

BRIGID BROPHY

Avant-Garde Writer, Critic, Activist



Edited by Richard Canning and Gerri Kimber

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Introduction

Richard Canning

Brigid Brophy (1929–95) was a British – but, by descent, equally Anglo-Irish – novelist, short story writer, dramatist, essayist, critic, artist, poet, polemicist, activist and sometime celebrity. Many of her publications defy generic classification, and so the following summary of her output might be contested. She was the author of (probably) eleven works of fiction, including these eight (or seven?) novels: *Hackenfeller's Ape* (1953), which concerns the relationship between an ape in London Zoo and a professor observing the animal's mating rituals; *The King of a Rainy Country* (1956), portraying a set of bohemians in post-war London and Venice; *Flesh: a novel* (1962), which recounts the erotic tutelage of an inexperienced husband by his wife; *The Finishing Touch* (1963; rev. edn 1987), set in a girls' finishing school in France, which amounts to a fully-realised homage to Brophy's novelistic hero Ronald Firbank, while also containing a portrait of the art historian and Soviet spy Anthony Blunt in fictional and cross-gendering guise as the headmistress; *The Snow Ball* (1964), Brophy's Mozartian novel, whose characters attend a ball dressed as characters from *Don Giovanni*; *In Transit: An Heroi-Cyclic Novel* (1969), one of a tiny handful of novels in English to manage to conceal the anatomical sex of their chief protagonist entirely, with the further distinction of deploying that utterly contemporary dystopia the airport lounge as its chief locale; *The Adventures of God in his Search for the Black Girl: A Novel and Some Fables* (1973), puns on George Bernard Shaw's 1932 parables about religious faith in *The Adventures of the Black Girl in Her Search for God*; and lastly *Palace without Chairs: A Baroque Novel* (1978), a playful, Shavian dialogue questioning the nature of democracy, set in an imaginary Middle European kingdom called Evarchia. Brophy's writing career then dramatically and cruelly ended: she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1983, in her early fifties.

She also wrote shorter fiction: her career began with the story volume *The Crown Princess and Other Stories* (1953). Brophy's radio play *The Waste Disposal Unit* was broadcast and published in 1964. *The Burglar* (1967), her only published stage play, had a West End run starring Jim Dale and Sian Phillips, which was directed by Frank Dunlop. *Pussy Owl: Superbeast* (1976) was Brophy's only work of children's fiction, though she later wrote a work of non-fiction for children with illustrations from pictures by the nineteenth-century Russian artist Gregoire Gagarin, entitled *The Prince and the Wild Geese* (1982).

Brophy wrote several acclaimed and highly influential non-fictional works: *Black Ship to Hell* (1962), her first and perhaps strangest, investigates humankind's destructive and self-destructive instincts, by way of Freudian psychoanalytic thinking; *Mozart the Dramatist: A New View of Mozart, His Operas and His Age* (1964; rev. edn 1990), still in print, remains an oft-cited study of the composer's art; *Black and White: A Portrait of Aubrey Beardsley* (1968) was followed by a second immersion in the *fin de siècle*, *Beardsley and his World* (1976); *Prancing Novelist: Defence of Fiction in the Form of a Critical Biography in Praise of Ronald Firbank* (1973) is what the title proclaims – and much more. She penned a huge number of reviews, essays and comment pieces, many gathered in the three volumes *Don't Never Forget: Collected Views and Reviews* (1966), *Baroque-'n'-Roll and Other Essays* (1987) and *Reads: A Collection of Essays* (1989). As a critic she took no prisoners: these books describe in stark, always utterly informed and persuasive terms a social and cultural world view, as well as a series of literary and aesthetic judgements that could encompass classical music, the fine arts, dance, popular culture, the applied arts and the history of the world. Lastly, the iconoclastic and highly controversial *Fifty Works of English and American Literature We Could Do Without* (1967) saw Brophy collaborate with her husband, the art historian and director of London's National Gallery Michael Levey, and the Australian biographer and critic Charles Osborne.

