Introduction

Where does a book begin?

This one began with a piece of furniture. Not so long ago, I bought a sideboard on eBay. I was very pleased with it: I'd got myself a lovely piece of fashionable-again early Ercol at a bargain price, and it looked so wonderfully pale and interesting, standing there in a corner of the kitchen. I relished telling people how little I'd paid for it; I loved watching them run their hands enviously over its warm beech and elm curves.

Friends who admired this sideboard were always surprised by its age – the man who sold it to me believed that it dated from 1954 – and after a while I began to share their amazement. The more I lived with it, the more timelessly modern it seemed; it was difficult to picture it in the comfortable but old-fashioned living rooms of my grandparents, who would have been about the same age as I am now when it was made – they favoured fitted carpets, cut-glass rose bowls and what used to be known somewhat unappetisingly as 'brown furniture' – and because of this I began to wonder about the Fifties. In my mind, they split in two. There were the Sepia Fifties, all Linoleum and best china; and there were the Technicolor Fifties, all atomic prints and Swedish-inspired modernism. Ercol, whose designs were exhibited at the Festival of Britain in 1951, was not the cheapest of the new-style post-war furniture, but nor was it impossibly expensive; though beautifully made, it was certainly mass-produced. I wanted to know: what kind of people had first bought it, and what were they telling the world about themselves

My Ercol sideboard

when they did? It wasn't too long after this – aspiration of one kind surely signifying ambition of another – that I had the idea of trying to write a book about the career women of the Fifties.

The more I thought about it, the more I questioned our idea of Fifties woman – so inflexible, so monolithic, a cultural symbol of all that we are most grateful to have sloughed off. As she is portrayed everywhere from Ian McEwan's *On Chesil Beach* to Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men,* she is a compliant, smiling creature who knows little or nothing of sex, and stands no chance at all of getting to the top of advertising or any other career. She must marry or die. (McEwan's novel, like the second series of *Mad Men*, is set in 1962, aka the last year of the Fifties; the Sixties, by general consent, only began in 1963, when Philip Larkin enjoyed his *Annus Mirabilis* and Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique*.) In newspaper columns and magazine articles, the phrase 'like the Fifties' has become a kind of shorthand, especially when it comes to the lives of women, doing the work of at least a dozen other words, some of them contradictory. The phrase means, or can

mean: old-fashioned, unambitious, docile, emollient, inhibited, clenched, prudish, thwarted, frustrated, repressed and, most recently, obsessed with baking (those who rage against the cult of the cupcake often marshal the backwards Fifties in their cause). But what if there was another side to the story? What if this collective readiness to move on has tilted history too far in one direction? Some people idealise the past, but far more common is the tendency to patronise it. We can't help ourselves. We make it one thing, or another, and then we set about considering ourselves superior to it.*

At first, I must admit, it seemed as though I might have set out on a wild goose chase. Many, if not most, of the heftiest histories of the Fifties were written by men, and while they have, for instance, an awful lot to say about Anthony Eden and the Suez Crisis, they are rather less forthcoming about the lives of women, especially the kind who might have longed for Ercol furniture. The male historians' favourite resource, when it comes the female Fifties, is Mass Observation, the research organisation founded in 1937 to record everyday life via legions of diary-writing volunteers. And while the journals people wrote under MO's auspices are vivid and fascinating, and often extremely moving, their female authors were mostly housewives and secretaries: women rather like my grandmothers, in fact. Still, I read on, and eventually was rewarded with a few names. Several weeks into the new Queen's reign in 1952, I learned, the *Picture Post* ran a feature entitled 'The New Elizabethans'. On the magazine's list were forty-two men (among them Nye Bevan, Benjamin Britten, Graham Greene and Henry

* In November 2011 around two thousand women marched through the City of London to protest against government cuts to benefit payments and publics services – cuts which, according to the march's organiser, the Fawcett Society, disproportionately affect women and risk setting back the battle for equality by several decades. To illustrate this point, many of those who took part had come dressed as Fifties housewives in twin sets and red lipstick, mushroom-shaped hats and leopard-print coats, pink rollers and silk scarves. Already hard at work on this book, I looked on with mixed feelings.

Moore) and five women. Two of these women were actresses: Glynis Johns, star of the 1948 mermaid hit *Miranda*, and Celia Johnson, whose performance in *Brief Encounter* had proved so resonant for a generation of women dealing with the return of the men from the war. A third was the ballet dancer Margot Fonteyn. Actresses and dancers probably weren't, I felt, illustrative of anything very much – they are surely anomalies, whatever the age – but the last two names caught my eye: Barbara Ward, an economist, and Rose Heilbron, then Britain's only female QC. They sounded interesting. Then, six hundred pages into David Kynaston's amazing panorama *Family Britain*, there came a couple more. 'Contrary to subsequent mythology,' writes Kynaston, 'the 1950s were not entirely bereft of ambitious, independent-minded women.' His examples were Sheila van Damm, the rally-car driver and theatre manager, and Margery Fish, the gardener and writer.

I took these names – new to me – as a gauntlet, thrown down. I would investigate (and celebrate) their achievements, and I would find others like them. I understood that I wouldn't be rewriting the decade: the facts would see to that. It *was* a time when most women were married (75 per cent of adult women in 1951); when relatively few women worked (though not, perhaps, as few as you might think: in 1956, women comprised about 30 per cent of the workforce); and when, whether thanks to expectation or necessity, a huge amount of energy was devoted to housework (full-time housewives spent between sixty-one and seventy hours a week on washing, ironing and the rest). Women could not take out mortgages in their own name, even if they had a job, and if they wanted to be fitted with a diaphragm, one of the few forms of contraception then available, they had first to produce a marriage certificate. Abortion was illegal. But we need to be clear: the end of the war did not send every female hurrying back into the kitchen, just as the feminism of the Sixties did not spring from the minds of women who had spent the last decade in an apron and rubber

gloves. As Katharine Whitehorn, who graduated from Cambridge in 1950, puts it in her memoir *Selective Memory*, 'There's been a tendency to look on the Fifties as simply a damp patch between the battleground of the Forties and the fairground of the Sixties; yet it was anything but . . . We had the heady sense that everything was getting better.' It goes without saying that Austerity Britain could be grim: all that smog and rubble, the feeling that rationing would last for ever. Yet perhaps we underestimate the sense of excitement many people, especially the young, felt about what lay ahead. Margaret Steggles, the heroine of Stella Gibbons 1946 novel *Westwood*, can't help but think of the ruins of post-war London as 'sombre and thrilling, as if History were working visibly, before one's eyes'. Elaine Dundy, the actress and novelist, arrived in London from America in 1949; the city was, she later wrote, 'a place where young people, besieged for six years of war, could finally see that they had a future. You could fairly feel the rush of air as they raced forward to greet it.' I suppose you could say that I wanted to stir up that breeze all over again.

At the start, my aim was to bag ten of these women because that seemed like a good, round number, but also because I feared I would struggle to find more. In the end, though, I was quite wrong on that score. When I finally sat down to write this book my poor heroines found themselves in a beauty contest; somewhat to my amazement they were too many, not too few. So many pioneers! Forced to make hard choices about who was in and who was out, I went mostly with those whose private lives were as modern as their professional lives. (Though this only narrowed things a little: the more successful career women of the Fifties were not often the spinsters I had been expecting.) Of the ten who survived, then, seven were married and the other three were lesbians. Six had children. Two worked in professional partnership with their husbands. Three were divorced and another separated from the father of her children, a man she never married. Several had

extra-marital affairs. Three of the women lived together, bringing up two unrelated children as brothers. This interest in love and sex and all the permutations of the family, a sacred institution in post-war Britain, wasn't prurience on my part. I wanted to know how these women solved the problems that most of us still struggle with today: the balance of work and the rest of life. So much was stacked against them. Were they lonely? Did they sacrifice love for ambition, or did fulfilment at home lead naturally to fulfilment at work? Who looked after their children? And how did they run their homes when they were so busy?

For me, this is, I suppose, a sly kind of feminism – by which I mean that my message, in as much as I have one, is intended to hit the reader side on. Polemical books that tell us how we might close the pay gap, become FTSE directors and put an end to sexual harassment at the office are all very fine and important, but the truth is that they are rarely much fun to read. I prefer the idea of role models, inspirational figures who make you want to cheer. The extraordinary, mould-breaking women you will find in the pages that follow weren't perfect. They were, like all human beings, flawed. They doubted themselves, they got in muddles, they made mistakes; feeling defensive, they sometimes seemed difficult and distant even to those who loved them. They certainly did not – dread phrase – 'have it all', or not all of the time, at any rate. Their children sometimes had a hard time of it. But they loved what they did and they got on with doing it as best they could in far less equal times than our own. If that isn't encouraging – a kind of rallying call to the twenty-first-century battle-weary – I don't know what is.

'Everyone has an age when they are most themselves,' says the narrator of Elizabeth Bowen's first novel, *The Hotel*. For Bowen, that era was the Blitz. For the women in this book, it was the Fifties. The youngest of them was twenty-two when the decade began; the

oldest, fifty-eight. Most were in their thirties. They were stoical and rather tough, but also hopeful, full of expectation. Their characters had, after all, been informed by two wars: the horror and privations of the first they had experienced vicariously through their parents (though the oldest, Margery Fish, was twenty-two in 1914, when she had bravely crossed the Atlantic at a time when the U-boats were doing their very worst); the second they had endured themselves and, perhaps, had even enjoyed at times.

The Second World War had kicked open the door to another life. Some of them had joined one of the women's auxiliary services (the ATS, the WAAF or the WRNS) and found themselves suddenly driving an ambulance or sitting behind a big desk in a government ministry. Others had been able to take advantage of the men's absence. After 1939 more university places had become available to women; a young woman barrister like Rose Heilbron, meanwhile, found herself newly in demand with solicitors whose preferred male lawyers had all disappeared to fight. On a practical level, dress codes had relaxed. During the war, girls had worn trousers and flat shoes; those who couldn't get hold of decent stockings – from 1942, nylon was used exclusively in the production of parachutes – had simply gone bare-legged. On an emotional level, restraint had been exercised more infrequently than before, and the chastening crimp of disapproval felt much less often. In Britain's bombed cities people had slipped their moorings, falling in love easily and, sometimes, inappropriately. Future-less, couples had lived in the moment. Temporarily husband-less, wives had sought solace in the arms of others.* In

* For a good sense of this, try the novel *To Bed with Grand Music* (1946) by Marghanita Laski, in which a young mother, Deborah Robertson, embarks on a series of affairs while her husband is serving in Cairo. She neglects her son and spends her money on nightclubs and fripperies, and in doing so falls into debt. Although Laski, who published the book under a pseudonym, exaggerates for effect, her story makes for a bracing antidote to the stoical and loyal wife who holds everything together in the most trying of circumstances. No wonder the (male) critics hated it.

London the joke had been that everybody was having at least one affair – and that some were enjoying two or three. All of these things together added up to something quite significant: the sense that there was a world out there, and that a woman was entitled to move through it as easily and as confidently as any man.

During the war the numbers of women working had peaked at nearly eight million, but within a year of VE Day that figure had fallen by a quarter. The men wanted their jobs back, and the usurpers were expected to beat a nifty but decorous retreat. Of course, there were some women who longed for nothing more than to be a housewife again: the safety, the security and no officer or factory boss barking orders in your face. But for others, post-war retrenchment came as a shock. Those women who were accommodating returning husbands did not always manage to meet their expectations (and vice versa), the joy of reunion fading when couples woke up and realised they were strangers. In *One Fine Day*, a novel by Mollie Panter-Downes published in 1947, Laura and Stephen Marshall grapple with this altered landscape over the course of twenty-four hours. They must deal with a new world order, running their house without help, their girls Ethel and Violet having escaped to a 'big bright world where there were no bells to run your legs off'. Laura knows they'll have to adjust, but her husband is in denial: 'He talked the situation over with other men on the train, and they reported that things were getting easier. Bellamy's wife had got a cook immediately the other day by an advertisement in the *Bridbury Herald*.' Stephen, the reader gathers, is in for a disappointment at some point quite soon. Even if he secures the longed-for domestic, this isn't going to right the listing ship that is his marriage, post-war wives being almost as uppity as post-war servants. The novel reflected the reality. Nineteen forty-seven was a great marrying year, with 401,210 weddings, but at the same time the divorce rate began to rise, the number of Maintenance Orders made by magistrates courts

almost doubling to twenty thousand (it had stood at 11,177 in 1938). Cut to 1954 and there were six times the number of divorces (27,417) as there had been before the war.

But the lives of single women were also in flux. 'What to do with my day, jobless and faced by the awesome prospect of endless leave?' wrote Joan Wyndham, wartime diarist extraordinaire. 'I was beginning to realise that now I was no longer in the WAAF I would have to recreate my world from scratch every morning.' Joan was a twenty-two-year-old girl about town, whose sex life during the war had been both busy and exciting ('the happiest time of my life'). The more determined among these young women refused to feel guilty for wanting to 'steal' men's work,* and were fast learning to be on their guard when it came to the matter of their future. In 1951, twenty-one-year-old Grace Robertson, soon to embark on a remarkable career as a photojournalist, saw a woman in one of the full skirts made popular by Christian Dior and his New Look struggling to get on a London bus: 'A crowd had gathered. Her skirt was so wide, she couldn't negotiate the door. At first, I laughed with everyone else. But then I suddenly thought: are they putting us into these clothes so we can't get on buses, and take their jobs?'†

The question was: how should a woman who wanted to have a career conduct herself? Should she fly below the radar, or above it? Some didn't bother to hide their ambition: 'I knew exactly what I was going to do, and that was art,' says Wendy Bray, who

* Though this was difficult. 'You couldn't avoid the men who had been hurt in the war,' Grace Robertson told me. 'They were everywhere, blind or scarred, on crutches or in wheelchairs.' This made women less voluble when it came to the subject of equality than they might otherwise have been. 'I could no more have thought of feminism in the face of what I could see in the streets than I could have flown to the moon. It would have been indecent as far as I was concerned.'

