



Clancy Sigal, *The London Lover: My Weekend that Lasted Thirty Years* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), ISBN: 9781408885802, 288 pages, £12.78

Reviewed by

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The Chicagoan Clancy Sigal (who died in 2017) was a regular on British radio and TV in the 1950s and 60s, and his journalism appeared in the *New Statesman*, the *Observer*, *Encounter*, the *Spectator*, and other publications. His memoir, *The London Lover*, which is his final book and published posthumously, follows several other autobiographical fiction and non-fiction texts. He is best known for his connection with Doris Lessing, whom he met in 1957 when, in exile from FBI harassment in McCarthy-era America, he turned up on her doorstep looking for a room to rent. If Sigal is known today, it is most likely through his fictionalised presence in Lessing's novel *The Golden Notebook* (1962), in which he appears as Saul Green, Anna Wulf's lover. Inevitably, *The London Lover* will be compared with Lessing's work, and it covers some of the same period spanned by the second volume of Lessing's autobiography, *Walking in the Shade* (1997). Sigal humorously looks back on his involvement in left-wing politics, his 'love affair' with London, his relationship with Lessing, and his life as a writer, as well as his involvement in radical psychiatry and his work in London supporting Vietnam draft dodgers and deserters.

Like Lessing, Sigal was a foreigner in a strange city and determined to follow a vocation as a writer. While Lessing's focus is almost entirely on the 1950s, Sigal moves from the 50s into the 60s (and to a lesser extent the 70s and after). In *Walking in the Shade*, Lessing attempts to represent the difference of the past through note-like sections headed 'The Zeitgeist'; similarly, Sigal gives us brief occasional sections headed 'In the News' to highlight the difference between the past and the present. Sigal, though, unlike Lessing, is very much an activist and a joiner. He presents himself

as a big-hearted, bumbling North American fascinated by a strange, reserved, and freezing nation. If Lessing's mood in *Walking in the Shade* is often one of trenchant irony, particularly as she looks back uncomfortably on her left-wing past, Sigal's voice is basically comic.

As Lessing's lodger and lover, he sits in at her flat on editorial meetings of the New Left journal *New Reasoner*. He also paints the walls of the Partisan café in Soho, which the historian Raphael Samuel set up as a left-wing version of the espresso bars that were becoming popular. Sigal is present at Central Methodist Hall in Westminster for the 1958 meeting that launched the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. There he is roused by the oratory of A. J. P. Taylor and the singing of 'Jerusalem'. He remarks that CND was '[e]ssentially young, studentish, vicarish [and] middle-class'. CND's call for unilateral disarmament was, for Sigal, essentially a rallying cry for imperial leadership. But '[s]uch liberal arrogance', he finds, 'is immensely appealing' (61).

The English, for Sigal, are rather silly but quite irresistible. His first English lover, Jean the clippie (a bus conductor), likes tea before the two of them go to bed. A woman he meets in a café on the Kings Road puts him in mind of Betjeman's Joan Hunter Dunn. In their politics, the English are no less comic or appealing. Gathered together at Trafalgar Square for a march to the nuclear weapons research facility at Aldermaston in Berkshire, the British Left seem to Sigal less like a vanguard or serious political movement and more like characters from the BBC radio comedy *Hancock's Half Hour*.

Never quite at ease with the leading lights of the New Left, men he found to have unsettlingly reserved manners and often enviable war records, and seeking relief from his fractious relationship with Lessing, Sigal feels much more at home with children. He nostalgically evokes the 1950s Thames as a working river that he would explore with Lessing's son Peter and his friends. Another favourite location for Sigal and the boys was the Regent's Canal: 'a jungle gym, a secret world of goldfinches, ducks, dragonflies, gudgeon and chub that elderly anglers fish for.' Most of all, Sigal and the boys enjoy exploring the 'derelict wharves in docklands from Bow to Wapping' (55). Sigal, in his early thirties, also spends time at a youth club in Bute Gardens, Hammersmith, a short walk from Lessing's home in Warwick Road (Earl's Court). Fascinated by the tough and violent boys, he forms a skiffle band with a group of them. After being told to leave Lessing's home following arguments about other women, his muse finally visits him. He writes about the Bute Gardens boys, sends the copy to the *New Statesman* and it is accepted: his first publication.

Roberta Rubenstein deals at length in *Literary Half-Lives* (2014), her book on Lessing and Sigal, with the way in which the life of each provided inspiration for the other. Sigal, for instance, inserted passages into his journal that were messages to Lessing, who he knew was reading it. Lessing took parts of the journal and used them in *The Golden Notebook*. There is no detail on this in *The London Lover*, however. Nor does Sigal retell the comic story, fictionalised in his novel *The Secret Defector* (1992), of his outrage at Lessing portraying him on stage in her *Play with a Tiger* (1962). Lara Feigel notes that, just as in *The Golden Notebook* Anna and Saul begin to merge together, so Lessing and Sigal were bound up together, both trying to be free and both becoming entrapped.¹ In *The London Lover* Sigal certainly portrays *his* sense of entrapment, which, he tells us, reduced him to the status of Lessing's errant child. In

his memoir's narrative of his self-development, he grows up through becoming a writer, and this occurs through him leaving, or being forced to leave, Lessing's home. Inspiration then comes copiously and frequently.