Her legacy today, nevertheless, lies both within and far beyond literary or cultural contexts. Therefore, as the title of this volume – remarkably, the first book ever dedicated to her – makes plain, our aim is to celebrate Brophy in the round: as an avant-garde writer, critic and activist, and much else besides. Brophy was a vital driving force behind the establishment of the UK Public Lending Right in 1979. She was, moreover, a key player in the establishment of today's global animal rights movement, following her 1965 *Sunday Times*

article, ‘The Rights of Animals’. We can now clearly see, as Gary Francione’s definitive account in this volume “‘Il faut que je vive’: Brigid Brophy and Animal Rights’ argues, that she had formulated ‘a nascent animal rights position twelve years before the publication of Tom Regan’s *The Case for Animal Rights* (or eighteen years, if you measure it from her 1965 essay)’ (p. 103). Not only this: as Francione reveals, Brophy’s ideas had ‘suggested elements of a truly radical animal *rights* position’, even though the subsequent history of what Francione calls ‘the Animal Movement’ effectively became overshadowed by Peter Singer, a ‘utilitarian who eschews moral rights’, according to Francione. Singer’s *Animal Liberation* (1975) and related advocacy may have had ‘an arguably greater impact in terms of audience [than Brophy]’ but it does not ‘recognise any moral imperative not to use and kill animals’ (p. 108). Brophy’s ethically informed perspective, Francione indicates, was the harder road, and thus the one not taken by most animal activists. Had that not been the case, he polemically concludes, ‘we would have an animal rights movement today rather than the “happy exploitation” movement that exists’ (p. 113).

Francione’s account is complemented in this volume by Kim Stallwood’s ‘A Felicitous Day for Fish’, part reminiscence, part evaluation of Brophy’s contribution to animal rights. Stallwood’s recollection of Brophy speaking at the RSPCA’s Rights of Animals symposium at Trinity College, Cambridge in 1977 sees the character of Brophy – at least, as a public speaker – move centre stage: there was ‘the dry humour, the deadpan delivery and the black nail varnish’ (p. 211). In 1981, he recollects, she delivered an address, also entitled ‘A Felicitous Day for Fish’, at a meeting of the Council for the Prevention of Cruelty by Angling, where Brophy railed against:

a fantasy to which our species is prone and which distorts our vision of the real world – the feudal, indeed the fascist, fantasy whereby we stamp around as the lords and bullies of everything and pretend that our most minor pleasures are so important in the scheme of things that they outweigh the entire life and outweigh the death agony of our fellow individual animals. (p. 214)

This polemical Brophy, characterised by what Stallwood calls her ‘mordant humour and unrelenting analysis’, could move effortlessly from one pointed observation or skewering to the next (p. 211). Thus, condescending to identify a trait within ‘the British’ which explains their proneness to confuse hunting and angling with notions

of ‘sport’ or good sportsmanship, she opined that they are ‘given to confusing the Royal Family with the Holy Family’ (p. 214). Such iconoclastic moments, where Brophy’s aloofness from British social or cultural mores was at its starkest, benefited obviously from her sense of her own Anglo-Irish heritage, inculcated by her author father John Brophy, and something which in turn captivated her fellow traveller, the novelist and philosopher Iris Murdoch, who, of course, had her own ‘deep but twisted Irish roots’.¹

Miles Leeson’s ‘Encoding Love: Hidden Correspondence in the Fiction of Iris Murdoch and Brigid Brophy’ takes us further than anyone to date in considering the creative writings of both authors in an informed bio-critical light. The phrase ‘deep but twisted’ might even be co-opted to describe the complex, tortuous and highly intellectual approach the writers took ‘to explore sexuality and gender in their work by importing their own relationship, laid out in letters and journals, on to the page’ (p. 159). As Leeson concludes, ‘[f]or neither woman was this the most defining relationship of their lives, but it was certainly a formative, intense, near-decade lived out in London, in regular romantic short breaks, and on paper’ (p. 159).