† Robertson wasn't the only one to worry about the New Look. Mabel Ridealgh, the Labour MP, railed against it, saying, 'Our modern world has become used to the freedom of short, sensible clothing . . . the New Look is too reminiscent of a caged bird's attitude.' Bessie Braddock, also a Labour MP, called it 'the ridiculous whim of idle people'.

Penelope and John Mortimer at home

began a career as a textile designer at Courtaulds soon after leaving art school in 1951. 'And I was going to kill in order to do it. I had to fight my father every inch of the way.' Others tried to disguise it: 'I wanted to be a perfect housewife *and* a successful actor,' says Sylvia Syms, who in 1953 had recently graduated from RADA. 'I would be away on tour, and I would rush back the following week to cook all the food for my husband. I mean . . . what was *wrong* with me?' Still others worked in snatched moments, as if they weren't really working at all, with the inevitable result that they often felt thwarted and resentful. In December 1957 the novelist Penelope Mortimer wrote in her diary that she was finding it increasingly difficult to run her family – by this time, she was a mother of six – and find the space to write: 'I wake radiant to the thought of a peaceful work day . . . I long for it and can't bear it to end – which it does with the key in the lock: *"Hullo? What's the*

plan?" We must have people in or go out, my room invaded, all routed and nothing left in its place.'* (All the same, her work was going well. She was delivering a steady stream of stories to the *New Yorker*, for which she was well paid. A useful side-effect of the way society was changing was that women longed to read about experiences like their own, and said so. Even the 'dreariest days' could, she found, be profitably mined for irony and farce.) Finally, there were those who only leapt into the fray when Plan A had failed. In *Millions Like Us*, her excellent book about women's lives during and just after the war, Virginia Nicholson cites the example of Margery Baines. Abandoned by her husband – since their marriage in 1940, she and he had spent barely a year together – and with a young child to bring up, in 1946 Margery opened a one-woman typing agency in a tiny Mayfair room. This business would one day become the Brook Street Bureau, the first employment agency to be listed on the London Stock Exchange.

Those who embarked on careers had to be thick-skinned: immune to slights and knock-backs, resolute in the face of tremendous social expectation and prepared for loneliness. When she began working at *Picture Post* at the age of just nineteen, the first consequence for Grace Robertson was that she lost two of her girlfriends. 'Their parents stopped them seeing me. You could be a nurse, a secretary or a teacher while you waited to get your man. But a photographer? That sounded off-putting. I might be a bad influence. I was cut dead.' In the office she grew accustomed to visitors assuming she was a secretary. Her colleagues treated her well, mostly, but on work trips they would inevitably attempt to get her into bed. 'They would try and get you blotto, and then turn up at the door of your hotel room. Luckily, I could out-drink

* Mortimer hated to feel thwarted; she feared it. 'Frustration is a greater poison than jealousy, which at least recognises the existence of someone else,' she once wrote – and she was in a position to know, given the reputation of her husband John Mortimer.

any man in Fleet Street.' Her mother worried about such predators. She insisted that Robertson go to work in a hat and gloves like a 'nice' girl. (The gloves lasted about as long as it took her daughter to peel them off.) In 1954 Claire Tomalin, future biographer of Dickens and Pepys, went for a job interview at the publisher Heinemann. A few minutes into her conversation with a man called Roland Gant, a younger man, 'thick-set and wearing heavy glasses', came in without a word and put a piece of paper on Gant's desk. 'He was James Michie, the poet,' she writes in her book *Several Strangers*. 'Later, he told me he had been awarding me marks for my looks. Seven out of ten, he gave me, just enough for the job of secretary/editorial assistant, at £5.10s a week. This was how things were done in 1954.'

It was, of course, impossible to fight back. It wasn't only that sexual harassment had yet to be invented; women were expected to know their place, irrespective of their talents and experience, of the fact that they had won their jobs on merit. In 1959 the influential costume designer Jocelyn Rickards* was hard at work on the film of John Osborne's *The Entertainer* when Michael Balcon, the famous producer, questioned the casting of Joan Plowright as Jean Rice. Rickards made the mistake of sticking up for her. Soon afterwards, Balcon asked the film's director, Tony Richardson, to sack Rickards. He would not, Balcon said, 'be spoken to like that' by a woman.† But this was a mild example (and in any case, Richardson refused to relinquish her). Others had it far, far worse. One thinks of Rosalind Franklin, the crystallographer whose X-ray photographs were crucial in establishing the structure of DNA in 1953. At one end of the scale, her male colleagues persisted in referring to her as 'Rosy', though this was not a name used

* Rickards, an Australian-born artist and costume designer, went on to dress some of the most iconic films of the Sixties, among them *Blow-Up* and *From Russia With Love*.

† Balcon was an implacable enemy of women at work. For more on this, see Chapter 5, The Brontës of Shepherd's Bush.

even by those closest to her. At the other, they repeatedly refused to acknowledge her outstanding contribution to the discovery of the double helix.*

Those who were mothers had also to worry about childcare – and it was at this point in history that many women first learnt to juggle, even if that wasn't the word they used. Anne Scott-James, the journalist who spent the Fifties first as the editor of *Harper's Bazaar* and then as the women's editor of the *Sunday Express*, described her own routine as 'a sort of miracle of slotting in' (her son Max was born in 1945; her daughter Claire in 1951). In her 1952 memoir-disguised-as-a-novel *In the Mink*, she carefully describes the battle that raged inside her as she tore herself away from the nursery each morning, an account that would not look out of place in a glossy magazine today. 'Up to now I'd always started out eagerly to work,' she writes. 'Ever since my apprentice days, the office front door had been an agreeable sight to me, and I had looked forward with pleasure to the jolts, excitements and interchanges of the day's work. Now, I banged the door of the flat behind me with something of a pang.' Every day she promised herself – and 'James' (aka Max) – that she would get home in time for tea. And every day she failed: 'Half-past five would find me with three or four people still to see, and the letters still to sign, and I would think: "Bang goes my meringue" – and all it stood for.'

But, in the end, such struggles were worth it. The bliss of work! The balm of it, and the satisfaction. 'I was so pleased to have found what it was that I really wanted to do, and to be paid for it,' says

* The canon of sexist slights against Franklin is miserably extensive. (Most recently, it was revealed that shortly before she left King's College London in 1953, her colleague Maurice Wilkins wrote to James Watson and Francis Crick in Cambridge to say that 'the smoke of witchcraft will soon be getting out of our eyes'.) When Watson, Crick and Wilkins were awarded the Nobel Prize for their work on DNA in 1962 only Wilkins made mention of Franklin's role in his acceptance speeches. Many books have been written about Franklin, who died of cancer in 1958, but the best is probably the 2002 biography by Brenda Maddox.

Anne Scott-James

Grace Robertson. Wendy Bray found it 'thrilling': 'I was well aware that I was doing a good job which I enjoyed, and which used my skills.' (She still remembers the first major purchase she made with her new salary: a purple velour coat, which – so much for the brown Fifties – she teamed with yellow shoes and a lime green hat.) 'I loved my job,' says Sylvia Syms. 'Any aspect of it. I needed to work for money, but I wouldn't ever have given it up.' In *Selective Memory* Katharine Whitehorn notes admiringly that in 1956 her former flatmate Sheila Gibson became a partner in the architectural firm Carden & Godfrey. 'She had a life she relished,' she writes. 'She said once about her work: "This is what I am *for*."' For her own part, Whitehorn, who was then working as a journalist on a small magazine called *Home Notes*, was about to hit what she regarded as the big time. 'HAVE GOT JOB ON PICTURE POST WHICH I WANTED MORE THAN HEAVEN' said the telegram she sent to

her parents. I don't mind telling you that I have a copy of this message by my desk as I write. Even after all this time, I still can't see it without smiling.

I feel I should say something about the culture of the Fifties. It seems so masculine, its principal literary heroes being Jim Dixon (*Lucky Jim*, 1954) and Jimmy Porter (*Look Back in Anger*, 1956). Doris Lessing published her first novel (*The Grass is Singing*) in 1950, and Iris Murdoch hers (*Under the Net*) in 1954, but it's Kingsley Amis, John Osborne and the Angry Young Men we most strongly associate with the era – a tone that may be traced all the way back to 1950, when William Cooper published *Scenes from Provincial Life*, whose hero, Joe Lunn, is so strikingly determined not to marry his girlfriend Myrtle.* In some ways this heightens our sense of what women's lives must have been like – on the receiving end of a great deal of repression and rage – but it also, I think, warps it. So many of these books and plays, and the films adapted from them, have for an engine the sexual frustration of men; it's sometimes hard to see beyond this. And then there is the inescapable fact that their authors were applauded for their radicalism! If this is what passed for revolution, you think, the situation must have been even more stifling than you thought.†

* Women are just there to stop these men from getting what they want, aren't they? I can't stand Jimmy Porter. It's not only that he flays poor Alison; he's nothing more than a peevish Little Englander, secretly relishing the status quo, for all that he rails against it. *Lucky Jim* makes me laugh – I love a good madrigal joke as much as the next woman – but I can't bear the way the women are portrayed. I'm especially offended by the monstrous Margaret Peel, who was based on Philip Larkin's girlfriend Monica Jones. Larkin should have taken Amis out and shot him. Incidentally, the sequel to *Scenes from Provincial Life*, though written in the mid-Fifties, remained unpublished until 1982 for legal reasons; the real-life model for Myrtle had threatened to sue.

† 'For my generation, John Osborne was a heroic figure,' the actor Ian McKellen told Osborne's biographer, John Heilpern. But not everyone bought into this so-called heroism. Jocelyn Rickards walked out of *Look Back in Anger* when it opened at the Royal Court. 'It was all those fucking bears and squirrels,' she told Heilpern. (She never told Osborne, later her lover, about this.)

Monica Jones

I say: take the 'realism' of these novels, plays and films with a pinch of salt. For all their humble roots, for all that they were often threatened by the opposite sex, their authors knew a great many interesting, clever, sexually liberated women. In 1962 Kingsley Amis would leave his wife for the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard: successful, coolly intelligent, already twice-married. In 1950 Amis's friend Philip Larkin began his long and complex relationship with Monica Jones, who had a first-class degree from Oxford, a lectureship in the Department of English at Leicester University and a stubborn mind of her own. By 1959 John Osborne had left his second wife, Mary Ure, for the bookish, free-spirited Jocelyn Rickards, whose friends included Lucian Freud, Ben Nicolson and Cyril Connolly, and among whose former lovers were the philosopher A. J. Ayer and Graham Greene. It was, moreover, Osborne who wanted his new girlfriend to fall pregnant, not Rickards herself. 'I'm not sorry it happened,' she writes of the miscarriage she suffered during their relationship in her memoir, *The Painted Banquet*. 'I cannot think of myself as one of nature's mothers, and I suspect nature dealt kindly with me on that occasion.' Before the pill, certainly, sex was often fraught

with danger. 'We were terrified,' says Sylvia Syms. 'You had to be *very* careful,' says Wendy Bray. But this didn't mean that the life of every woman was dedicated entirely to withholding sex from men. 'If you were a naughty girl, you could sleep around,' says Bray. 'Art school was lovely and naughty [for some people].' When Grace Robertson wanted to sleep with her boyfriend she simply 'stayed at a friend's house'; the girl knew to lie for her if her father rang.*

For the middle classes, or those with enough money, abortion was a possibility. You just had to know the right people. In 1955 Diana Dors had her third abortion, having discovered she was pregnant shortly before *Yield to the Night*, a film in which she had been cast as the lead, went into production (she could not bear to lose the part just because she was pregnant; this was to be her breakthrough as a serious actress, or so she hoped). Nor was the subject taboo.† In Penelope Mortimer's 1958 novel *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, Ruth, its main character, helps her daughter Angela, who has returned from university pregnant, to arrange an abortion – and their collusion brings them closer: 'She trusts me and I am justified.' (Ruth decides that, if he asks, she will tell her husband she has spent the money on an abortion for herself, since he would regard another baby for them as a disaster.) Angela isn't agonised by her decision, nor is she frightened, since a doctor is to perform the operation. 'Just think,' she says to her mother. 'Tomorrow I'll wake up and it will all be over. I can't wait. I'm *happy*. You see?'

* Of course, some men still prized virtue. 'I had one who, strolling together across Wimbledon Common, tried to wrestle me to the ground and have his way with me,' says Grace Robertson. 'I fought him off, and the next time I saw him, well, he wants me to meet his mother. I'd kept my virtue, you see.'

† Abortion was not legalised until 1967. But women, and some men, were already agitating for change. As far back as 1934, the Women's Co-operative Guild had passed a resolution in favour of the legalisation of abortion at its AGM (in 1939, incidentally, it was estimated that some 20 per cent of pregnancies ended in abortion). The Abortion Law Reform Association was established in 1936. By the Fifties, led by the redoubtable Alice Brook Jenkins, it was actively campaigning in Westminster.