Sigal then goes through highs and lows of life as a jobbing writer. After his first book *Weekend in Dinlock's* (1960) positive reception, he is able to buy himself hand-made clothes, rent a plush apartment, and, while still a Bevanite, become the darling curiosity of both right-wing Labour modernisers and aristocrats. *The London Lover* often has a gossipy and name-dropping flavour, heavy on the anecdotes. For instance, at the Lyric Theatre in Hammersmith with Dr David Owen (who would go on to be Foreign Secretary in the 70s before co-founding the Social Democratic Party), Sigal is amazed by Owen's leaping over seats to administer CPR to an ill theatregoer. On his visits to country houses, Sigal, who can never understand how the English put up with cold weather, has to take along his own paraffin heater. But the memoir reminds us that the life of the jobbing writer can move quickly from acclaim and financial security to penury. Sigal apparently accepts periods of extreme financial hardship as just part of life. Commissions appear almost magically, it seems, and just as easily fail to appear. When work is offered, Sigal takes it, even if it is work as a theatre critic and he has little idea about the Shakespeare he has to review. We learn nothing, though, about the business of hustling for work in the literary and journalistic marketplace.

Sigal, however, is not someone who simply bumbles through life. Beset by anxiety, he suffers from fainting fits (once passing out on the lap of E. P. Thompson in a *New Reasoner* meeting). Psychoanalysis, paid for by David Astor, his editor at the *Observer*, is of no aid. On the recommendation of Colin MacInnes, Sigal consults the radical Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing at his office on Wimpole Street and begins therapy. Joking with one another, sparring, role-switching, and taking LSD — Laing was licensed to administer the drug — the two become close and Sigal soon becomes the Chair of Laing's mental health charity, the Philadelphia Association (an organisation that still runs therapeutic communities in London). In 1965 Sigal is one of the first to move into Kingsley Hall in Bromley-by-Bow, Laing's ground-breaking experimental community in which those diagnosed as mentally ill were invited to experience their distress as a journey towards authenticity.

Zone of the Interior (1976), Sigal's satirical *roman à clef* about Laing and radical psychiatry, deals at length with Kingsley Hall. Initially enthused by Laing, Sigal came to see him as grandiose and apolitical. *The London Lover* offers little new information, but conveys well the sense that the Hall, which became an East End outpost of countercultural London, was a 'place to be'. As Sigal puts it, the house filled up with 'the crazy, the lonely, homeless, given-up-on-themselves, psychotic and neurotic, hippies, draft dodgers, mystics, academics, and celebrities, maverick doctors, [and] acid fiends' (139). Prior to moving into the Hall, Sigal goes to the States where he joins perilous drives to enrol black voters in the South, and finds that he needs police protection when travelling through his old neighbourhood in Chicago. By contrast, British politics and radical psychiatry, and, indeed, Sigal's life as a writer in London, seem a casual comedy.

Sigal not only spends time at Kingsley Hall but also works as a volunteer at another radical psychiatric community, Villa 21, an attempt at ward democracy in Shenley

Hospital, St Albans, that was established by a colleague of Laing's, David Cooper. With the young working-class male patients in Villa 21 (rather than with the more socially exclusive group at Kingsley Hall), Sigal at last finds the sense of belonging he had craved in England and glimpsed beforehand only in the male camaraderie of visits to northern mining communities — visits made possible, he tells us, by cheap British Rail fares.

Later, he sets up his Bayswater home in Princes Square as a sanctuary for survivors of the psychiatric system, and then, at the invitation of a former Kingsley Hall resident, moves into a safehouse — a 'foco', as he puts it — for North Americans fleeing involvement in the Vietnam War. In the house on Queen Anne Street (off Oxford Street), Sigal, who becomes its station master, is able to be both an American and a Londoner, as he looks after scared young men of illegal status. In recounting these men's harrowing stories and precarious lives in London, Sigal, as always, is alert to social class. He notes the hierarchy amongst deserters, with Ivy League student-deferred 'fortunate sons' sitting above deserters with little money and education.

Fundraising to keep his 'foco' running, he goes to the Rolling Stones' 1969 free concert in Hyde Park. But we learn nothing of the event besides Sigal telling us that the hippies were ungenerous in their donations. (The Kray twins, however, made a generous donation.) There is little about 60s counterculture in the text, and the artistic innovations of the decade leave Sigal cold. The Peter Brook-directed play *US* (1966), for instance, is incomprehensible to him, and he flees the theatre when actors begin striking the audience with rubber truncheons. Sigal's message seems to be that while the hippies partied and artists experimented, there was unglamorous work to be done in dealing with the fallout of the Vietnam War, and he, for one, was doing what he could as an American in London.

The book will be of interest to Lessing scholars, as well as those interested in the history of the British Left, and the history of London in the 50s and 60s. It could also be of aid to students new to British literature and culture of the 1950s and the 1960s. I should add that with its fast pace and humour, the book is lots of fun to read.

Notes

1. Lara Feigel, *Free Woman: Life, Liberation, and Doris Lessing* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 175–6.

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