

# Bookreviews and Thirkellcriticism

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*Angela Thirkell: portrait of a lady novelist* by Margot Strickland. 182 pp. Illus., index. 1977, London: Gerald Duckworth & Co. ISBN 0-7156-1124-0. Hardback. Reprinted 1996 by Angela Thirkell Society, North American branch: Kearney, NE: Morris Publishing. Facsimile edition, but without illustrations. Paperback \$12.95 inc. p&p. This edition also available from the author, £7.95 inc. p&p: Lion House, 10 Redenhall Road, Harleston, Diss, Norfolk IP20 9EN.

Margot Strickland's biography of Angela Thirkell has been reprinted in the US. (It is also now available on cassette as a 'Talking Book', read by the author.) The first biography of AT, it was published three years before the AT Society was founded. Margot Strickland, the author, is an honorary member of the Society.

The biography recounts each stage of AT's life: cherished childhood among distinguished family elders and acquaintances, in Sussex and in London; education at the Froebel Institute, St Paul's School, Hammersmith, and on the Continent; social life in London and on country house visits in the early years of the century; marriage to James McInnes, and its end; living in her parents' home with her two small sons, and the death of the baby daughter; marriage to George Thirkell, emigration with him to Australia, and nine years' family life there; life in Kensington resumed, with the third son, Lance; the burgeoning literary career; World War II and its aftermath; her parents' deaths, her sons' marriages and other affairs, grandchildren; celebrity; visits to the US and Canada; failing health and death.

The writing and publication of each of AT's books is recounted, and related to events in her life—and social encounters—at the time. Her writing career is traced, with the relationship with her publisher, James Hamilton: sensitivity to reviews; appreciation of publishers' promotion; revelling in research ('you have no idea of the joy, the excitement, the blood-lust, of tracking down one date, one allusion, at the cost of three days' work'); the labour of continuing to produce ('I sit down to write in a state of black despair, knowing that the Muse has fled ... Something must be written. Angrily the pen or pencil is forced to write one sentence. Then—with luck—something else takes over'); libel threats and offence caused (the employer of the model for Miss Bunting bought and destroyed all the copies she could find of *Marling Hall*); her resentment of copy-editors ('Not only have they punctuated to their own taste ... but they have made the most ignorant and pretentious emendations and suggestions'); the amazement when Yale University wanted one of her manuscripts ('It never occurred to me that anyone would want the illegible pencillings when they could read a nice printed book'); the cherishing of copyright ('They must ask your [her publisher's] permission to quote from my immortal works and pay for same'); fan- and other mail.

There is a family tree (Baldwins, Burne-Joneses, Kiplings, Macdonalds, Mackails), and (in the first edition only) photographs of Angela at several stages, her grandparents, husbands, sons, as well as houses and letters. In the new edition, colour is restored to the cover portrait of AT.

A book to be welcomed eagerly by any reader of AT novels who wants to know more of the author.

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*Angela Thirkell and Charles Dickens* by Edith Jordan Jude. 20 pp. Angela Thirkell Society North American Branch, 1992. Paperback \$2.50.

An overview of AT's use of quotations from and references to Charles Dickens in her Bassetshire novels, giving a paraphrased compilation of some of the 73 or more mentions of him, and a selection of the 252 or more direct quotations from his novels. Statistics are given: the greatest number of Dickens quotes are from *David Copperfield* (43), and the greatest number are in *Love at all ages* (48). 'All in all, Mrs T makes use of 118 characters from 16 of Dickens's novels'; the quotes increase from 78 in the first 15 Bassetshire novels to 246 in the last 14. A delight for—in Dickens's idiom—mutual fans.

## Thirkellrediviva

A.S. Byatt, winner of the Booker Prize in 1990 for *Possession*, dismissed Angela Thirkell in her *Passions of the mind* (Chatto & Windus, 1991) as 'a good comic library novelist who disrupted her own comfortable world with shrill hostility to the 1945 Labour Government, and (maybe for that reason, or because of the understandable hostility of her son Colin MacInnes) has proved unrevivable'.

Byatt's judgement is proving unreliable: AT is being well revived. After the US regular book catalogue, *A Common Reader*, featured her work, Jennifer Moyer of Moyer Bell Ltd, a small publisher based in Rhode Island, became a Thirkell fan and, tantalized by knowing of all those unavailable titles, decided to reissue them. The project, 'The Angela Thirkell Bassetshire series', is now well established: *Growing Up* and *The Headmistress* were published by Moyer Bell in 1995; *Ankle Deep*, *The Demon in the House*, *Miss Bunting* and *O These Men, These Men!* in 1996; *Peace Breaks Out*, *Private Enterprise*, *Love Among the Ruins* and *The Old Bank House* are scheduled for 1997; *County Chronicle*, *The Duke's Daughter*, *Happy Returns* and *Jutland Cottage* for 1998; *Enter Sir Robert*, *What Did It Mean?*, *A Double Affair* and *Never Too Late* for 1999; *Close Quarters* and *Love At All Ages* for the year 2000. The volumes are paper-backs, in 5.5 x 8.5" format, costing \$11.95 or \$12.95 according to length. Moyer Bell have also established a 'Thirkell Circle', now boasting 2500 members, who receive Thirkell mailings; the most recent of these included a poster-map of Bassetshire rendered in watercolour and hand-lettered in ink, based on the original Bassetshire map by Maurice Weightman.

Incidentally, the term 'Thirkell Circle' is recorded in Margot Strickland's biography of AT as originating in the US in 1949, when 'Bennet Cerf's column in the *Saturday Review* carried an anecdote about an indignant woman being turned away from a library which had no Thirkell novels available. "I thought this was a genuine Thirkellating library", she was reported as saying. This led some of Angela's American fans to form groups calling themselves "Thirkell Circles".'

*August Folly*, *Cheerfulness Breaks In* and *Marling Hall* are also newly available in the US, from Carroll & Graf. In the UK, Hogarth Press brought out *The Brandons* and *Summer Half* in 1988; Penguin are to reissue *The Brandons*, *Before Lunch* and *Cheerfulness Breaks In* in 1998. With all this, the reissue of Margot Strickland's biography of AT, and Hermione

Lee's article in the *New Yorker* in October 1996, Thirkell may well be about to enjoy a triumphant return.

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Who are the 20th-century heirs of Jane Austen? Professor Robert Emmet Long's contenders for the title, in *Barbara Pym* (Ungar 1986) are Elizabeth Bowen, Ivy Compton-Burnett, Barbara Pym and, primarily, E.M. Forster.

— appeared in the *Angela Thirkell Society Journal* No. 17, 1997