Mortimer* isn't much read now (though she is still in print) – and this is another problem. The Fifties canon, as it exists today, is too narrowly defined. The narrative that has Rattigan giving way to Osborne, and Waugh to Sillitoe, and the Ealing Comedies to the New Wave has blotted so much out. I could have written a whole book (or at least a PhD thesis) about this alone, but here are a few examples. *Daddy's Gone A-Hunting*, plangent and excoriating, is surely one of the decade's very finest novels, and it's twice as 'modern' as most of the books by her male contemporaries (or at any rate, it has dated far less). At its heart is Ruth, who finds herself trapped at home all day in a stockbroker village, while her paunchy, self-centred husband messes about with girls in London, a confinement Mortimer contrasts with her daughter's escape to university. It's not an awful life, hers; it's prosperous and safe: 'The wives conform to a certain standard of dress, they run their houses along the same lines, bring their children up in the same way; all prefer coffee to tea, all drive cars, all play bridge, own at least one valuable piece of jewellery and are moderately good-looking.' But still, Ruth is going mad. She is suffering from what, just five years later, Betty Friedan would call 'the problem that has no name'. She is isolated and frustrated, cut off from all the things that once defined her character. Mortimer's next novel, *The Pumpkin Eater*, about a woman with too many children and a husband just as unfaithful as Ruth's, moves the story on, in the sense that its narrator (who also, incidentally, has an abortion towards the end of the novel) has already had her breakdown and is telling her story from the psychiatrist's couch. 'Almost every woman I can think of will want to read this book,' said Edna O'Brien when it came out in 1962.

You see the same kind of desperation, albeit in a much less

*Mortimer, by the way, had six children by four different men. In 1961, at the suggestion of her husband, John Mortimer, she aborted her eighth pregnancy.

Yvonne Mitchell as the depressed housewife Amy in Woman in a Dressing Gown

wealthy household, in J. Lee Thompson's *Woman in a Dressing Gown* (1957), a wonderful, melancholy film that has never had half so much attention as *Room at the Top* and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, perhaps for the simple reason that its main role is played by a woman. Yvonne Mitchell is Amy, a housewife; Anthony Quayle her husband Jim. Outwardly, Amy is cheerful, a chatterbox and a music lover. But it is clear that she has depression. She is unable to keep her tiny new London council flat clean and tidy,

and spends most of the day in her dressing gown, her face unmade, her hair a mess. Jim tolerates this, but he is having an affair with his beautiful, organised secretary Georgie, and when she asks him to make his choice he is tempted . . . Sylvia Syms, who played Georgie, doesn't doubt that Thompson and his screenwriter, Ted Willis, had proto-feminist ideas, though they might not have described it that way themselves. 'It was time to make films in which working-class women had problems in their lives that weren't necessarily solved by a joke and going out to the pub,' she says. 'Amy is desperate, and Georgie is only in love with Jim, the most boring man in the world, because her horizons are so limited. He's her boss; he's the only man she knows.'

Such books and films reflected, to a degree, something that was in the air. Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, don't forget, first came out in English in 1953; and in 1956 the sociologists Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein published *Women's Two Roles*, which warned women of the dangers of the new cult of motherhood and home-making: 'The sentimental cult of domestic virtues is the cheapest method at society's disposal of keeping women quiet without seriously considering their grievances, or improving their position . . . it has been successfully used to this day and has helped to perpetuate some dilemmas of home-making women by telling them on the one hand that they are devoted to the most sacred duty, while on the other hand keeping them on a level of unpaid drudgery.'* By the end of the Fifties the subject of working mothers was one of the most talked-about moral issues of the day. It was in 1957 that the term 'latch key child' was first coined – by a

* Myrdal and Klein had been provoked, in particular, by the public response to the ideas of the psychiatrist John Bowlby, whose book *Child Care and the Growth of Love* described the damage done to babies and infants by early and prolonged separation from their mothers ('the absolute need of infants and toddlers for the continuous care of their mothers will be borne in on all who read this book, and some will exclaim, "Can I then never leave my child?"'). The public had applied his theories to situations they simply did not cover, and which Bowlby himself had specifically excluded.

magistrate who reported his distress at the numbers of delinquents he found before him, 'mostly because post-school and holiday hours meant all the temptations of street life, with the home motherless, cold and often locked up . . . '

On the flip side, there were plenty of books and films about the lives of single, liberated girls. Elaine Dundy's 1958 novel *The Dud Avocado*, which became a best seller, has for its heroine the adorable Sally Jay Gorce, who is alone in Paris, indulging her 'predilection for being continually on the wing'. Most of the book is devoted to her romantic encounters. Sally Jay sleeps with her boyfriends, thinks nothing of it and (crucially) *no harm comes to her*. J. Lee Thompson's *Yield to the Night* (1956) is an anti-death penalty film, made against the backdrop of the hanging of Ruth Ellis. It tells the story of the last weeks on earth of Mary Hilton (Diana Dors), who is to be hanged for the murder of the woman with whom her lover, Jim, was unfaithful. This film, a commercial flop in its day, has long since been reduced to a footnote in the dustier shelves of film studies, perhaps because it is about an Angry Young Woman rather than an Angry Young Man. In its flashback scenes, which depict Mary's life before she committed the murder, she is shown to be a liberated (and hard-working) young woman. She has left her boring husband and is renting herself a flat using her own money (she has a good job in a perfume store); the film makes it clear that she sleeps with Jim. She wants a better life, and when she shoots Lucy it is out of jealousy and curdled love, but also of class rage (Lucy is wealthy; Jim was her bit of rough). Powerful and terrifying, *Yield to the Night*, whose screenplay was written by a woman, Joan Henry, is remarkable in a dozen different ways. Above and beyond its contribution to the debate about hanging, it is a film whose central message seems to be that it is stupid and dangerous to think of women only as pretty things to have about the place. This applies as much to Dors, its wasp-waisted star and the greatest sex symbol of her day, as to anyone.

Mary (Diana Dors) in the condemned woman's cell

Save for the flashback scenes, she looks terrible throughout. Sullen and unsmiling, she wears no make-up and her roots are growing out. Her eyes are shadowed with grey. Her face is greasy. She puts in a blazing performance, and you ache for all that she might have been as an actress, had the men around her only given her more of a chance.*

Nineteen fifty-six. If this, as the historians suggest, is the year that marks the point the decade changed, austerity giving way to prosperity and deference to a new kind of confidence, then let us see what the women were up to. Across Britain they were

* In the US, the film was given the more blunt – and deeply unfair – title of *Blonde Sinner*. For more about *Yield to the Night* see Chapter 5, The Brontës of Shepherd's Bush. Dors's career was more or less over by 1960, by which time she had been reduced to selling sordid stories about her private life to the *News of the World*.

returning to work in ever larger numbers. The boom had created more jobs, and since there was already full employment women were once again in demand. Some of these women were wives too: by 1957, 33 per cent of married women worked. They wanted, many of them, to improve their family's standard of living, to be able to buy the shiny new consumer goods then becoming available: the country's hire-purchase debt rose to £784 million in 1959 (the figure had stood at £100 million before the war). And though disapproval of those women who worked had certainly not gone away, even the naysayers and doom merchants had to admit it was becoming ever easier to work and also have a family. Life was smoothed by, among other things, the rise of freezers, supermarkets, labour-saving devices in the kitchen and convenience foods. Fish fingers arrived on the market in 1955.

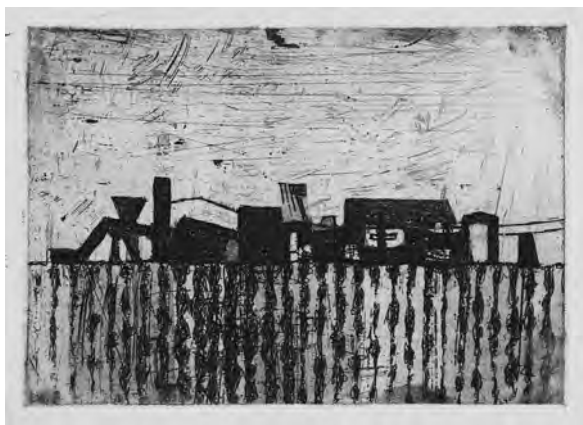
Other women, though, worked for its own sake, wanting their lives to be interesting, satisfying, *replete*. Their careers had taken them over, in the best sense. At Pinewood Studios Jocelyn Rickards was working on her costume designs for Laurence Olivier's film *The Prince and the Showgirl*. At the Royal Court Jocelyn Herbert was beginning her professional life at the age of almost forty with a job painting scenery; in less than twelve months' time she would produce her first major design, for the British premiere of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, and her career as the most celebrated and innovative theatrical designer of her day would be under way. At the Theatre Royal, Stratford, in the East End of London, the director Joan Littlewood and her company, the Theatre Workshop, were staging Brendan Behan's bawdy play, *The Quare Fellow*, a scathing indictment of the death penalty. Two years later Littlewood would stage *A Taste of Honey* by the eighteen-year-old Shelagh Delaney. The play, set in Salford, depicted working-class women from a working-class point of view, and would portray a gay character and a black character sympathetically. It would also be a smash hit.

Lucienne Day with a bolt of one of her Miró-inspired fabrics; her daughter Paula peeks out

In Stoke-on-Trent twenty-eight-year-old Jessie Tait, who'd trained at the Burslem School of Art and had begun her career as a junior to the great Charlotte Rhead, continued to design revolutionary abstract patterns for Midwinter Pottery: Savannah, in minimalist yellow and black; Zambesi, inspired by zebra stripes; Festival, which looked like cells seen through a microscope. In Chelsea, west London, in the studio she shared with her husband Robin, Lucienne Day was producing distinctive and fashionable textile designs inspired by painters such as Kandinsky and Miró. Calyx, the fabric she designed for the Festival of Britain, had made her a celebrity, and by this time she was everywhere: her house and even her recipes appearing in magazines, her face in an ad campaign for Smirnoff vodka. Across London, in the East End, Rosamind Julius continued to work to ensure that Hille, her family furniture company, was seen as the leading purveyor of contemporary style in Britain. She and her husband Leslie had furnished both the Royal Festival Hall and Gatwick Airport, and they had commissioned Robin Day to design furniture for them, including the moulded plywood Hillestak chair in 1950. At the *Guardian* the newsroom had a new architecture correspondent:

Diana Rowntree, who had won her job after sending its editor an excoriating analysis of the Shell building, which was shortly to be built on London's South Bank. 'No one at the *Guardian* wanted to learn about architecture,' she said. 'Only the women journalists warmed to the subject.' Nevertheless, she would remain at the newspaper for the next fourteen years.

In public and academic life, women were increasingly prominent. In 1956 Barbara Wootton, the sociologist and criminologist, was a governor of the BBC and had just finished serving on the Royal Commission into the civil service (this was her third Royal Commission). A Nuffield research fellow at Bedford College, she would soon be made a life peer. Edith Summerskill, the Labour MP for Warrington and a well-known campaigner on women's issues, was in the shadow Cabinet and had spoken at the famous rally against the Suez War in Trafalgar Square. Summerskill was also at work on *Letters to my Daughter*, a book that would, among other things, discuss frankly female sexuality. The distinctive voice of the novelist and campaigner Marghanita Laski was often heard on the BBC's *The Brains Trust*. In Jericho, Palestine, the archaeologist Kathleen Kenyon was hard at work on the Neolithic



Corrugated Fence by Prunella Clough

excavations that would make her internationally famous. Among her team was Honor Frost, a keen diver, who would later make her name as an underwater excavator. At Birkbeck College in London Rosalind Franklin was now working on tobacco mosaic virus and would soon reveal the structure of the ribonucleic acid of the virus, the carrier of its infectivity. In Oxford the chemist Dorothy Hodgkin, a mother of three, was close to solving the full structure of vitamin B12.*

The list goes on. Some marvellous novels by women, of course: Rose Macaulay's *The Towers of Trebizond*, Sybille Bedford's *A Legacy* and Mary Renault's *The Last of the Wine* all came out in 1956 – a year that was rather a poor one for fiction by men. Mary Quant had opened her first shop, Bazaar, in Chelsea. Barbara Hepworth was at the height of her powers, casting her first bronzes, having built her reputation as a carver. At Erica Brausen's† Hanover Gallery in Piccadilly Magda Cordell had a successful show of her abstract work. According to the architect Peter Smithson (the husband of one of the women at the heart of this book), Cordell was 'a force who had the capacity to turn her willpower to anything'. Her paintings were bloody and brutal; when it came to the female body she subscribed not at all to conventional ideas of beauty. Meanwhile, another artist, Prunella Clough, had embarked on her extraordinary and very fine depictions of industrial landscapes. Her subjects: cranes, cooling towers, fences of corrugated iron.

The women I interviewed for this introduction were all hard at work too. Grace Robertson had just been offered a job by *Life* magazine (she turned it down). Many of her assignments, now, were about the lives of women: party girls, childbirth, ribald seaside outings. Wendy Bray, having left Courtaulds, was pursuing a career as

* In the Forties, one of Hodgkin's students had been Margaret Roberts, the future Margaret Thatcher, who would enter parliament as a Conservative MP in 1959. Margaret Thatcher died on the day I finished writing this book.

† Brausen was Francis Bacon's first patron and gallerist.

New Born Baby by Grace Robertson

a freelance textile designer, her portfolio bulging more with every day that passed. Both were recently married. Sylvia Syms was shortly to marry her childhood sweetheart, Alan – and to be cast in her first film, *My Teenage Daughter*, in which she would play a rebellious girl alongside Anna Neagle. And the women whose stories I tell in the coming pages – Rose Heilbron, Nancy Spain, Joan Werner Laurie, Sheila van Damm and Jacquetta Hawkes; Muriel and Betty Box, Margery Fish, Alison Smithson and Patience Gray – were up to all sorts of things, as you will shortly discover.

A word on how this book should be read. It is a group biography, but not in the traditional sense. These women were not friends, or members of the same gang or organisation. A few of them knew each other, it's true, but not well. Fame was often the only thing they had in common. Each of the essays in this book, then, stands alone, making perfect sense even if yanked from its neighbours. But if you read all seven of them there will, I hope, be a cumulative effect, the culture of the Fifties – its food, its architecture, its popular culture, its habits and its opinions – revealed

through the lives of ten revolutionaries and taste makers who just happen to have been women. I hope these stories make people reconsider the 'lost' decade between the end of the war and feminism. But more than that, I hope they pull the reader along. As I researched them, piecing lives together by means of interviews, diaries, letters, photographs and memoirs, I was mostly goggle-eyed, *in awe*. These are, above all, tales of derring-do. Records will be broken, and hearts.