Brophy’s embrace of Irish logic and lore was demonstrated by her love of Wildean paradox and inversion, best *shewn* in her study not of Wilde himself – too many vultures had sought out that prey – but of his Anglo-Irish modernist novelist disciple, Ronald Firbank. The 600-page monograph *Prancing Novelist* may have created a genre in itself: certainly, no book in literary criticism or biography remotely resembles it. Peter Parker’s ‘*Prancing Novelist* and *Black and White*: Experiments in Biography’ celebrates that title alongside Brophy’s study of the English artist-illustrator Aubrey Beardsley, himself closely associated with Wilde and his circle. As Parker points out, nothing in Brophy’s choice of subjects in her non-fiction, and, specifically, nothing about her implicit Pantheon or ‘alternative Trinity’ (p. 182) – of Firbank, Beardsley and Mozart – was casually arrived at or coincidental. Of *Prancing Novelist* and *Black and White*, Parker concludes: ‘One mark of a good book is that it could not have been written by anyone else, and it is this that makes these two experiments in biography, characterised by the author’s energy, wit, idiosyncrasy and combativeness, so exhilarating to read’ (p. 191).

My own contribution, ‘Penetrating (the) *Prancing Novelist*’, seeks to harness that exhilaration which informs our reading of Brophy but which equally informed her own pursuit of the genius she identified in her three non-fiction subjects. I have focused on

the largely neglected Firbank play *The Princess Zoubaroff* (1920), which offers a study in miniature of how far Brophy's own deeply developed Firbankian instincts could take flight, in respect of a work which other critics have ignored, but which Brophy's research quite correctly placed at the centre of Firbank's achievements, and at an essential turning point in his novelistic career too. My own reading of *Zoubaroff* develops out of Brophy's claims, on occasion taking them considerably further, and, on rarer occasion, adopting a Brophyan stubbornness in following a quite different interpretative path. It is remarkable, I argue, how Brophy could see in this male (if hardly masculine) author everything transgressive, winning and accomplished that she aimed for, and achieved, in her own fictions – including her tribute to the Firbankian, *The Finishing Touch*: 'Her Firbank, nonetheless, is a trailblazer, not only swapping genders, sexualities, ethnicities, nationalities and more, but effectively founding an impostor-canon of lesbian-themed works, penned by a queer man writing as the womanish "Ronald Firbank"' (p. 51).

On the way, Brophy's own readings in Firbank take in William Congreve, Oscar Wilde (reworking Congreve) and George Bernard Shaw. John Dixon's essay "Shavian that she was" offers a compelling, highly informed speculation as to what might have happened if Brophy had been approached by the Society of Authors to write Shaw's biography, rather than Michael Holroyd. Dixon notes from her writings on Mozart, Beardsley and Firbank what we might have expected in formal and structural terms, going on to trace Shavian elements throughout her fictional writings, from *Hackenfeller's Ape* to *Flesh's* reworking of the Pygmalion myth, and from *The Adventures of God in his Search for the Black Girl*, the book of Brophy's most obviously indebted to Shaw, to *Palace without Chairs*. En route, Dixon takes in the entirety of Brophy's dramatic writings, with much to say about the scandalously overlooked *The Burglar*. In *The Adventures of God*, Dixon notes, 'God writes a reference for himself. A manifesto (a godifesto) is drawn up, with Shaw as shorthand scribe. It is not on the future of the black girl, but on God: "I do not exist' signed with divine authority, God"' (p. 87). Jill Longmate's contribution, "'Heads and Boxes": A Prop Art Exhibition Collaboration by Brigid Brophy and Maureen Duffy', takes us to a different '[woman]ifesto'. The year 1969 saw the one-off Brophy–Duffy venture into the world of avant-garde art, as makers of sculpted poems. If the pun in 'Prop Art' suggested that the collaborators' work might have been whimsical in intent, the exhibition's co-authored '[woman]ifesto' –

extensively drawn on by Longmate – puts us right, as did Brophy in a contemporary interview:

To be any kind of artist is a dangerous profession. There is a constant attempt to place limitations on the intellect and the imagination, and if someone comes up with something new – not newness of form which can become immediately fashionable, but newness of concept, people find this disturbing.

So they say that what you have done is a joke, or that you are not equipped, or that you are deliberately trying to shock, or that you ought to stick to what you know. And in our case, there is always one objection to fall back on, the one which says: you are a woman. (p. 163)

Carole Sweeney's 'The Dissenting Feminist' tackles Brophy's complicated responses to feminist thought, revealing how her 'distinctively contrarian' approach to -isms or -ologies played out (p. 221). As Sweeney notes, in one review or article after another, Brophy displayed 'ambivalence towards the cultural politics of feminism' (p. 221) – nowhere more evidently than in a review of Germaine Greer's *The Obstacle Race: The Fortunes of Women Painters and their Work* (1979), in which Brophy declared that Greer had adopted a 'singularly squinting vision of our culture', whereby Greer's one 'shut eye excludes painters who were men, except where they impinge, as teachers, lovers or parents, on painters who were women' (p. 224).

