

# *The Literary London Journal*

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**Wendy Pollard, *Pamela Hansford Johnson: Her Life, Works and Times*, hardback, 500 pages, London: Shephard-Walwyn, 2014. ISBN: 978-0856832987; £25.**

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*The Literary London Journal*, Volume 12 Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015)

Pamela Hansford Johnson was a Londoner born and bred who lived most of her life in the capital and died there. Many of her 27 novels are set largely or partly in and around London; these include her first, *This Bed Thy Centre* (1935), which maps its erotic and emotional topography in Clapham; *World's End* (1937), featuring the Chelsea district of that name; *The Monument* (1938) whose three characters, at first strangers to one another, are visiting the column commemorating the Great Fire when the novel begins; *Girdle of Venus* (1939), which opens in a Rotherhithe pub; *The Humbler Creation* (1959), praised by critic Graham Hough as 'giving a compelling sense of [its characters] being a part of the great continuum of contemporary London life' (291–2); *Cork Street, Next to the Hatter's* (1968), whose title announces its Mayfair matrix; *The Survival of the Fittest* (1970), which offers a 'compelling' picture of 'the pre-war London literary scene' (380); and her last novel, *A Bonfire* (1981), which takes place in London between 1924 and 1937. Wendy Pollard's absorbing, well-researched and sensitive biography shows the importance of London in the complex life and work of a writer who was quite popular and critically respected in her lifetime but has since fallen into relative and undeserved obscurity.

Clapham was Johnson's birthplace, and she lived there until she was twenty-two. In later life she would sometimes invoke it as the base by which to measure her upward mobility: in June 1957, dining with her second husband, C. P. Snow, at the Governor General's residence in Malta, she recorded in her diary her impression of an 'exceedingly glamorous' evening—'lights in trees, beautiful garden—starry night—oh, a long way from Clapham Junction' (272). When visiting Eton after Philip, her son by Snow, had won a scholarship there, she observed: 'O, a long way from Clapham Junction!' (362). This might suggest a snobbish disdain for low origins but comes

across more as an innocent petit-bourgeois delight in enhanced status. Johnson's childhood had been one of respectability mixed with financial strain. She lived with her mother Amy in 'a large brick terrace house' (7) her grandfather had bought in the 1880s, when Clapham was still semi-rural; by the time she was born, on 29 May 1912, the railway had started to transform the area into a suburb. Johnson's father was Chief Storekeeper on the Baro-Kano railway in Nigeria, then a British colony, so Johnson saw little of him. When she was eleven he died at home while on leave; his financial improvidence left his wife and daughter a legacy of debt. This meant that Johnson, who proved an able student at the local girls' grammar school, the Clapham County Secondary School, could not go to university. Instead, her mother enrolled her in a six-month secretarial course at the upmarket Triangle Secretarial College in South Molton Street, Mayfair. Through the College she obtained a job, in May 1930, as a shorthand typist with associated secretarial duties at a branch of an American bank, Central Hanover Bank and Trust Co., Regent Street. Socially, central London was the place to which she aspired; Pollard suggests that a passage from Johnson's fifteenth novel, *An Impossible Marriage* (1954), applies to young Pamela herself:

W.1. It had a magical sound in those days for the young living far beyond in the greater numerals: S.W.11, N.W.12, S.E.14. Perhaps it still has. It meant an excitement, a dangling of jewels in the dusk, music and wine. It meant having enough money not to get up on the cold, sour mornings and catch the crowded bus (28).

If it has not already been done, there is surely a treatise to be written on the literary resonances of London's postal districts.

Johnson's duties at the bank were undemanding and much of her energies went into writing. Her poem 'Chelsea Reach' was published in the *Sunday Referee* and, as a prize for the best poem the newspaper had published in the last six months, a volume of her poetry, *Symphony for Full Orchestra*, appeared in 1934. In September 1933 another *Sunday Referee* poem, 'Thy Sanity Be Kept', led her to begin a correspondence with its author, a then virtually unknown Welsh poet called Dylan Thomas. The correspondence developed into a romance, with meetings in London and Wales, and there was serious talk of marriage (although Thomas, who had told Johnson he was the same age as her in his first letter, was actually not yet nineteen when their correspondence began and thus too young to marry at that time without his parents' permission).