Timeline

1950

Ken Wood launches his electric mixer – later to be known as the Kenwood Chef – at the Ideal Home Exhibition.

Elizabeth David publishes *Mediterranean Food*.

Doris Lessing publishes her first novel, *The Grass is Singing*; set in Southern Rhodesia, it examines racial politics and causes a sensation.

1951

The first Miss World competition is held. It is won by Miss Sweden.

1952

On the death of her father King George VI, Princess Elizabeth ascends to the throne.

1953

Women teachers are awarded equal pay.

Lita Rosa is the first British woman to have a number-one hit, with 'How Much is That Doggy in the Window?'

The Second Sex by Simone de Beauvoir is published in English for the first time.

1954

Iris Murdoch publishes her first novel, *Under the Net*, the story of a struggling young writer called Jake Donaghue.

At the Alexander Sports Ground in Birmingham, Diane Leather becomes the first woman to break the five-minute mile.

1955

Dame Evelyn Sharp is appointed the first woman Permanent Secretary, at the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.

Barbara Mandell is the first woman to read the news on ITN.

Mary Quant opens her shop Bazaar.

Birds Eye launches Fish Fingers.

Ruth Ellis, a nightclub hostess, is hanged for the murder of her lover David Blakely.

1956

Tesco opens its first supermarket in Maldon, Essex.

Women's Two Roles by Alva Myrdal and Viola Klein, an academic study that allows for the possibility that women should be able to combine family life and work, is published.

1957

The *Guardian* starts its women's page.

Hubert de Givenchy designs a dress called the 'sack', an unstructured column that allowed for the possibility that women might want to move around (and which hid their curves from view).

1958

Hilda Harding becomes Britain's first female bank manager, at Barclays in Hanover Street, Mayfair.

Shelagh Delaney's controversial play *A Taste of Honey* opens at the Theatre Royal, Stratford.

Three women take their seats in the House of Lords, following the passing of the Life Peerages Act: the sociologist and criminologist Barbara Wootton (Baroness Wootton of Abinger); Stella Isaacs, the Marchioness of Reading, founder of the Women's Voluntary Service (created Baroness Swanborough); and the Conservative politician Katharine Elliot (Baroness Elliot of Harwood).

1959

The American pharmaceutical company, Searle, seeks Food and Drug Administration approval for the pill.

1960

Sylvia Pankhurst dies.

Coronation Street begins, and with it the reign of Ena Sharples and Elsie Tanner.

1961

The pill is made available on the NHS.

The first branch of Mothercare opens.

1962

Elizabeth Lane is appointed the first woman county court judge.

The TV satire *That Was the Week That Was* begins; one of its stars is Millicent Martin.

Doris Lessing publishes *The Golden Notebook*, the story of writer Anna Wulf.

1963

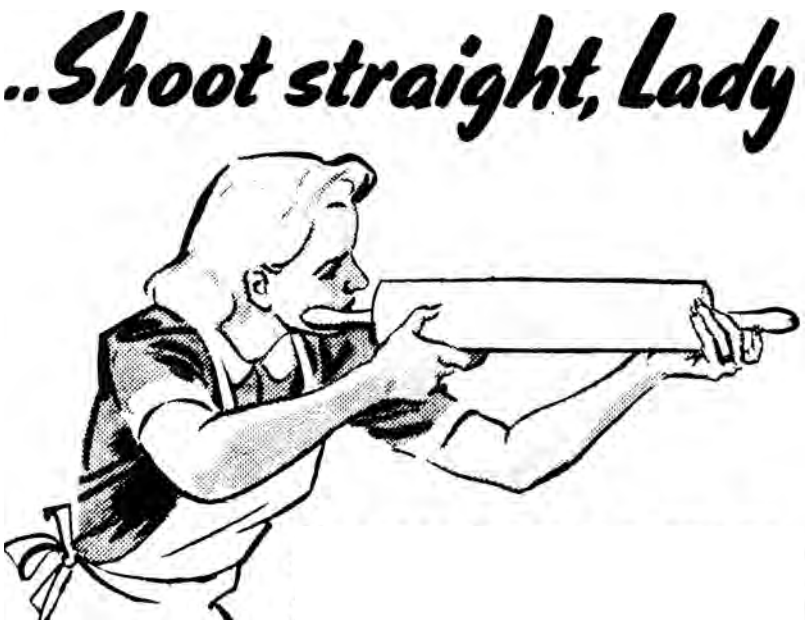
Betty Friedan publishes *The Feminine Mystique*, which identified 'the problem that has no name' and marked the beginning of second-wave feminism.

In the Kitchen with . . .

Patience Gray

'Large fishes are best left unscaled . . .'

Rationing. How miserable it was. 'Shoot straight, lady,' urged one of the Ministry of Food's many wartime posters. 'FOOD is your munition of war.' It was up to women to keep the nation fighting fit. But how few weapons the housewife infantry had at their disposal! No meat, no eggs, no butter, no sugar, no cream and barely any fruit. The cookbooks of the day, so chipper it makes you want to weep, are full of ideas for mock foods: marzipan cobbled from haricot beans and almond essence; eggs that are really tinned apricots fried in bacon fat. One cold afternoon in the



British Library I opened one of these books and realised with a start that I was looking at advice for cooking crow. 'Boil it up with suet,' said the writer, 'to keep the meat as white as possible.' There was a recipe for sparrow pie too – though the Ministry of Food did not 'encourage' the eating of these tiny birds.

Reams have been written about snoek, an imported tinned fish no one cared to eat. Ditto Woolton pie, a concoction of boiled vegetables named for the Minister of Food. But you get a truer sense of the privations of rationing by thinking about what people missed than by how they made do (or not). Oh, the *longing* that was there. On 5 March 1944 Vere Hodgson, who worked as a social worker during the war, recorded in her diary that a shop near her flat in Notting Hill had got hold of some oranges. 'We have seen orange peel in the street,' she wrote. And then: 'Most refreshing *even to look at it*.' In 1946 Elizabeth David, the future author of *Mediterranean Food*, returned to London from India, where she moved in with her pregnant sister Diana and promptly took over the shopping. 'One day, I took back to her, among the broken biscuits and the tins of snoek . . . one pound of fresh tomatoes. As I took them out of my basket to show her, I saw that tears were tumbling down my sister's beautiful and normally serene face.' Elizabeth asked Diana what on earth was wrong. 'Sorry,' she was told. 'It's just that I've been trying to buy fresh tomatoes for five years. And now it's you who've found them first.'

Things did not improve after the war; they got worse. In 1946 bacon, poultry and egg rations were all reduced, and the National Loaf shrank; far more shockingly, bread, flour and oatmeal were rationed for the first time (the government had agreed to donate part of the nation's wheat crop to Germany, the price of America supplying the bulk of what was needed to the starving nation). In 1947 a bad winter led to restrictions on potatoes. Milk was also in short supply, and canned meat and fish no longer coming in from America. Bread was removed from the ration in 1948, along with

jam, but there then followed a long and dreary wait. Tea was not de-rationed until 1952; sweets, cream, eggs and sugar until 1953; butter, cheese, margarine, cooking fats and meat until 1954. At this point the cookbook-writers went into celebratory mode. Suddenly it was glamorous to be at the stove: new homes were being built at a rate of three hundred thousand a year, with new kitchens full of new appliances – and now, just in the nick of time, food was abundant once more, which meant that these colourful new work surfaces (Formica!) could be put to good use. People could *entertain*. They could be *adventurous*. A trickle of books turned into a deluge, one that has been unstoppable pretty much ever since.

Of course, it was a while before most people would be eating, say, pasta as a matter of course. I was born in 1969, and into a family that cared about food, but it was 1977 at least before I tasted an avocado, 1978 before I tried lasagne and some years after that before my stepmother first attempted to cook a risotto. We were deep into the Eighties before most of us ate a salad leaf other than butter lettuce, and nudging the Nineties when pesto became a craze (and only then the ersatz kind, in little glass jars). This is why we must take cookbooks, whether written in 1945 or 2005, with a pinch of salt: they tell us more about our aspirations than about our daily lives (and this, perhaps, is why I remain unconvinced that anyone ever cooked a crow for their dinner – though I hope the thought of its black feathers shocked you as you read about it). Fifty years from now people will look at the cookbooks in kitchens like yours and mine and assume that our lives were one long celebration of spelt and sea bass, samphire and salsify. But the truth is that I can't tell you when I last used any of these things. Indeed, I have never knowingly cooked salsify.

It is in this context that we must consider Elizabeth David and her vastly less well-known but equally talented peer Patience Gray.

David's ambition, her sheer chutzpah, cannot, I think, be underestimated; outrageously, she published her first cook book, *Mediterranean Food*, in 1950, four long years before rationing ended. But her *influence* surely can. This book and those that followed it were only ever read by a small, select crowd, and even after rationing ended its fans would not have been able to get hold of many of the things she described: the figs and the aubergines, the polenta and the pistachio nuts. But, of course, that hardly mattered. She was not writing for the masses – she was too grand for that – and nor, in all honesty, was she writing a handbook. As Rosemary Hill has pointed out, David was to cooking what Bernard Leach was to ceramics: *A Potter's Book*, published in 1940 but unexpectedly popular after the war, offered a similar kind of paradise in its description of the lives of Oriental craftsmen to the one David evoked in the olive groves of Europe. Just as the majority of Leach's readers had no intention of building themselves a kiln, so David's were mostly not about to make a bouillabaisse for dinner. David was certainly prescient. The food she wrote about is everywhere today. But in her own time she fed fantasies, not families.

Perhaps because she is still so famous, people often assume that David was the Fifties' best-selling food writer. In fact that accolade must go to Patience Gray and her 1957 book, *Plats du Jour*, some hundred thousand copies of which were sold before the decade was out. It is said that David and Gray met just once, in 1961, for dinner in the flat of their mutual acquaintance, an antiquarian book dealer called Irving Davis. But if this is so neither one of them recorded the occasion. What would such a meeting have been like? Terrifying, one imagines. For one thing, they were the kind of women who mostly preferred male company to that of their own sex; impossible to imagine them, heads bent, sharing baking tips. For another, they were too similar for each to have taken the other for a kindred spirit; as every junior science

student knows, like poles repel. If such an encounter did happen, one hopes that Davis was more than usually circumspect with the claret.

Both came from the upper middle classes, growing up in large Jacobean manor houses in Sussex where legendarily bad nursery food was cooked by cooks and served by maids, and both were famously beautiful and intelligent. Compared to most British women their age they were well travelled and in possession of complicated, bohemian private lives. Elizabeth David, as all the world surely knows by now, spent the war abroad, travelling to Greece in a small boat in 1939 with Charles Gibson Cowan, an actor and writer, and thence to Egypt; Patience Gray was in London and Sussex for the duration of the war, sharing her life with a badly behaved man called Thomas Gray, but she went to Romania in 1938, and later to France, Italy and Yugoslavia. Most significant of all, both women enjoyed a brief period in thrall to older mentors who would have a profound influence on their careers as food writers. David met the writer Norman Douglas in Antibes when she was twenty-six and he was seventy-two; he is the dedicatee of *Mediterranean Food*. Patience Gray met Irving Davis when she was forty and he was sixty-nine; the seventh chapter of her masterpiece *Honey from a Weed* is a tribute to him, and in 1967, after his death, she edited his Catalan cookery book, *A Collection of Impossible Recipes*.

What about their work? Both women were extremely clear-sighted about what it was that they wanted their books to do. Controlling, you might say. You see this in their prose (bracing), in their recipes (sophisticated, unapologetic) and even in the illustrators they chose starting out (John Minton in the case of David, and David Gentleman in the case of Gray: neo-Romantics, the pair of them). David was first into print, but Gray beat her to it when it came to French *cuisine bourgeoise*; David's *French Provincial Cooking*, the most accessible of her books, was

published some four years after the chic but unprecedentedly user-friendly *Plats du Jour*.*

And yet, as I have said, we know so much about one – Elizabeth David's story has been told many times, in print and on screen – and so little about the other. Gray, perhaps because she was the more unconventional of the two, and perhaps because she followed her heart in a way that David never did, remains in the shadows. This is not a competition, and I am not about to make it one. They were both glorious, fascinating, pioneering. But I will say this. It was Gray who hung on to her ideals right to the end (though this does not mean that her opinions calcified; she never ceased to be interested in the world and in other people). She was a cook *to her bones*: not for her the diet of instant coffee and Ritz crackers Elizabeth David would come to favour in old age. When it came to the details of her life she was, like David, wilfully vague.† The ins and outs could be glossed over, she felt. But when it came to dinner, she meant what she said. She *lived* her words. 'As can be seen, all this chopping and pounding has much to do with health,' she once wrote. She could no more give it up than she could breathing.

Patience Gray was born on 31 October 1917 at Shackleford, near Godalming in Surrey, the second of the three daughters of Hermann Stanham, a major in the Royal Field Artillery, and his wife Olive. The family home was Mitchen Hall, a grand but rather isolated house of peach-coloured brick, whose oak-panelled rooms overlooked 'a world of woods, garden, cherry trees' and beyond

* It is striking that Patience Gray is not mentioned at all in *Writing at the Kitchen Table*, Artemis Cooper's authorised biography of Elizabeth David.

