

Mad Boy missed the point, but writers loved her

Jennifer Ross, Heiress, literary muse, 1916-2003

Jennifer Ross, who has died at 87, was a literary muse with beautiful eyes and a memorably lovely voice; kind and gentle, she inspired the love of some of the great literary figures of her day, notably Alan Ross (whom she married), Cyril Connolly and Henry Green.

Ann Jennifer Evelyn Elizabeth Fry was the only daughter of Sir Geoffrey Fry, who served as private secretary to Bonar Law from 1919 to 1921 and to Stanley Baldwin from 1923 to 1939. He was a descendant of John Fry, the Quaker cocoa magnate.

Jennifer's maternal ancestry was exotic. Her mother, Alatheia, was the daughter of Herbert Gardner, the first Lord Burghclere, whose mother, Julia Fortescue, was a professional actress who bore her husband (the third Lord Gardner) five children before he eventually married her. Alatheia's sister, Evelyn, was Evelyn Waugh's first wife, known as "She-Evelyn".

In 1942 Jennifer, already pregnant, married Robert Heber-Percy and entered a most unusual menage. Heber-Percy had been living at Faringdon for a decade as the boyfriend of Lord Berners, the composer and eccentric known for his waspish sense of humour and exotic way of life: guests were summoned to dinner by a music box in the hall; the doves that flew about were dyed many and various colours (inadvertently making them vulnerable to predators), and the whole set-up was gently parodied by Nancy Mitford, who drew on Berners for the fictional Lord Merlin.

Heber-Percy himself was a wild figure, known as "the Mad Boy" in Berners's circle. He had done more than enough to earn the sobriquet; even if Berners's fondness for exaggeration is taken into account, there is substance in many of the stories. He once nearly killed a woman in Salzburg by throwing a tankard from a restaurant, then attempted to commit suicide and had to be removed heavily tranquillised. When he arrived in Florence he was "carried into the hotel in a semi-conscious state still dressed in his Tyrolean costume and with his hair hanging all over his face". At Amalfi he hit Berners over the head with a button-hook when Berners, wary of being spotted with a young man sporting a bright red shirt, refused to accompany him to breakfast on the terrace.

The Heber-Percy marriage took everyone by surprise, not least Berners, who was not at all sure how to react. Although he took Jennifer in, this was by no means an ideal solution. In essence, he found himself landed with a quasi-daughter-in-law. Some of his set she coped with, others she did not. The not always civil Daisy Fellowes was kind to her, but Jennifer refused to leave her room when the Mosleys visited.

The marriage was doomed from the start, Heber-Percy soon crying out: "I hate it, I hate it!" A daughter, Victoria, was born in February 1943. Berners composed the music for her christening, and Cecil Beaton photographed them all together, Berners in grandfatherly pose.

In April 1944, James Lees-Milne went to Faringdon and thought them "a curious family . . . sitting around this large round table". But he admitted "they know how to live. I thought how enviable their menage."

But soon afterwards, Heber-Percy packed Jennifer's belongings into a removal van and sent her back to her family home. They were divorced in 1947.

In the '40s, Jennifer attracted many friends and lovers. Cyril Connolly, a hopeless romantic whose love life was fraught with contradictions, was one suitor, while the novelist Henry Green was another. But she preferred the young Mickey Luke, whom she later described as the love of her life.

Finally, in 1949, she married Alan Ross, poet, writer, cricket-lover and editor of the London Magazine. This was a happy union for many years, she not only financing the magazine but taking a keen interest in its content. Among other things, she introduced Francis Wyndham to the forgotten writings of Jean Rhys, which led to a revival of interest in that neglected novelist with the publication of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Based in London and at Clayton Manor, Hassocks, Sussex, the Rosses remained close to Cyril Connolly and entertained many literary figures, including John Betjeman. But matters did not always run smoothly. When Alan Ross engaged in a brief affair with the sensual Barbara Skelton (Connolly's ex-wife, then married to George Weidenfeld), Connolly was incensed and rang Jennifer to inform her. Nevertheless, she remained a lifelong friend and occasionally offered Connolly financial help.

Quietly, as was her way, she also worked with the voluntary Prisoners' Wives Service, which helped the families of inmates serving long sentences.

The Rosses, who had a son, Jonathan, separated in 1978, and divorced in 1985.

Jennifer is survived by her daughter and son. By a twist of fate, Faringdon is now the home of her granddaughter, who inherited it from Robert Heber-Percy, who was Lord Berners's heir, in 1987.

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