In 1934, Johnson resigned from the bank after falling ill and moved with her mother to a rented flat in Tedworth Gardens in Chelsea, in between King's Road and Embankment from which there was a view of the Reach evoked in her *Sunday Referee* prize poem. There, she worked rapidly on a novel that would be accepted for publication on 28 December 1934. She had originally intended to call it *Nursery Rhyme* but substituted a phrase from Donne's poem 'The Sun Rising' that Thomas suggested: *This Bed Thy Centre*. That title helped to fuel the furore about the book's focus on sex that erupted after its publication on 5 April 1935. The controversy took on a local London edge because it was set in the very place in which Johnson had been brought up: as she later recalled, 'I was given to understand that I had disgraced myself and the entire area of Clapham Common' (65). The setting is an

integral part of the novel. As Pollard points out, 'towards the end of the book, the changes in the lives of the central characters are paralleled in the transformations in the locality itself' (69):

The Neighbourhood fell with the fall of the year. At the end of August a whole block of houses in Lincoln Street [...] was bought and demolished, and out of this ruined Pompeii arose a large picture-palace, with one thousand seats for sevenpence, and a noble façade, moulded with stags and Greek notabilities. (69)

The scandal helped the book's sales, however, and this first novel by a virtually unknown author also received favourable reviews from culturally influential figures, for example Compton Mackenzie in the *Daily Mail* and Cyril Connolly in the *New Statesman*. Johnson was firmly launched as a novelist.

Her personal life was less happy; Thomas had come to live in London but her romance with him faltered painfully and finally ended, though he would obtrude again into her life from time to time, both personally and posthumously. At Chelsea Register Office on 15 December 1935, Johnson married Gordon Stewart, an Australian journalist, and they went to live in the Tedworth Gardens flat she shared with her mother. With Stewart, Johnson became more involved in left-wing political activities, and this fed into her sympathetic characterisation of the working-class London militant Annie Sellars in her fifth novel, *The Monument*:

To Mrs Sellars London was a field of battle, a field to be sown with the dragons' teeth of knowledge. [...] She, at least, laboured in her spare hours [...] to awaken in the minds of her own people a real understanding of their daily bread; where it came from, who sold it to them, what happened to it on the days when it didn't arrive (88).

Johnson herself was the main breadwinner for her husband and mother, and later for their children. Stewart himself wrote two published books, a history of Chartism called *The Fight for the Charter* (1937) and *Blanqui* (1939), a biography of Louis Auguste Blanqui, but these made little money. He and Pamela also co-authored two detective stories, *Tidy Death* (1940) and *Murder's a Swine* (1943), under the name of Nap [Neil and Pamela] Lombard (the Chelsea café where they had first met). But their main source of income was Pamela's royalties for her own novels and her fees for her deft and rapid book reviews.

Johnson, now pregnant, and with her husband about to be called up, moved out of London with her mother to a rented bungalow between Laleham and Staines for the duration of the war—though the Blitz was still visible from a distance: 'One night we watched, from our garden, the City burning. It was a beautiful and terrible sight, the sky a vivid rose-colour behind our apple trees' (107). She continued to write novels and reviews and, just as her romance with Dylan Thomas began with her reading of his poem, so her romance with C. P. Snow began with her reading of his novel *Strangers and Brothers* (1939, retitled *George Passant* when the original title was transferred to the whole series of 'Lewis Eliot' novels). It was among a batch of books the *Liverpool Post* sent her to review, and she praised it highly as 'one of the most striking and vital literary products of five years or more' (109). Snow wrote to thank her on 30 November and, as with Thomas, a correspondence began that would lead to emotional and erotic involvement.