† As Artemis Cooper notes, David always behaved 'like a married woman' even when she was not. Her busy private life as a younger woman was tidied away in the assurances of her publisher that 'Mrs David has kept house in France, Italy, Greece and Egypt' – as if she were just another diplomatic wife. (She was a divorcee.)

them the Hog's Back, that part of the North Downs which rises far higher than the countryside around. For Patience, Mitchen Hall was a place of 'wonder and terror' whose every nook and cranny she would remember until the end of her life. 'Mysteries without and mysteries within,' she wrote of it in her maddeningly cryptic collection of essays, *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams*. 'Sunbeams streamed into these rooms, in which the dancing dust particles were so clearly seen against the darkened panelling that they were imagined, then known to be, slides for fairy beings. The passages, concealing cupboards in their walls, the winding stairs with carved balusters, impressed mere infants with uncertain feelings, as if at any moment some terrifying "thing" might appear . . . '

Major Stanham was not quite what he seemed. Stanham was his mother's maiden name. His real name was Warschawski, and he was the son of a Jewish professor of Hebrew who had fled persecution in Poland in the middle of the nineteenth century, become active in the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews and had finally been ordained as a Unitarian minister in about 1900. Major Stanham's career in the army, moreover, was running in parallel to a photographic studio he kept up in Brighton – a business his children seem not to have known about until much later, and which operated under his real name.* But outwardly he was an upper middle class Englishman, and this was what his daughters took him for. Thanks to an inheritance his wife had received from her grandfather the family had servants, and the children were brought up in high Edwardian style by their nanny in a nursery at the top of the house; later, there would be governesses, often French. Left alone – Nanny would regularly disappear down the back stairs for tea with Cook –

* A notice in the *London Gazette* of 21 April 1903 announces Hermann's promotion from Captain to Lieutenant. In this, he is referred to as Hermann Stanham Warschawski. Before he joined the army Hermann had trained as a photographer's assistant.

Olive and her daughters. Patience is on the right, Tania on the left, Virginia carried piggyback

Patience would stand on a toy box and gaze on the garden below with its orchard, its enclosing yew walk, its tennis court and its wide lawn on which, in summer, tea would be taken: black lacquer tray, silver pot, cucumber sandwiches, strawberries and cream. 'Nanny's so wonderful!' her mother liked to say. 'She never leaves the children.' Unbeknownst to Olive, Nanny was also in possession of certain 'terror-inducing powers'. Sudden death was a favourite theme: it could, she informed the children, strike at any time, even in the paradise of the garden. Patience knew to avoid the pink-orange berries of the yew and the shiny black berries of the deadly nightshade. But still, magpies had to be saluted, knives and forks immediately straightened, salt handled with extreme care.

With the exception of her father, the household was entirely female. This did not improve Major Stanham's famously bad temper: 'Looking round the table he sighed, then came out with the familiar words: "*Women again . . . always women.*"' As an adult, Patience would lay her refusal to marry firmly at his feet. 'The kneeling upset me,' she wrote. 'I used to suffer appalling

embarrassment when my mother got down on her knees to implore my father, who was sitting in a low armchair stretched with well-worn leather and completely absorbed in the *Times* fourth leader, to come to dinner.' Mealtimes were a battlefield. When the children were small he would command the maid to set down the dish of the day in front of one or other of them, knowing full well this would provoke tears (no one liked the look of Cook's spotted dogs and roly poly puddings). When they were older he would ask impossible questions, 'the answer to which was supposed to be a fundament of general knowledge'. There would then follow a lecture, a disquisition that proceeded without interruption because their mother carved the meat herself.

The Major was also mean to his daughters' governesses. One, Miss Collins, used to be teased about the arrival (or non-arrival) of letters from her fiancé in India. Another, Zella, was asked to take his prize boar for a walk – an outing that ended in disaster when the pig lay down in a ditch and refused to budge: the fuming Major, called from the sanctuary of his study to retrieve the hog, condemned this incident as 'a bad case of mismanagement of which only a woman is capable'. It was left to Patience's mother to act as his pacifier, a role on which she seemed to thrive. As her daughter put it drily, '"Pacifying" can also be seen, in retrospect, as "a bad case of masochism".' No one knew why their father was so choleric – though it must have had something to do with the war, it might also have been connected to his strange double life – but his moods were difficult to live with. 'I have listened to other people's accounts of their happy childhoods with sadness mingled with disbelief,' wrote Patience. 'I recognised mine as a snuffing out of every spontaneous impulse to the point where one might have been said to be walking on tiptoe to avoid the detonations.' The only respite came when her parents disappeared to hunt, to swing their golf clubs and, most blessed of all, to ski. (For them, this relatively new sport had an especially romantic aura,

for they had first met on the slopes at Gstaad.) At these times a maiden aunt – the kind who lived in fear of draughts – would supervise the household and all would be peaceful, for a while, at least.

When Patience was six, however, the family's fortunes changed dramatically. On his return from the war and a stint in Mesopotamia, the Major had set up a pig farm near Basingstoke. When this failed – according to his middle daughter, he was born with 'zero business sense' and found himself quite unable to market his pigs – he moved the family back to Sussex, the county where he had grown up, buying a 'perfectly inconvenient farmhouse' halfway between a seaside golf club and the Pevensey Marshes. Here he returned to studio photography full time,* at which point Patience's parents' social life became altogether more rackety: 'Divorce, a word hitherto unknown, began to crop up at home in adult conversation, a signal for our dismissal to the schoolroom. Lingering on the stairs, one overheard phrases such as: "The cad! I've a good mind to go and horsewhip him." A supposed victim on one occasion – a rather fast and fascinating woman with [an] Eton crop, low husky voice and nine-inch ivory cigarette holder, who drilled my father through the clockwork paces of the foxtrot and the perilous complexities of the tango – inspired him to dash off and threaten the doubtless cruel but perhaps timid offender . . . with a revolver. This high-flown action resulted in a visit from a policeman.'

Patience's maternal grandfather and her mother's sister Dodo began to worry about Olive, 'detecting in my father's indifference to breadwinning a growing threat to my mother's peace of mind and pocket. Our bread and butter could be traced to mysterious "shares" left to her by Grandmother. In the financial landslides of

* Patience did not, I think, realise that he was returning to his original trade. Similarly, she did not find out about her Jewish roots until late in life – a discovery that delighted her.

the time, she became the object of their solicitude . . . *poor Olive*.' It was on her sister's account, then, that Dodo suggested Patience, a prodigiously intelligent child, should live with her in term time and attend school in London with her youngest cousin.

For Patience, this was a terrifying prospect. Aunt Dodo, a talented musician, was a 'glittering' figure. She had a large collection of 'late-afternoon adorers' with whom she liked to discuss Proust and Wagner, and she was married to the distinguished obstetrician Eardley Holland (later *Sir* Eardley Holland), a saturnine figure who was 'often reported to be "perfectly charming" to his female patients'.* At home, Patience was the only daughter capable of speaking to Major Stanham without stammering or blushing. But in London – the Hollands lived, in grand style, close to Harley Street – she found that she could not countenance the idea of uttering so much as a single word to Uncle Eardley. She had, it seemed, moved out of the frying pan and into the fire: 'At breakfast, he gloomily, silently, savagely surveyed the five females [the Hollands also had three girls] from the far end of the table, frowning, then with a grunted Umph! retired behind the *Times,* emanating thunderous vibrations.' The family was always relieved when, at 8.30, his chauffeur arrived to take him to the London Hospital.

Being 'a half-fledged cuckoo in alternating family nests' gave Patience a certain detachment. Moving between the two houses threw all sorts of things into relief, for the contrast between them was now severe: 'While the tea tray was still being gracefully borne across the polished parquet in Queen Anne Street [the

* This may be code – or sarcasm. Holland had a long affair with the novelist Elizabeth Jenkins, whom he met during the war, and who described him as the love of her life. 'He wasn't faithful to his wife,' said Jenkins many years later. 'I wondered why she didn't value him more; so many women, including me, would happily have changed places with her. I offered him my heart on a plate. He made me unhappy, but it was worth it.' Jenkins wrote one of the great novels of the Fifties – and one of the great novels of any age about marriage – *The Tortoise and the Hare*.

Hollands' home], financial extremity faced my mother with new tasks.' Thanks to the Depression, the Stanhams now lacked both cook and housemaid, and Olive was forced to perform their duties herself. By rights Patience should have admired her mother's stoicism, the determined way she learned to make kedgeree, angels on horseback and all the other familiar dishes on the her new-fangled gas stove. But somehow she could not. The 'pursed lips of self-immolation' saw to that. When her mother set about the hall gong with the Brasso, she and her siblings would 'linger on the sidelines as spectators'. There was something frantic in these displays of domestic drudgery that Patience disliked. 'I don't exaggerate this obsession with things to be kept up,' she writes in *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams*. 'When Major Blacker, who so recently had flown solo over Everest, a hero, was invited to dinner, my elder sister and I were reluctantly transformed into spotless maids in starched aprons and caps in order to bring on the asparagus, the roast pheasants, and the Stilton cheese.'

At the bridge tables frequented by her father, having a clever daughter was 'a misfortune equivalent to the loss of a dog or an Act of God'. But at least this meant that Patience was spared the fate of her older sister Tania,* shortly to be dispatched to Switzerland to learn household management, and at her new school, Patience thrived. Queen's College in Harley Street,† founded by the Victorian theologian and social reformer Frederick Denison Maurice, was a liberal establishment respectful of the rights of women, having begun its life as a place where governesses might be educated. The atmosphere was serious and

* Tania became a photographer. Her work appeared in *National Geographic* and elsewhere. She married the journalist John Midgley, who had a long career at *The Economist*.

† Among her contemporaries at Queen's College were the daughters of the Labour politician Stafford Cripps, and Unity Mitford, who was a boarder: 'Try to imagine an outsize supercilious beautiful doll harnessed inside a gym tunic, aloof and dumb, outraged at being thus confined.'

the teachers able and passionate (save for poor Miss Enderby, a 'well-intentioned, broad-bottomed lady' whom the girls liked to tease, and whom Patience would one day meet again in a short story by Katherine Mansfield, an old girl whose portrait hung in the school's entrance hall). Drawn to the Jewish girls in her class, a group she thought particularly bright and quick, Patience began to feel competitive, and with pleasing results: by the time she was fourteen she had already qualified for university entrance.

She spent her final year at school as a boarder – it's not clear why; perhaps Uncle Eardley had had enough – sharing a top-floor bedroom with a girl from Berlin called Edith Goeritz and Ann Stephen, Virginia Woolf's niece. ('A victim of psychoanalysis', according to Patience, Stephen mistook her narrow bed for the analyst's couch with the result that her dorm-mates had to listen to her droning free associations late into the night.) Patience found boarding ridiculous at times – 'how absurd to remember the midnight feast which, in a childish fit, the boarders had conspired to hold underneath the long table in the library' – but Queen's taught her to be both free-thinking and spirited, and when she went home to Sussex for the holidays she noticed immediately the effect she had on the young men in her parents' social set. The 'least gleam of thought or the slightest satirical inflection' in the direction of these youths, callow or otherwise, caused them both anxiety and irritation. She found their chat – what animals they had shot, what injuries had befallen them when they 'took a toss' from their horses, what miracle they had performed on the billiard table – intensely boring. Her father, meanwhile, regarded these young men as 'undesirable intruders'. He had not left home until he was forty. Wouldn't his daughters be doing the same?

Patience had other ideas. She longed 'for air and flight'. Too young to take up her place at university, she went first to Bonn to learn German and study economics, though she soon swapped

Patience in Germany, 1936

the latter for history of art. Bonn was her father's choice, being a safe little town; Paris he deemed immoral, and Rome, Florence and Perugia were 'out of the question.' She lived in a 'kind of prison', a seventeenth-century observatory in the Poppelsdorfer Allee which she shared with the professor of astronomy and his wife and child. To escape the observatory's claustrophobic atmosphere she spent much of her time walking in the old town, and it was here that she discovered the baroque. 'I was drawn to these musical façades and domed interiors where imagination could take off and soar . . . ' It was not the gilt and the putti that she loved but the spaces, and their glorious flowing curves soon 'entered her dreams'. What did these dreams mean? Freedom. Escape. Or, as Patience put it in her slightly more grandiose style, 'Edwardians! Let me breathe and live!'

In England once more she began her degree at London University, where her tutor was Hugh Gaitskell, the future Labour leader. She read economics which was, by all accounts, Dodo's idea; since her father was not going to be able to support her – it wasn't only that funds were low; he was now suffering from cancer and would soon die – she needed to study a subject

that might help her to earn a living. But she knuckled down all the same. Better economics, she thought, than a return to Sussex and the young men with their gumboots and their billiard cues.

In 1938, after she had graduated, Patience and her sister Tania travelled to eastern Europe on a grant from the Society of Quakers, their brief 'to make friends with the Romanians'. From the scant details we have, their three-month stay seems to have been an extraordinary experience – though it's important to bear in mind Patience's tendency to myth-making. Given to making Delphic pronouncements, her writing was often opaque, perhaps because life seemed more interesting that way. 'She had this . . . *idea*,' says her daughter Miranda. 'You had a little black dress [among your luggage] that you could wear on any occasion, and then you travelled on carts and met the people.' And so it went. The sisters spent time in Balcic, a formerly Turkish town close to the Black Sea (it's now in Bulgaria), where they drank mazagran (black coffee poured over honey and shreds of ice) and Patience wandered its ancient sites with an archaeologist called Rosetti, whom she hoped, somewhat misguidedly, to use as a human Baedeker (in fact, they got terrifyingly lost). In Bucharest – a city then so elegant it was known as Little Paris – she and Tania stayed in the only 'respectable' hotel, all carmine damask, deep red plush and yellowing marble. In as long as it took to turn the key in the door of her room, she was grown up.

In July Marie of Romania, the Queen consort, died, with the result that Patience was moved to write her first piece of journalism, for a (presumably English language) Bucharest newspaper. The funeral made for great copy. Marie, a granddaughter of Queen Victoria who is sometimes referred to as the jazz-age princess, had led a life full of intrigue and drama and her coffin, followed by an honour guard of hussars, nuns and wounded veterans, moved through a city that the king had commanded to be draped all about with her favourite colour, mauve. (Marie's

heart, incidentally, was sent to Balcic, where she had kept a beloved summer palace.) But no sooner had Patience delivered her report than the newspaper's infatuated editor laid siege to her, filling her hotel room with tuberoses, the cloying scent of which would thereafter always fill her with remembered horror. The story goes that she and Tania escaped his attentions by fleeing to the Black Sea in a monoplane piloted by a Romanian prince.

