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Catherine Carswell was forty-one when the first of her six books was published. *Open the Door!* is a wince-makingly candid portrait of the adolescent heart, as relevant to the Instagram generation as it was in 1920. Joanna's affair with Louis Pender (a cipher for the painter Maurice Greiffenhagen, who taught at Glasgow School of Art) and the push and pull of her friendship with Lawrence Urquhart (Cathie's second husband Don Carswell) are beautifully done. No one with any sense would try to improve on these chapters. But like many fictional debuts, it's an uneven book. In the forty pages describing Joanna's ill-starred marriage to an Italian engineer, the autobiographical ingredients struck me as both undercooked and oversauced. Could I do any better?

Initially I was wary of weaving a fiction around the author of one of the great Glasgow novels. Weegies look after their own. After a series of exchanges involving the question 'Who?' it dawned on me that her fame was a twentieth-century phenomenon. These days almost no one has heard of her. Her books – a controversial biography of Burns; another of Boccaccio; a memoir of her friend D. H. Lawrence; a piecemeal autobiography, *Lying Awake*; *Open the Door!* and a second, slighter novel, *The Camomile* – are no longer on the Scot-lit curriculum. Reassured, and a little crestfallen, I carried on digging.

Finding out about Cathie Carswell was straightforward enough. Along with *Open the Door!* and *Lying Awake*, there is a biography by the academic Jan Pilditch. Cathie was a prolific print and radio journalist and left behind enough correspondence to fill two volumes of Selected Letters. She had everything – with the notable exception of her disastrous first marriage. *Lying Awake*, which runs to 245 pages, covers the subject in twelve lines.

Getting to know Herbert Jackson was a trickier proposition. He was the man everyone wanted to forget. His sister had him buried in an unmarked grave in Dumfries. None of his paintings survive. He left behind one rather pedestrian review of an art exhibition in a Liverpool student magazine, and five lacklustre artworks reproduced in Edwardian periodicals. (His father was Mason Jackson, art editor of the *Illustrated London News*, which must have helped.) I had already written one novel based on real events *A Petrol Scented Spring*, about four Scottish suffragettes and the prison doctor who force-fed them so I knew researching ordinary people who lived a century ago is a gamble. You can usually find basic information about their birth, marriage and death, their address and occupation when the ten-yearly census was taken. Beyond that, you need a hefty dollop of luck.

I got lucky.

A day in the Liverpool University archives turned up a tiny photograph of four teachers at the art school. One of them was the Glaswegian artist Herbert MacNair, but it was the saturnine figure sitting to his right who caught my attention. Military moustache, boxer's broken nose, narrowed stare, that glint of menace some women find irresistible. I was face-to-face with Herbert Jackson.

My other lucky break came courtesy of the National Library of Scotland. By 1907 Cathie was so desperate to be free of her absent husband that she petitioned for an annulment on the grounds that Herbert had been mad, and so legally incapable, on their wedding day. She was working as a journalist and must have known that the most embarrassing aspects of her marriage would prove irresistible to the press. The judge decided in her favour and *Jackson v. Jackson* became a leading case in divorce law.

From the immensely detailed coverage in *The Times*, I learned that Herbert was only a little more forthcoming about his *secret trouble* after the wedding. He was convinced he and Cathie were being followed, so afraid of his enemies he slept with a pistol under his pillow. His old friends in Liverpool, along with another more shadowy faction, were plotting against him. They accused him of vile deeds in coded articles in the newspapers, even in playbills pasted on Italian walls. Why they were doing this he didn't know. Cathie was supposed to unmask them. It seems such an obvious case of paranoia, it's hard to believe it took her months to doubt his sanity, but she was married to a virtual stranger and facing the

adjustments we all have to make when we begin to share our lives with another. Isn't it always a shock, discovering quite how divergent a spouse's take on life can be?

And of course she loved him. Or did she? When asked this question in court, she replied that she was very fond of him. A curious phrase to describe one's emotions shortly after making a whirlwind marriage. In *Lying Awake*, she wrote 'I made what may be called a rash and foolish marriage to a man I scarcely knew. In reality it was a desperately rational act. Which hardly sounds like love's young dream. Cathie wasn't destitute. She might have been bored with Glasgow and her religious mother and eager for a more adventurous life, but that *desperately rational* suggested to me a more extreme predicament. Or at least, the fear that she was in that sort of trouble.

It seems unlikely she slept with Herbert before the wedding. He was convinced he was impotent. After a few awkward nights they got on with doing what honeymoon couples do, but his delusion persisted. When she told him she was pregnant, early in 1905, he took it as proof that she had slept with another man – the Prince of Wales, no less! He tried to strangle her. They were on a steamer crossing Lake Maggiore at the time. The struggle was overheard and the captain locked her in a cabin for her own protection, but when they docked, she was handed back to her husband.

