, 'Introduction,' 11.

While Robinson finds Glanville-Hicks to be a distasteful character in some ways, she is not overly moralistic in her judgement of her subject. With respect of Glanville-Hicks's frequent lies, Robinson presents them as another facet of Glanville-Hicks's character. For Robinson, if 'the life as she recounted it differed in its detail from the life as it was lived, the whole was nevertheless true to her impression of it, and to dismiss the fairytale would be to ignore that essential truth' (p. 258). Moreover, Robinson links Glanville-Hicks's imaginative capacity to the extraordinary life that she led. For a woman to have constructed a life so distinctly different from the early twentieth-century suburban Melbourne world Glanville-Hicks was born into required immense creativity and self belief. On the final page, Robinson emphasises this point when she draws on a quote from Glanville-Hicks's close friend Yehudi Menuhin, who commends her 'for having ordered your life in the most remarkable, exemplary, imaginative and brilliant way' (p. 260).

In addition to Robinson's rich portrayal of Glanville-Hicks's chromatic intensity, complexities, contradictions, and her multi-faceted character, another strength of Robinson's monograph is its utilisation of well-placed and revealing contextualisations. These cover a myriad of topics such as the 1930s depression, two world wars, and more personal matters. Robinson also discerningly situates the impact of gender on Glanville-Hicks in her time. These not only focus on gender's influence on her compositional output, but intersect with a wide range of subjects such as education, behaviour, clothing, hairstyle, and relationships. The significance of gender within the biography is underscored on the last page of the central chapters when Robinson quotes a particularly lengthy and strident statement from Glanville-Hicks that not only foregrounds her thoughts with respect to gender but also captures her grit and determination.

From scraps and traces of extant material, Robinson has fashioned a fascinating story of an important composer navigating her way to the centre of mid-twentieth-century American composition. The depth of Robinson's understanding of her protagonist's life within this period is remarkable. Robinson has consummately balanced narrative interest, exhaustive detail, astute contextualisation, and theoretical considerations to produce a well-rounded, high-calibre biography.

About the Author

Emma Townsend is a PhD candidate at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music undertaking a thesis focused on mid-twentieth-century Australian women's composition.