Safely back in London, Patience acquired a job at the Foreign Office. But she held on to it for only a few months: when war broke out in 1939 she was promptly dismissed – well, this was her story – for 'having too many foreign contacts'. Her next job was as a secretary at the Arts Council, and it was there that she met Thomas Gray, a designer and veteran of the Spanish Civil War.* In his spare time, Gray was running a clandestine counter-insurgency course for the Home Guard at Hurlingham in west London. He was married and had two children, but Patience – caught up in what Elizabeth Bowen would call the 'lucid abnormality' of the Blitz – became his lover anyway. And why stop there? She also became the secretary of this somewhat barmy-sounding training school for civilians who wanted to learn 'how to make Molotov cocktails'. Hard to say which was the more exciting.

For a while she and Gray were happy. In January 1941, by which time he and Patience already had a son, Nicolas, she took his name by public announcement in the *London Gazette*. A daughter, Miranda, was born in 1942. But then things changed. Gray was a womaniser, and when he tried to seduce one of her friends Patience resolved to give him up. She left London and moved to her mother's cottage, which stood in a wood on the South

* Thomas Gray was the brother of Milner Gray, the artist and designer who founded the Design Research Institute (where Thomas may have worked after the war). The DRI made important contributions to the Britain Can Make It exhibition of 1946, and to the Festival of Britain. He was a close friend of the artist Graham Sutherland.

Downs. The trouble was that she was pregnant again. Believing she could not bring up three children alone she decided to have the baby – a daughter called Prudence – adopted, a decision that turned out to be even more painful than it might ordinarily have been.* The baby was seriously ill, and for a while was returned to Patience so she could nurse her (only mother's milk, it was thought, would see her through). This was agonising. Meanwhile, Gray had been conscripted. Patience was terribly alone, coping with a sick baby and two small children (though Nicolas was eventually evacuated to Fowey) in 'a kind of *Walden* situation, with no telephone, electricity or water laid on'. The cottage didn't even feel that safe. Planes could often be heard overhead, and behind the house was a dirty great bomb crater. In the end Prudence did not survive. As if this weren't bad enough, her adoptive parents would not allow Patience to attend the funeral.

After this, Gray fell out of the picture. Patience never spoke of him, and Nicolas and Miranda did not see him again, though there was an occasion when they found themselves bundled hurriedly on to a number 24 bus in Camden Town. 'That was your father,' said Patience once they were safely on board. In *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams* she refers to him only twice, and then only very briefly. He was, she writes, courageous during the Blitz. In an afterword she notes that she never found, in the Forties and Fifties, 'the propitious moment' for explaining to Nicolas and Miranda, 'who had forgotten they had known their father', why she had not married him, nor anyone else. Towards the end of her life, when she was unwell and her mind wandering, she would watch Nicolas, who resembles Thomas, stoking the fire at her house in Italy and she would say softly, 'There's my husband.' But

* I have been unable to find out any more about this adoption drama. Patience never spoke about the baby, and only revealed the adoption to Miranda in old age.

in 1943, when they separated, she thought of him only as a huge mistake. She turned her back on him and on all the trouble he had brought her. From now on, she would live for herself.

Patience remained in Sussex until the winter of 1947, the worst in living memory, at which point the relentless cold and her difficult relationship with the widowed Olive sent her back to London. (Olive, a follower of Krishnamurti was not judgemental about her daughter's lifestyle; she was delighted to have grandchildren. The problem was more that Patience expected her to disapprove and so bristled anyway.) In the city she hoped to be able to make enough money to educate Nicolas and Miranda, and to keep a roof over their heads. But she also longed for an interesting life. 'There is nothing to say about work,' she once wrote. 'It occupies you intensely if it's what you choose to do.' She wanted to make just such a choice. There followed a series of temporary jobs until, in 1951, she was appointed research assistant to F. H. K. Henrion, designer of the displays inside the Country Pavilion at the Festival of Britain. This was a wonderful opportunity, and not only because of the hullabaloo that surrounded the Festival. Henrion, kind, encouraging and cultivated, was fantastically well-connected: his friends included the writer and naturalist Julian Huxley, the Labour politician Tony Benn and Walter Neurath, the founder of Thames & Hudson. To belong to his circle was to belong to London's intellectual and creative elite.*

What research did Patience do? A good deal of it must have been logistical; the pavilion was an organisational nightmare. It was divided in two: one section, entitled *The Natural Scene*, featured a

* Patience loved meeting artistic types, especially writers. In *Work Adventures Childhood Dreams* she describes how she met T. S. Eliot at a Sussex cocktail party in 1950. They talked for a long time – until the curtains were drawn and the lights went up, and all the other guests had gone on their way. They drank many gin and tonics, and talked of London and Henry James, whose 'interminable sentences' muffled Eliot's sense of the present.

huge plaster tree with a woodland garden and pools of water at its foot; visitors gazed at it through a tank of live butterflies. The other, *The Country*, was filled with animals – horses, cows, sheep, goats, chickens, ducks and bees – and a variety of tractors, which moved, bizarrely, up and down on a series of hydraulic columns. The horses had to be transported to Hyde Park every day for exercise, and the fish fed with plankton, deliveries of which came from the Lake District each morning. The butterflies were kept alive with wildflowers, dug up by a network of boy scouts. Slightly less complicated to mount were the geological display and an exhibit of rural crafts,* the highlight of which was a vast narrative stumpwork embroidery, *The Country Wife*, designed by the great Constance Howard to depict Women's Institute activities such as baking and weaving (it had been worked by her students at Goldsmiths' College, among them Mary Quant).†

It may have been thanks to Henrion that Patience got her next job, as a secretary at the Royal College of Art (he sometimes used to teach in the design school). But though she somehow hung on to this position until 1953 – according to someone who knew her at the time, she simply wasn't malleable enough to survive for long as a secretary – she had another iron in the fire. At the Festival of Britain an artist called Primrose Boyd had been among her colleagues, and the two women now set up their own

* As one visitor, Dylan Thomas, put it, 'What a pleasure of baskets! Trugs, creels, pottles and punnets, heppers, dorsers and mounds, wiskets and whiskets.' According to her daughter Miranda, Patience was at one point friendly with Thomas.

† Howard, embroiderer and textile designer, won a scholarship to study at the Royal College of Art in the Thirties. She then went into teaching. At Kingston School of Art, where she spent the war, she and her students embroidered maps for the RAF, which were then photographed – a technique that produced great clarity. The students who worked on *The Country Wife* would go to her house in Chelsea both to embroider and to babysit her new daughter Charlotte. Howard would feed them tripe and onions, which she thought good for them. *The Country Wife* was so large it had to be assembled on site. According to the Embroiderers Guild, Howard inspected it every weekend because sections kept disappearing. One, featuring a fish, had to be replaced four times.

freelance research partnership. Their business cards – touchingly and pluckily entrepreneurial, but rather prim – informed potential clients that they would take on 'all kinds' of research and 'report writing' for the rate of five shillings an hour plus expenses, and that commissions would be completed 'accurately, fully and promptly'. When they said all kinds of research, they meant it. The list of their 'SPECIAL SUBJECTS' was extensive: bibliography, cartography, indoor gardening, horticulture, office organisation, kitchen equipment 'and practice'. The last item on this list was opportunist but hardly surprising, for the two of them had also begun work on a cookbook.

Patience's growing interest in cookery had two sources. In Sussex, poverty and rationing had sent her out foraging, which was how she had learned about mushrooms: which ones to pick, and

Foraging in Sussex

how to eat them (she carried them home in a basket lined with moss). But she had by now travelled quite a lot too. In 1947, leaving the children with their grandmother, she had seen Rome for the first time, a city she felt should be approached humbly, 'on one's knees'. She followed this with the first of what would be several visits to Brittany, where she and Nicolas and Miranda stayed in the Hôtel Lautram in a village called Locmariaquer and enjoyed the good Breton butter, the fat, fresh oysters and the 'rosy mullets' fished at dawn and bathed in an equally rosy sauce ('M. Lautram was that mysterious personage, a great cook . . . Fish dishes were his forte.')* In 1951 she had made her way, alone, to Paris, and thence to Yugoslavia on the Orient Express, a route inspired by some of the writers she loved: Gissing, Smollet and Stendhal.

Patience had arrived in London a pretty terrible cook. 'My first introduction [to cooking] was desperate,' she recalled. 'I lived in a sordid square in an old Victorian house and, inspired by a particular article, tried to cook a sheep's head à la Russe. It was absolutely indescribable, and made a frothy scum which filled the whole kitchen.' But when she moved to the Logs, a sprawling Victorian Gothic mansion on the edge of Hampstead Heath – it still stands; Pevsner describes it as a 'formidable atrocity' – her skills began to improve. She and Miranda† lived and worked in its former billiard room; they slept on a mezzanine – little more

* *Les rougets au vin blanc de Monsieur Lautram:* For eight red mullets, put 80g butter and a glass of white wine in an oven dish with the fish and cook in a moderate oven for 25 minutes. Thicken the liquor in a pan with good butter and a little flour. Set the fish in a serving dish, cover with the sauce and sprinkle with parsley. Patience adds: 'This is the recipe he gave me written in French in his own hand. What he fails to say is that the sauce, copious and perfectly amalgamated, is achieved by a *tour de main*. A perfect example of a "simple" recipe conveying no idea of procedure, or an instance of a true Breton's reluctance to share his secrets.'

† Nicolas was away at boarding school. According to Miranda, there was no room for him at the Logs. When term was over he and his sister would grab their cat, Pussy Willow, and head straight to their grandmother's in Sussex. The children, incidentally, called their mother Patience.

than a shelf, really – designed for her by Alexander Gibson, one of the architects of the Regatta Restaurant at the Festival of Britain.* The billiard room, for all its obvious drawbacks and eccentricities, suited Patience very well, for she was an early adopter of open-plan living, believing that it was quite wrong for the cook to be marooned in a separate room. Her kitchen, then, was an alcove at one end of the space, and her dining table just a wooden shelf attached to a wall, which she called the Lion's Bar (a lion's head hung on the wall above it – a sculpture constructed by Nicolas and Miranda from lead collected from the crumpled roofs of bombed houses and melted down).

At the Logs she liked to entertain, and gave Sunday lunches oiled with plenty of wine: talky gatherings of Hampstead neighbours such the writer Marghanita Laski and her husband John Howard. Henrion would come, and his colleague John Brinkley, the typographer who'd done the lettering at the Lion and Unicorn Pavilion. Also a young art student, David Gentleman. Patience and Gentleman had grown very friendly, and by the time he went off to Italy on a travelling scholarship in the summer of 1954 it was understood that while he was there he would gather material for Patience's book, which she had asked him to illustrate.

It took a long time to write, this cookbook: she and Primrose began working on it in 1953 or thereabouts, and would not finish it for another four years. Patience was scrupulous about testing its recipes: it made her furious when Primrose failed to do this, and she would often end up dismissing her co-writer's dishes once she'd tried them herself. (She was not, you gather, terribly easy to

* Gibson's co-designer at the Regatta Restaurant was Misha Black, Milner Gray's partner at the Industrial Design Partnership – which suggests, perhaps, that she still kept tabs on Thomas's life, or at least that she knew what he was up to. The restaurant sat on the river next to Hungerford Bridge, adjacent to the Skylon. It was the main showcase for the Festival Pattern Group, a selection of futuristic-looking fabrics whose designs were inspired by crystal structures. The food was said to be awful.

Patience smoking a Craven A at the Logs; on the bentwood hatstand hangs a winnowing basket, possibly from Madame Cadec's shop on Greek Street

work with, and because of this it was ultimately Patience who ended up writing and editing the main body of the book.) Then there was the shopping involved. Ingredients had to be hunted down. It's a cliché of food writing to note that in the Fifties olive oil could only be purchased at a chemist. What people tend to forget is that the same was also true of – for instance – Tidman's Sea Salt, an item most people used for bathing but which Patience recommended for seasoning fish and meat.

The best shops were in Soho: Parmigiani's and Roche's in Old Compton Street, Schmidt's in Charlotte Street and – for kitchen kit rather than for ingredients – Cadec's in Greek Street, which stood next to a 'hospitable place called Rose's, whose horsemeat steaks and dandelion salads kept a happy few well nourished

during the war'. Cadec's was an emporium that filled Patience with awe. Established in 1862, only master cooks had, she felt, the true right of admission. Sometimes, her nerve having failed her at the last, she would simply remain outside, studying through Madame Cadec's window all her wonderful and exotic wares: 'the beautiful terrines with hares and pheasants moulded in deep relief on their lids, the chef's knives, silver *hatelets* surmounted by cocks' and boars' heads, the embossed tin moulds for iced puddings in the form of pineapples and bunches of grapes . . . '

Inside, the proprietor 'occupied the foreground, an ample figure, her hair piled high and her eyes attentive to every detail behind their rimless pince-nez', while around her stood great cairns of stuff piled high from floor to ceiling. Navigating these finely balanced pyramids of copper and earthenware was perilous, but mysteriously galvanising. 'The essential thing about this charged interior was that it contained nothing which had not a practical significance,' Patience wrote in *Honey from a Weed*. 'But the quality was so superb that the function of the objects seemed to be transcended. Beautiful in themselves, they were an invocation to produce good food.' At home she worked away, practising her *daube de boeuf* and her *pot au feu*, her *bouillabaisse* and her *poulet à l'estragon.* She wasn't a great one for modern gadgets: no mixer, no dishwasher, no ice-cream machine. Her *batterie de cuisine*, however, was a splendid sight to see, and she had Madame Cadec to thank for it.