In Brophy's own, previously unpublished contribution to this volume, 'The Librarian and the Novel' (1980), she argues by way of the female writers Patricia Highsmith, Jane Austen and Ruth Rendell, but also of Aristotle, Shakespeare, Mozart's letters and the art of Sandro Botticelli, that

if we are to have a literature, if we are to have a literary culture, we need bad books as well as good books. This is partly because everyone *begins* on bad books, as Sartre pointed out in his autobiography; it is also a little because even readers of undeflectably highbrow tastes, including myself and including Jean-Paul Sartre, maintain into their adult lives a liking for books they would never judge good; but it is mainly because that is the way art works. (p. 48)

In his introduction to this lecture, John Dixon recalls her 'staggering in with a cup of black liquid. She was wearing a long velvety black dress' (p. 33). The talk was a hit – predictably, for Dixon, since Brophy knew what performance was, and even when scarcely audible, she showed that she 'had tailored the text to the audience'

(p. 33). Brophy never underestimated an audience, and never short-changed one either.

Little filmed evidence of this survives. She can be seen in just two television clips today: a 1965 BBC documentary entitled *A Woman's Place*, and a 1967 edition of Jonathan King's show *Good Evening*, where she memorably cites the then Poet Laureate Cecil Day-Lewis as her ideal husband, for his 'sheer sexiness'.² Her daughter Kate Levey's reminiscence in this volume, 'A Certain Detachment?', meanwhile, contrastingly emphasises Brophy and her husband's 'remarkably self-contained' existence: 'only intimate friends were truly welcome visitors' (p. 236). This moving account of her mother's latter years calmly adumbrates the shocking impact of multiple sclerosis on Brophy's character, where her previous 'almost pathological gentleness was ripped to shreds as illness incrementally stripped her of all that vital softness of consideration, of appreciation, of empathy, leaving in the end only a reduced, schematic persona, hostile towards my father particularly, and dissociated even from me' (p. 238).

Rodney Hill's inspiring memoir, 'Letter to Brigid', should be read alongside the above, since Hill recalls on finally meeting Brophy, 'reflecting on your gentleness and personal good manners. This seemed, on face value, to be in contrast to your sometimes barbed reviews. You could come across as aggressive in print and shy in life' (p. 142). Hill describes reading Brophy's non-fiction in *Don't Never Forget* as 'a revelation' (p. 138) – a discovery that led him to fantasise about the Leveys' domestic arrangements: 'Old Brompton Road began to get an almost mythic quality – "a beehive in Brompton"' (p. 140) as he puts it.

Phoebe Blatton's essay, 'Embodying the Fragments: A Reflection on the Reluctant Auto-Biography of Brigid Brophy', focuses on the account Brophy wrote of her early experiences of multiple sclerosis, 'A Case-Historical Fragment of Autobiography'. Blatton reflects on the seductive potential but also the challenges and risks in reading not just this, but Brophy's fictions too, and indeed her entire oeuvre, and, in so doing, constructing subjectively a 'Brigid Brophy' authorial persona, in all the ways Brophy herself knew readers did, and that she did too:

What is it about, this imagining of Brophy as 'a real person'? Perhaps it is the sensation one has of reading her novels – and I think it specifically applies to novels for their immersive, long form – as a young person that seems so pointedly to have touched the core of what you feel before you have the words or experience to express it, and propels you on to a whole new plateau of experiencing the world. (p. 13)