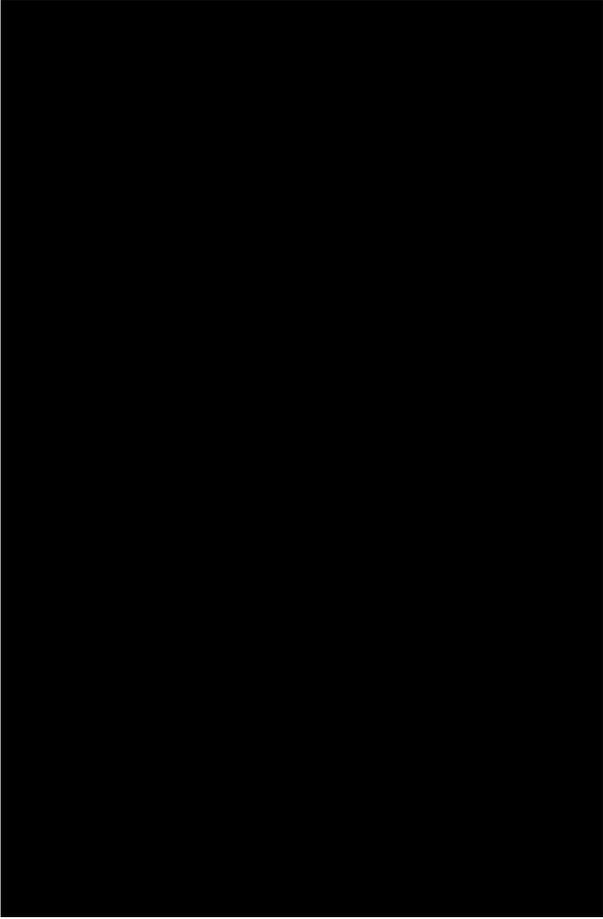
No wonder she agreed to have him taken to an asylum.

In *Open the Door!* Joanna's first husband, Mario Rasponi, is described as having eyes that danced dark and fanatical in his head. His jealousy and its effect on Joanna are completely convincing. Mario himself seems to have wandered in from a penny dreadful, but gets killed off in a motorbike accident before the reader loses patience. I didn't want to write Herbert Jackson as a cartoon madman, however florid his symptoms. By all accounts he was quiet, occasionally morose, but a long way from mad, before he left England for the Boer War. When he returned everyone noticed the change in him. To that extent, his paranoia was justified – his Liverpool friends *were* talking about him. Clearly something happened to him in Africa. The question is: what?

At this point in the research my lucky streak ran out. I know he was a lieutenant put in charge of twenty-four Aberdeenshire Royal Engineer volunteers, and I

know he lost command of them. Beyond that, the African chapters of *What We Did in the Ark* are educated guesswork. I have no way of knowing if the answer I came up with fits the facts, but the facts are likely to be just as shocking. I read enough about the Boer War to be pretty sure of that.

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feminists. I won't be writing about another writer any time soon. For me, writing is a trade, like plumbing or joinery. Doubtless some writers are extraordinary human beings living extraordinary lives, most are not. However fanatical I may feel about the work of certain writers, I don't need to know who they slept with. As for novels about writers, I actively avoid them.

But, reader, I wrote one.

Ten years ago I was researching the early twentieth-century Scottish Renaissance when I came across a mention of Catherine Carswell's first marriage to the artist, Herbert Jackson. They were wed within a month of first meeting and set off on a tour of Italy and Switzerland. On their return, in March 1905, Herbert was incarcerated, against his will, in the first of a series of lunatic asylums. He remained a patient until his death in 1929. This struck me as a wee bit out of the ordinary.

The deeper I dug, the more intriguing the details became. Cathie was twenty-five and by her own admission, a young twenty-five intelligent; musical; a tomboy with the face of an angel, who remained strikingly good-looking all her life. Herbert was an amateur boxer and swordsman with a thing about duels. He had worked as a drawing teacher at Liverpool School of Architecture and Applied Arts before serving as a Royal Engineer in the second Boer War. (Augustus John took over his job at the art school.) Soldier, artist, brother-in-law of Cathie's Glasgow University professor and mentor, Walter Raleigh all this, and in love with her at first sight. But he had a secret trouble he would only reveal once they were

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Writing a book is, among other things, a test of nerve. Until a novel is published, it has an infinite number of possible variations. I drafted far too many of them. I've been writing fiction for almost thirty years, long enough to know that my characters are not me (even if I may become them for as long as it takes to write the novel), but working on *What We Did in the Ark*, I found myself plagued by a beginner's doubts. Cathie was a journalist turned writer, I am a journalist turned writer. We even worked for the same paper, the *Glasgow Herald*, eighty-odd years apart. Was I just writing myself in an Edwardian frock? I wanted to capture Cathie's voice – but which voice? *Open the Door!* is dazzlingly written, but it was reworked by D. H. Lawrence, who complained about the beastly style of her original manuscript. Her non-fiction prose can be (whisper it) a tad plodding.

On top of that, I faced all the usual dilemmas involved in fictionalising real people.

The dead can't sue. Legally, a novelist can do whatever she likes with them. But what about the living? Do family members have rights of ownership over their dead ancestors? Personal circumstances lead me to answer emphatically no, but of course families have feelings. They may have helped you in your research and profoundly disagree with the story you end up telling. The novelist Antonia Byatt maintains there is a wider moral issue at stake. For her, writing about real people, living or dead, invades their privacy. I think most readers of literary fiction are reasonably sophisticated. They understand that a novel is not a biography (leaving aside the question of how truthful a biography can ever be). They know that even the peerless Hilary Mantel cannot claim to be giving us the actual thoughts of the actual Thomas Cromwell. She might be uncannily accurate in her guesses, but guesswork they remain.

Mercifully, once a novel is printed and out in the world, the nagging doubts melt away. The reviews were great. I've been told it's my best book to date so often I'm starting to believe it. But I'm now immersed in 1970s Leeds and its revolutionary feminists. I won't be writing about another writer anytime soon.

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(c) *The Bottle Imp*