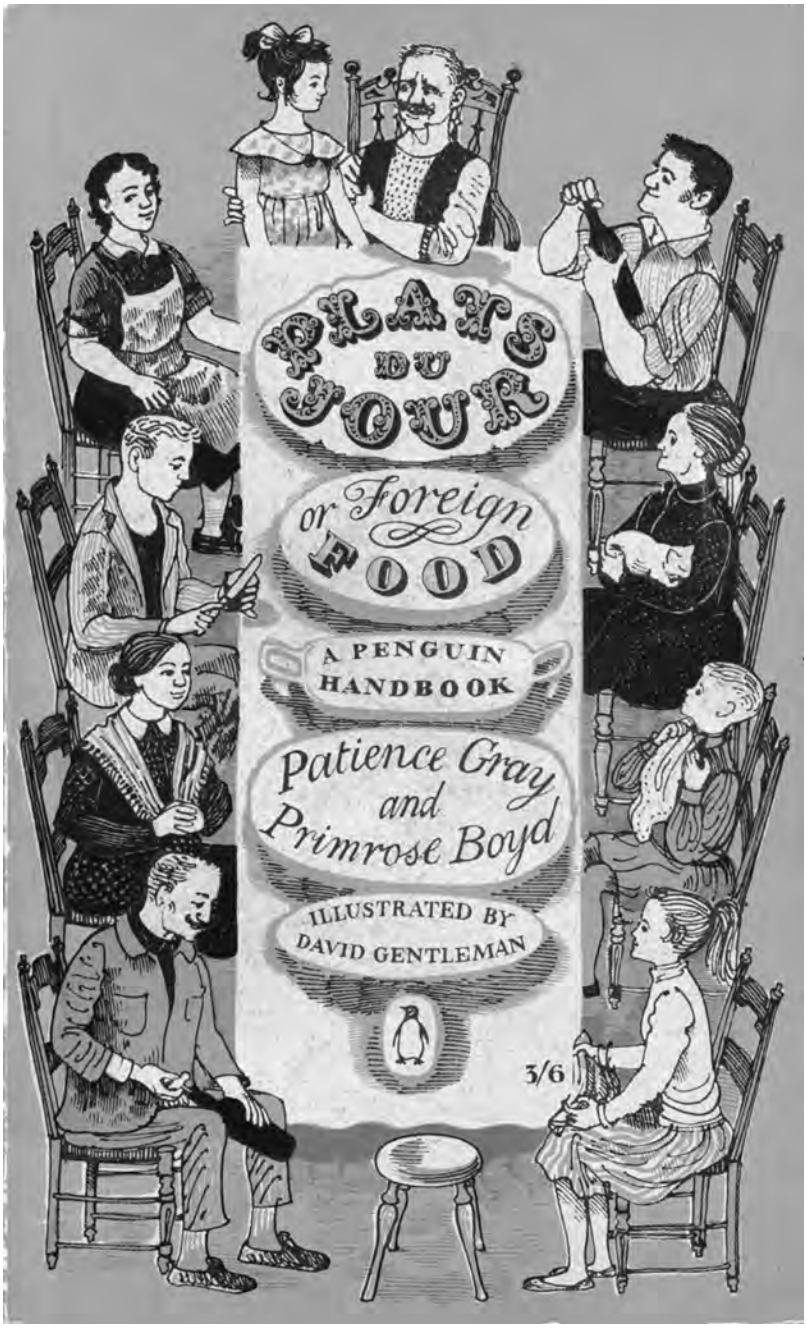
Plats du Jour, or Foreign Food was finally published by Penguin in 1957. As planned, David Gentleman was its illustrator, and he gave it the adorable cover which was (and still is) so much a part of its appeal.* It was an instant success, selling fifty thousand copies in

* Gentleman told me that he 'cribbed' the arrangement of the book from John Minton, Elizabeth David's illustrator. 'An opener for each section of a big picture, and then smaller drawings scattered throughout.' The frontispiece, of a woman lunching outside in the shade of what looks like a wisteria, was a drawing he'd first made in Milan, on his student tour. When I told him how many copies the book sold he looked amazed. 'I'd no idea,' he said.

its first ten months. It isn't difficult to work out why. Of course people liked the recipes, which were pleasingly straightforward, and which came not only from France, but from Spain and Italy too (the book seemed to be doing the work of several volumes twice its size, and at the bargain price of just three shillings and sixpence). *Moussaka*, *ratatouille*, *moules marinères*: these things were easy to make, and delicious to boot. But it was also, in its own quiet way, an extremely fashionable book, and it made those who bought it feel modern. It was written for people like its author, who ate in their kitchens (or, if they didn't, *wanted* to), and who owned smart new cookware from Denmark that could be brought from oven to table ('armed with this utensil, it would be possible to produce most of the recipes in this book'). These readers preferred courgettes to marrows and fresh fish to tinned, and they sometimes – oh, the decadence! – drank wine with dinner *in the middle of the week*.*

The tone of *Plats du Jour* was sophisticated, but it was rarely bossy and it was never severe. In this sense Patience and her co-author deftly occupied what might be called the middle ground. Consider, for instance, the still controversial issue of garlic. The authors of austerity cookbooks treated garlic with extreme trepidation, knowing that their readers were terrified of it. 'Please try it, just for once,' cajoled Peter Pirbright in his 1946 book, *Off the Beeton Track*. 'Not masses of garlic, just a tiny bit, half a clove, well crushed.' He was at one end of the scale. At the other was Elizabeth David, whose contempt for this kind of attitude rose from her pages like spitting fat from a hot pan. 'The grotesque prudishness and archness with which garlic is treated in this country has led to the superstition that rubbing the bowl with it

* To me, *Plats du Jour* feels more like a book of the Seventies than the Fifties, especially when you reach the chapter on fungi, which seems to have been written for *Good Life* types who combine 'an experimental approach to cooking with an interest in natural history'.


PLATS DU JOUR
or Foreign FOOD
A PENGUIN HANDBOOK
Patience Gray and Primrose Boyd
ILLUSTRATED BY DAVID GENTLEMAN
3/6

before putting the salad in gives sufficient flavour,' she wrote in *Summer Cooking* (1955). And then: 'It rather depends on whether you are going to eat the bowl or the salad.' Patience was in neither of these camps – or at least, not on the page. She would not beg and plead, but nor would she dismiss her readers' anxieties as rank stupidity. Having acknowledged garlic's pungent whiffiness, she set out to reassure: after all, this mighty allium is very easily reduced to 'a molecular state at the point of the knife or in the mortar'.* Try it in pesto, she said, or fried with mushrooms. She did not, of course, provide a recipe for pesto; an important part of the book's flattery is its occasional assumption that the reader knows exactly what its author is talking about.

It was no mean feat to have written what would become the best-selling cookbook of the Fifties, and Patience was thrilled by its success, for all that she would soon turn her back on many (though not all) of its tenets. But one senses that she did not want to be known only as a cookery writer. *Plats du Jour*, a brilliant calling card, now pushed open another door. In 1958 she entered a competition held by the *Observer*, which was in search of an editor for its first woman's page – and won. This was quite astonishing: she had been up against a thousand other entrants and she was not even a proper journalist – though she was not, it seemed, the editor's first choice. When David Astor, the paper's proprietor, told her he would be taking her on, the 'joyful news was mitigated by his adding that the "ideal person" they had endeavoured to persuade [to do the job] was not available'.†

What bliss to have a job with a regular salary that did not involve doing someone else's typing! But still, she mounted the

* She took a similar approach with David's beloved olive oil: 'Those who actively dislike the taste of olive oil might try ground-nut oil which is effective and cheaper.'

† Patience believed that the person in question was Anne Scott-James. For more on James, see the Introduction.

stairs at the *Observer*'s offices in Tudor Street with a 'slight tremor', a nervousness that proved to be well founded when she reached the top of them and discovered 'what appeared to be a club for old Etonians'. As she put it, 'A woman was not exactly *persona grata* at Tudor Street. The brilliant and delightful C. A. Lejeune [the film critic] was invisible, at home or watching films. Vita Sackville-West wrote her weekly article at Sissinghurst and posted it. Jane Bown [the photographer], already a wizard, then, was in her darkroom when not on photographic missions. Only Alison Settle,* marooned with her all too female fashion theme in a room apart, was established there.' Settle, the paper's thrusting and opinionated fashion editor, promptly invited Patience to lunch at the Women's Press Club: 'Not knowing that I was unclubbable, she invited me to join it. "Women," she said, "in a man's world should stick together." Over a glass of wine she looked at me appraisingly. "It's alright for you," she said, with a trace of acidity, "you have looks. I have had to make my way without them." What Alison had was red hair and character. She outlined her solitary uphill struggle. She was an early fashion pioneer, a quite indomitable profession. She made me realise that I was an amateur.'

The page Patience would edit was to be called 'A Woman's Perspective'. But what exactly did this mean? She wasn't sure. 'Of course I wondered what were women's subjects. In the late Fifties, it was not possible to discuss in print the question of how one might bring up two fatherless children and earn a living while contriving to get home at the precise moment they got back from school. It was this problem that impelled me to send my son to boarding school. I could only follow my own predilections and try to convince Nigel Gosling [her boss] that they might have

* Settle (1891–1980) was a former editor of *Vogue*, a vocal champion of women's rights and a contributor to the work of the Council for Art & Industry and the Council of Industrial Design.

some appeal for readers.' The only trouble was that her own predilections were already the province of other experts. The arts, gardening, food and drink: all of these were covered elsewhere, leaving Patience with what she called 'youth', modern architecture, design and 'craftsmanship'. But needs must. As she put it, 'These themes, rather oddly, began to furnish the Women's Page.'

Life at the *Observer* was fraught. Her male colleagues could not be relied upon to act like gentlemen. After long meetings she would sometimes pass Philip Toynbee on her way out; alas, it wasn't always possible to evade the critic's 'bearlike embrace' as she came down the narrow stairs and he came up, roaring drunk after a late lunch in Soho. These same men seemed to think she was there only to help them with their problems. Could she pop over and make their living rooms look more elegant? Could she advise on where they might buy cheap but attractive furniture? David Astor, having read an article she had written about a show of modern jewellery at the Goldsmith's Hall, asked her to choose a birthday present for his wife.

Then there was their response to her ideas. When she reported that she had just seen a brilliant performance by Marcel Marceau in Paris, she was told there was no point in writing it up: mime was so un-English! Only by writing for the *Observer*'s Foreign News Service, which sold stories to newspapers in far-off places, could she keep herself sane, for this allowed her to cover all manner of 'forbidden' subjects (contributing to it was, she said, 'like confiding a message to a bottle and casting it out to sea', the stories circumnavigating the world 'without remonstrance'). It was for the foreign press that she wrote of the spellbinding lecture given by the French actor Jean-Louis Barrault, to the students of Oxford University; of Henry Moore's retrospective at the Whitechapel Art Gallery; of the thrilling change Maria Callas had made to her interpretation of Medea between dress rehearsal and premiere.

She sometimes asked herself what her page *did* for women. Was it a morale booster? She hoped so. She deplored the pitiful women in the paintings of John Bratby,* who stared out of his canvases as if through the bars of a prison (they seemed, his defeated females, always to be surrounded by great piles of washing-up). She believed that women would rather learn than go shopping. She wanted her readers to look out to Europe, where life seemed altogether jollier and more enlightened, and it was therefore on their behalf, or so she told herself, that she travelled so much (on freebies, wherever possible; the paper was notoriously parsimonious, at least with her). She went to Paris and Milan, to Genoa and Venice, and even, on one occasion, to Turin, where she wrote about Pier Luigi Nervi's extraordinary modernist exhibition hall of reinforced concrete and ribbed steel: 'awe-inspiring, vast, a summit of engineering'. Her bosses, of course, remained mostly indifferent to 'the innovative genius burgeoning in foreign parts', and had their revenge by insisting that she also write a column about worthy domestic bargains such as rubber-backed carpets and battery chickens: 'Etonian tit-for-tat,' as she called it.

But I don't suppose she was really unhappy. Life was busy and interesting. She had several suitors, and at least one lover – though he was married and often unavailable. She was also in the throes of a heady platonic affair with Irving Davis, who sometimes accompanied her on these press trips. She and Davis, a gnome-like antiquarian book dealer with a shop in Bloomsbury, had met in London shortly after the publication of *Plats du Jour*. Shocked that she had had the temerity to write a cookbook

* John Bratby (1928–92) was a leading exponent of what the critic David Sylvester called the 'Kitchen Sink School'. He was married to the painter Jean Cooke, a much more talented artist than him – and, threatened by the competition, he was known to paint over her work when he ran out of canvases of his own. He would also beat her.

before she met him – Davis was a gourmet and a famously good cook – he had quizzed her on fungi, and when she passed this test with flying colours had invited her to dinner at his flat in Brunswick Square. Davis's dinner parties, held in his kitchen, were legendary affairs: best bone china, Venetian glass, fabulous claret. A highly particular cook, if a dish wasn't right he would destroy it altogether. He once threw a duck, imperfectly roasted, out of a window, where it became attached to a drainpipe several stories up; some days later the fire brigade had to be called, it being summer time and his neighbours put out by the smell. Thanks to this, dinner at his place was inevitably served rather late – though as he surely knew, this only heightened the pleasure of his guests, hunger making everything seem the more delicious.