After the War, Pamela and her mother returned to London, renting a house at 6 Cheyne Row for two pounds sixteen shillings per week. Her husband came home in March 1946, 'to the son he had left as a baby and to the daughter he had never seen' (138), but found it hard to get used to civilian life again and to find work, and came into constant conflict with his mother-in-law. The marriage gradually deteriorated and in 1950 they divorced and she married C. P. Snow—who, at 44, had the habits of a confirmed bachelor and an intricate network of relationships with women that he did not wholly abandon on becoming a husband. After their marriage, they moved for a time to half-timbered Nethergate House, dating from the sixteenth century, in Clare, Suffolk and their son, Philip, would spend his early days there. But even before they moved in, Pamela had doubts about their future residence, feeling, after a visit, 'horribly upset, as though I'd rather cling howling to Nelson's column than be torn away from London [...] Nethergate looking beautiful—but O, my Paddington, my Bethnal Green!' (234). The move proved unsuccessful: neither Snow nor Pamela had driving licences so their mobility was limited, and Snow spent much of his time in London, pursuing his bachelor existence. Johnson, however, continued to write novels and to review, and also became a broadcaster, appearing regularly on BBC Radio's Third Programme 'The Critics', although she felt her wireless voice, particularly in scriptless discussions, resembled that of 'a peculiarly brutal wardress in a woman's prison' (243).

Johnson was glad to leave Nethergate in 1956 and to move into a mansion flat at 199 Cromwell Road, London early in 1957. In 1968, they moved to their last home, 85 Eaton Terrace in Belgravia. Firmly back in the capital, Johnson and Snow became what would today be called a power couple, and began to attract more publicity and to arouse envy and resentment. *That Was the Week that Was*, *The Late Show* and *Private Eye* satirised them ruthlessly and their main defence—actions for libel—contributed to the perception that they were unduly privileged and pompous. Snow had been knighted in 1957, and while Johnson welcomed the honour for her husband, she felt it entailed a diminishment of her independent literary identity 'As "Lady Snow", I might be any battleaxe in the provision department of Harrods' (270). (She would, however, receive a CBE in 1975.) While she remained devoted to Snow, and put his reputation before her own, the marriage was emotionally and sexually impaired, and, unknown to his wife, Snow resumed his close relationship with his former secretary at English Electric, Anne Seagrim.

Publicly, Snow and Johnson were associated with two cultural campaigns: against experimentalism in the novel in the late 1940s and 1950s, in which Snow took the lead, and, in the 1960s, against the new frankness in the arts and in public behaviour, in which Johnson was more prominent and which led to a commission from the *Telegraph* for her to attend and write about the Moors Murders trial and to a philippic, *On Iniquity* (1967), which linked the killings with contemporary artistic and personal permissiveness. In this respect, she identified not with the Swinging London of the 1960s but with what the grandfather of British Pop Art, Richard Hamilton, called 'Swingeing London' in the title of his 1967 image of Mick Jagger and art dealer Robert Fraser in handcuffs; on a visit to the first night of Nicol Williamson's *Hamlet* at the Roundhouse in Camden, Johnson observed 'a gaggle of dishevelled Pop stars, the repellent Mick Jagger included, ostentatiously turning up late' (403).

In their last years, ill health compounded the public-image problems of Johnson and Snow. On the last day of June 1980, Snow suffered a major haemorrhage at home and died in his wife's arms before an ambulance could arrive. Johnson herself died aged sixty-nine on 18 June 1981 in the Westminster Hospital and her memorial service took place in August at St James's Church, Piccadilly. Since her death, she has been a neglected novelist; Pollard's rich biography offers important perspectives that should contribute to a reassessment of Johnson's work; one important aspect of this would be analyses of her fictional representations of twentieth-century London.

### **Note on Contributor**

**Nicolas Tredell** is a freelance writer who has published on authors ranging from Shakespeare to Martin Amis. He is Consultant Editor of Palgrave Macmillan's Essential Criticism series and formerly taught at Sussex University, UK. His recent books include *C. P. Snow: The Dynamics of Hope* (2012), *Analysing Texts: David Copperfield and Great Expectations* (2013) and *Shakespeare—The Tragedies* (2014). New and updated editions of *Novels to Some Purpose*, his study of Colin Wilson's fiction, and *Conversations with Critics*, his interviews with twenty leading writers, will appear this year.

### **To Cite this Article**

Nicolas Tredell, 'Review of: *Pamela Hansford Johnson: Her Life, Works and Times*'. *The Literary London Journal*, Volume 12, Number 1–2 (Spring/Autumn 2015): 79–83. Online at <http://www.literarylondon.org/london-journal/springautumn2015/tredell1.pdf>.