Among Brophy's most celebrated opinions was her claim that the two most interesting things in the world were sex and the eighteenth century.³ What, then, of the radicalism in her fictional portrayals of sex? Jonathan Gibbs's 'Brigid Brophy's Phenomenology of Sex in *Flesh* and *The Snow Ball*' winningly contextualises two key 1960s Brophy novels by way of comparison with Iris Murdoch, Kingsley Amis, but also the Marquis de Sade, D. H. Lawrence and Henry Miller. Like Murdoch, Gibbs argues persuasively, Brophy was 'interested in perverse, transgressive and anomalous sexual behaviour, and positively so', but unlike her peer, she was 'also interested in the erotics of sex in its more conventional forms' (p. 20). In the novels that Gibbs discusses, Brophy presents heterosexual coitus in utterly unfamiliar ways: '[i]n both cases she ignores the physical mechanics of the act, but concentrates entirely – and in detail – on the physiological and psychological experience: what sex feels like, and what goes through a person's mind when they are doing it' (p. 121). As ever, Brophy's radicalism was not just unmistakable, but also equally and simultaneously *sui generis*.

Michael Bronski's 'Brigid Brophy's Paradoxical World of Childhood' explores the subject of children and childhood across Brophy's fiction and non-fiction. He finds her interest in J. M. Barrie's *Peter Pan* unsurprising, 'since the narrative contains a matrix of many of the preoccupations foundational to her thinking' – including Oedipal conflict (Peter/Captain Hook) and literary metamorphosis (p. 23). Bronski's conclusion brilliantly identifies from this 'the theme that undergirds almost all of Brophy's work, which is the role of the joint powers of imagination and sexuality in the act of creation and re-creation. Peter's ability to fly – which he bestows on others through his wondrous fairy dust – is a form of aphrodisiac' (p. 23). Allan Pero's essay, "'Monster Cupid": Brophy, Camp and *The Snow Ball*', returns us to Brophy's Mozartian fictional esprit, taking in the myriad ways by which she harnessed her very particular sense of 'camp' style and literary stylistics towards often unexpectedly aphrodisiac ends. Pero returns us to Brophy's unholy Trinity – Mozart, Beardsley and Firbank – but takes in the widest range of theorists too, both expected (Sedgwick) and less so (Benjamin, Lacan). Above all, Pero reminds us that Brophy's embrace of her equally individualised sense of the baroque both abutted and contrasted with other twentieth-century flirtations with and reimaginings of that loosely defined form, disposition and/or personal style.

The Snow Ball's protagonist Anna will find that, 'sex and Mozart having inevitably failed her', only 'her other faithless love' awaits her:

‘death’ (p. 207). A full quarter-century since Brophy’s own death, the contemporary reader of her remarkable writings and, equally, the politically savvy activist of today, seeking inspiration and schooling in Brophy’s bravery, intellectual confidence and rigour, can take comfort in the existence of this book. It should guide, instruct and hopefully sometimes perplex, by illustrating Brophy in – to borrow from Shakespeare’s *Antony and Cleopatra* – her ‘infinite variety’.

A last word on what follows: we editors struggled time and again to order these essays according to topic, emphasis, genre, and anything else. Ultimately, we naughtily determined to play a Brophyan trick, by presenting them in a none-too-strict alphabetical order. Brophy – the ghost at her own celebratory feast – appears in her due place, disrupting proceedings as well she might. This meant, however, that John Dixon’s ‘Introduction to “The Librarian and the Novel”’ had to precede her talk, thus creating disorder. We also found it fitting, as surely will you, to leave the last word in this volume to Brophy’s daughter and literary executor Kate Levey, who thus also appears out of alphabetical sequence. If any further instruction were needed, do read here as promiscuously, perversely and even prancingly as our subject might have herself. Then return to her books and celebrate with us.

Notes

1. Peter J. Conradi, ‘Iris Murdoch’s Deep but Twisted Irish Roots’, *The Irish Times*, 14 July 2019, <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/iris-murdoch-s-deep-but-twisted-irish-roots-1.3950148>> (accessed 31 August 2019).
2. *A Woman’s Place*, <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2X3IDd1BuE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q2X3IDd1BuE;)>; *Good Evening*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKMSP3nhJzM>> (both accessed 31 August 2019).
3. See Jerome Weeks, ‘Surprise! Casanova Wasn’t Really . . . A Casanova’, *Art + Seek*, 1 December 2017, <<https://artandseek.org/2017/12/01/surprise-casanova-wasnt-really-a-casanova/#>> (accessed 31 August 2019).