It was at Davis's table that Patience now learned the 'full poetic meaning' of the word 'classical' when it came to cooking. 'His dishes were invocations to the ideal,' she writes in *Honey from a Weed*. 'His method of presenting them a celebration of his Mediterranean past [in 1911, when Davis was twenty-three, he had opened a bookshop in Florence with Giuseppe Orioli, a lover of Norman Douglas]. The effect was a kind of alchemy by which the past became manifest, and made me feel, in knowing him, I held the key to that lost Bohemia where Orioli, Douglas, Lawrence, Furbank, Beerbohm were creatures of substance, not of reminiscence.' The meal would usually begin with something simple: leeks *à la grecque*, sorrel soup or a plate of marinated anchovies. This would be followed by lobster, a *matelote* of eel or, in season, a game bird. Finally, to finish, there would be a salad with an 'admirable' dressing and, if Irving had been in Paris, perhaps some little goat's cheeses. I can't help but wonder whether devouring these feasts ever put the crimp on the success of *Plats du Jour*; the book might have been very different had it been written under Davis's influence. But it must

have been wonderful, too: not just the deliciousness, but the feeling that he was a kindred spirit.*

Davis, whose wife Ivy Elstrob had died during the war, was a great womaniser. He and Patience were not lovers but they grew very close very quickly, and it wasn't long before they went travelling together, driving from Naples to Lecce in a tiny Fiat. This journey, made in the footsteps of Norman Douglas, took three weeks and was often arduous: Patience recalled 'tomb-like' hotel rooms and the fact that drinks were sometimes hard to come by ('If you see a bar, however primitive, stop at it – there won't be another for forty miles!'). But there were good olives to be had, and a perfect dish of mussels, cooked in their own juices over a hot fire at the side of the quay in Taranto. She was certainly enjoying herself. The children had joined her on this trip – Nicolas was by now sixteen and Miranda fifteen – but when Irving's stepdaughter Ianthe turned up and expressed surprise at his companions, it wasn't Patience who scarpered. Only the children were expected to disappear. She gave them twenty pounds – it was all she had at the time – and told them to hitchhike back to London. 'We walked along the road to Paestum,' remembers Miranda. 'A lady stopped in a car. She said: I will give you a lift, provided you let me take you to your parents. And we said: it's our mother who sent us off like this.' She and Nicolas made it to Rome and thence to Florence, relying on strangers to take them in. En route to Monaco they stayed at the house of Percy Lubbock, the memoirist and critic, in Lerici, Liguria; an acquaintance both of their mother and of their aunt Tania, they had his

* Many people, of course, found this kind of simplicity slightly baffling: the long years of rationing meant that they craved novelty, complexity, colour and the richness of sauces made from eggs and cream. Thanks to this, and to television cooks like Philip Harben and Fanny Cradock, dinner-party food had grown loopily garish. Cherries, angelica and pineapple chunks featured prominently; so too did piped mashed potato and strips of pepper arranged over the top of dishes in complicated geometric patterns.

address and made good use of it. They finally arrived in London three weeks later, where there was still no sign of Patience. 'She wasn't worried about us,' says Miranda. 'That didn't apply. She wasn't like other people's mothers.'

Back at the *Observer* – she made it home in the end – Patience had a new boss, George Seddon. She dropped into his neon-lit cubby hole of an office for a talk. Seddon told her that he had discovered *Observer* readers to be mostly working men living in Victorian back-to-backs in the Midlands. What did she think about this? She remarked that these working men clearly showed great discrimination when it came to their Sunday reading. Seddon, however, was unconvinced. Everything had to change, their needs catered for. As she would put it later, 'Consciences were wrung, *Which?* flourished, advertising perked up, and the paper, heading for Consumerland, began to descend the treacherous slope – to sing the deceptive but seductive joys of acquisition.' For the editor of 'A Woman's Perspective' this was the beginning of the end. In 1962, almost four years after her arrival at the *Observer*, Patience received 'a kind note from David Astor, doubtless on the urgent recommendation of George Seddon'. Time to go. Ah, well. She tried not to mind too much. She had enjoyed a good innings, given that most of her colleagues had never stopped thinking of her as an outsider. 'I think I was regarded as something of an anarchist,' she said, recalling her *Observer* days in 1987. 'I had a phobia about fashion . . . People were *appalled* by my appearance.'

Like many of the women in this book, Patience Gray's professional life had a resounding and singular second act. Hers, however, was an awfully long time coming. The curtain would not go up on it for another twenty-five years.

It happened like this. In 1962, she was at staying at Furlongs, the Sussex home of her friend Peggy Angus, the painter, designer and

Tea at Furlongs by Eric Ravilious

teacher. Furlongs, a former shepherd's cottage near Firle on the South Downs, had been much frequented by artists before the war, Eric Ravilious, Edward Bawden* and John Piper among them. Actually, there is a well-known painting by Ravilious from 1939 called *Tea at Furlongs*, and when I think about Patience at this time in her life it is this that I see in my mind's eye – an image at once both bohemian and intensely domestic, just like her. A table, set with a plate of bread and butter and covered with a strange black parasol stands hard by a low flint wall; beyond it cornfields unfold, yellow and green, like silk handkerchiefs pulled from a magician's hat. For Patience, Furlongs was a refuge, convivial

* Patience used to take Miranda to Great Bardfield in Essex to see Edward Bawden at his home there.

and restorative. She and Peggy were cut from the same cloth: passionate, fiery and more interested in creativity than in money.* In 1962, however, Peggy was happily consumed by her latest hand-printed wallpaper designs. Patience, on the other hand, was restless, expectant, waiting for the next thing. Her energy had nowhere to go.

One evening at Furlongs, a splendid sight: in the gloaming, a wild-haired Flemish sculptor called Norman Mommens appeared over the brow of a nearby hill, effigies on sticks in his hands. (Perhaps it was 5 November; there was certainly a bonfire at Furlongs that night, for Miranda, who was there, remembers that Norman put his sheepskin coat around her shoulders as she sat by it.) Had he walked the seven miles to Firle from the house he shared with his wife, the potter Ursula Mommens,† in South Heighton? It seems more than likely; he had about him the air of a man on the run.

By all accounts, Patience should have met Norman years before; he and Ursula had previously earned a living turning out mould-made ceramic heraldic beasts for the Festival of Britain, and they and Patience knew plenty of people in common. But for one reason or another, this was their first collision. Inside the house, they stood by the fireplace and talked: Patience told Norman that she was worried about Nicolas, who was then going through a rebellious phase. Norman told Patience about the difficulties in his marriage.

It wasn't long before Norman was visiting Patience at the Logs. For Miranda, now a student at Chelsea School of Art, this was

* Following her resignation from the *Observer*, Patience was working as a textile designer. She had also worked as one of the translators of the 1961 English-language edition of *Larousse Gastronomique*, and had written for *House & Garden* (the Logs even made it to the magazine's pages).

† Ursula Mommens, who died in 2010 at the age of 101, studied pottery with William Staite Murray at the Royal College of Art, and under Michael Cardew. Her first husband was the painter Julian Trevelyan.

delicate. Three was a crowd and so, without telling her mother what she was going to do, she quietly moved in with friends. Patience was upset by this, but perhaps she was relieved too; certainly, it was left to Norman to arrive at Miranda's door with a little bunch of snowdrops and ask her to come home. Norman, you see, was five years Patience's junior, and she was worried that he would run off with someone else – even with her own daughter. Of course, on the surface of it, this was silly. Norman was as devoted to her as she was to him. But you can see how the muddle arose. Of the two of them it was Patience who was the more altered by their relationship. Everyone saw it. She was transfigured; Norman had made her young again. She saw him as her destiny, a man to be followed like a star. No wonder she panicked.

In 1963, in an effort, perhaps, to dispense with these anxieties once and for all, the two of them left for Greece. For their friends and relatives their departure was a great drama. How long had they been planning it? Or were they just acting on a whim? Patience wasn't letting on, and in her book about their subsequent

Norman Mommens in the Fifties; 'Goliath' was made for, or bought by, Leonard Woolf

adventures on Naxos, *Ringdoves and Snakes*,* she gave the gossips short shrift: 'Who cares now whether the departure was contemplated a whole winter from a hammock strung between two beams in a billiard room whose clerestory windows were caked with snow, or whether one morning we woke up to say: we're starting? Why must people know why we went? When we arrive, we leave behind the reasons why we came. We shed a snakeskin of fuss, plans, hesitations and other people's claims.' But if she *had* to answer the questions that assailed them, she would say that it all came down to Norman's appetite for marble, which was rather hefty. Though this might not have been the whole truth, it was no lie. As things turned out, they would spend the next seven years in search of stone, an odyssey that would take them from the Cyclades to Tuscany, from Catalonia to the Veneto and, finally, to Apulia.

They lived hand-to-mouth. Penniless and itinerant, she and Norman existed 'in the wild' and 'on the margins of literacy', an experience that changed the way they thought for ever. They relied on providence and nothing else, and in the process discovered that poverty gave the good things of life 'their proper significance'. At first, Patience would come back to London for visits, putting up with the questions and uncomprehending stares of those who accused her of slumming it. But as the years went by, she became ever more prickly and ever more peculiar-looking – 'a wild-haired, gap-toothed gypsy woman' according to one friend – and in the end it must have seemed easier not to bother; letters would suffice. In 1970 she made the separation permanent when she and Norman moved into the vaulted barn of a ruined sheep farm – a *masseria* – called Spigolizzi in Apulia, in the heel of Italy, and began a rooted new life of making and growing.

* This strange book – it has the same paranoid textures as the early novels of Mary Stewart – was written in 1963–4, but she did not find a publisher for it until 1988.

Spigolizzi as it was when Patience and Norman found it

(Patience, inspired by Norman, began to design jewellery.) The house was – it still is – very remote, and it had neither running water nor electricity; she cooked over olive wood in a huge hearth that had once, long ago, been used for smoking cheeses. When Patience's old friend Henrion came to visit he was shocked, appalled: how on earth would they survive the winter? But it was what they wanted. A homely wilderness. As she would write, 'Self-preservation is a poor substitute for an unfettered life.' It was with some reluctance that she finally agreed to have electricity installed in the early Nineties.

It was at Spigolizzi that Patience began working on her second cookbook, a volume that would contain all that she had learned in the marble years, and all that she was learning now, from her peasant neighbours (though it wouldn't be long before they were learning from her). This book, uncanny and deliberate, would celebrate the feasting and the fasting that is the lot of anyone who

relies on windfalls. Eat, preserve, wait for the next bounty: where there is subsistence farming and extreme weather, this is how it goes. More particularly, it would eulogise the edible weeds, bitter, abundant and health-giving, in which she had first become interested on Naxos: dandelions and wild chicory; comfrey and sorrel; glasswort and samphire; broom rape, fat hen and tassel hyacinth. There would be recipes for polenta, wild boar and fish soup, but for mischief she would include a recipe for a stew of *la volpe*, given to her by an old anarchist in Carrara. 'A male fox shot in January or February,' begins this alarming recipe. 'Skin it, and keep the carcass in running water for three days, or, otherwise, hang it up outside in a frost.' Beneath it she noted that these preliminaries are vital, since they remove the otherwise rather 'foxy' taste of the meat – and that the procedure works for badger too.

Patience tried for years to get her curious, prescient book published. But no one was interested. This was before the nose-to-tail eating was made fashionable by cooks such as Fergus Henderson;

The kitchen at Spigolizzi; the refrigerator was not installed until 2002

the foraging of Michelin-starred chefs such as Rene Redzepi at Noma in Copenhagen; the establishment of the Slow Food movement by Carlo Petrini in Bra, in Piedmont; the trend for local foods, organic foods and something known as 'heritage tomatoes'; the tendency for cookery writers to punctuate their recipes with scholarship and memoir. It wasn't until 1986 that it was finally taken on by Alan Davidson, the food historian, who ran a tiny company called Prospect Books and who also happened to be a man after Patience's own heart.

Honey from a Weed (the title is from William Cowper*) was not, and never will be, a best seller. But its reception in food circles was rhapsodic – in the *London Review of Books* Angela Carter acclaimed it as a 'unique and pungent book . . . a baroque monument'; Elizabeth David also wrote to its author, congratulating her on its success – and it has had a cult following ever since, both in Britain and, more particularly, in America, where its peculiar syntax and unfamiliar delights are a staple of gastronomic symposia and learned journals. It is a book, never out of print, that brings forth joy in some, but earnestness in an awful lot more. It is, you can't help but notice, especially loved by male cooks, who seem to find its rigour excitingly macho. In Patience's lifetime it brought to Spigolizzi a steady stream of pilgrims, men and women she would happily feed and put up for the night. After all, as she always maintained, one of the purest, most human delights was the 'disorderly' feel of a successful lunchtime. But she must also, I think, have enjoyed watching them watch her, for in old age she made for a remarkable sight. Physically, she was a paradox: as strong as an ox – she had to be, living there – but a skinny-limbed brown thing too, a wizened, witchy-looking woman (she was a passionate smoker) with wild

* Cowper, 'Pine-Apple and Bee': 'They whom Truth and Wisdom lead / Can gather Honey from a Weed'.

Patience in 1987. The portrait was taken by Jane Bown, who was one of her contemporaries at the Observer

hair and wide eyes. And always at her side was Norman, aka the Sculptor, who looked, with his long white hair and beard, like Abraham or Moses. She rarely disappointed her visitors, even at her most irascible. Her talk was as sinewy as her prose, and weeds, whether fresh or bottled, seemed always to be on the menu. Was she homesick? No, definitely not. 'I wasn't absolutely mad about English life at all,' she told a (young, male) journalist in 2002.

They were a happy and devoted couple, these two. Every year

Norman would devote the month of October to making a book for Patience, to be given to her on her birthday. She kept these treasures, with their paintings and their poems, each one more precious than the last, in a large wooden chest. While she was alive they were her secret. After she died, Rossella Piccinno and Tommaso Del Signore made a beautiful film about them, *To My Darling*.

Patience finally gave up her long-standing opposition to the institution of marriage in 1994 when, more than thirty years after their first meeting, Norman Mommens became her husband.

When he died six years later she announced his death to friends with a card that read, 'Norman is among the angels.' She lived on in the *masseria*, watched over by the silent sentinels of his sculptures until, in 2005, she went to join him. One assumes that by now the angels have learned how to rustle up a decent bowl of *orecchiette con la rucola*.