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First Lady of Fleet Street: A Biography of Rachel Beer

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Rachel Beer first caught my attention some 20 years ago when I was trawling through *Who Was Who* looking for journalists. She was unusual because she was the editor of *The Sunday Times* in the 1890s, when no other national newspaper had a woman editor. She was also deeply conscious of her background, proud of being a member of the wealthy and important Jewish family of Sassoon. At a time when so many members of the establishment seemed keen to Anglicize themselves if they had foreign roots, this too struck me as being unusual. So the appearance of her biography is a welcome event.

But this is rather more than a biography of one woman, for the first half of it is devoted to an account of the two families of whom she was a part, the Sephardic Sassons and the Ashkenazi Beers. The authors trace the Sassoon family back to 18th-century Baghdad, where already Sheikh Sason ben Saleh was a prominent member of the large and important Jewish community in that city. They follow the career of the Sheikh?s second son, David, who eventually fled from Baghdad during the politically difficult reign of Daud Pasha and settled in Bombay. There he built up a prosperous business which increasingly relied heavily on control of the Chinese opium trade for its success. Trading bases were opened in Canton and Hong Kong and all his sons served their turn in China. Living in a territory governed by Britain and relying on support from the

British navy to protect his ships from pirates, David became so conscious of the benefits of living under British rule that eventually, in 1853 he took a British passport. Two years later he sent his son Abraham to London to be educated. Significantly the boy already spoke good English. Rachel?s father, S. D. Sassoon, was sent to London in 1858 to open a branch of the family business. He was to remain in England for the rest of his life and his family became Anglicized. His wife Farha, a girl from Baghdad, became known as Flora, His brothers Ezra and Abdullah became Alfred and Albert respectively. Up to a point, they all became Anglicized, abandoning their oriental dress as well as their Arabic names, but they remained practising Jews and spoke the old Baghdadi Judeao-Arabic among themselves, as a kind of private code. The family, already extremely wealthy, changed its focus in England, embracing the new technology of telegraphic communications. Rachel?s cousin, Sir Edward Sassoon, M.P., was, at the end of the 19th century, one of the acknowledged authorities on the subject, writing for the Press and speaking in the House of Commons.

Rachel was born in India on April 7, 1858, a week before her father left for England. She was two-and-a-half before she saw him again, by which time her father had purchased Ashley Park, near Walton-on-Thames, a substantial and ancient property which was to be her home throughout her childhood and youth. We know very little about this period of Rachel?s life. That she enjoyed a life of luxury and ease from birth is self-evident. We are told that she and her brothers had an Oxford-educated tutor, but she must also have had other teachers, since we are also told that she played the piano from early youth and was also a talented composer. But the Royal Academy of Music does not seem to have been considered. Perhaps this was because she was too ?ill at ease on stage? to perform in public (p. 53), but no authority for this view is cited. The life of a musician was apparently unthinkable for a girl of her class and background in the England of the 1870s. It was certainly not easy, but her contemporary, Ethel Smyth, the daughter of a Major-General in the Royal Artillery, faced down parental opposition and had a distinguished career. The authors chronicle the various publications of her music and quote contemporary press opinion, but have not acquired the evaluation of a modern professional musician as to their worth. However, the authors state that Rachel was a very determined person and wanted, above all, her independence. Could it be that she abandoned her musical ambitions because somebody told her, or she realised, that her talent was not sufficient? Unfortunately, the sources which might answer this question do not exist.

In 1867 Rachel?s father died, when she was nine and her mother became responsible for her upbringing. Perhaps because she was the only girl she was not married off at eighteen, but stayed at home, doing very little. Her mother's various philanthropic activities were an approved outlet, but such a life, we are told, did not satisfy Rachel. We do not know what she really wanted to do in her twenties, and only later in life did she claim to have been unsatisfied with her lot. Apparently she had many suitors (p. 125, though no evidence is given) all of whom she rejected. One wonders why, since marriage might have given her the chance to do what she wished, if indeed she had any clear idea what that was to be at the time. Ultimately she was able to detach herself from her mother when her eldest brother Joseph married and, since he had inherited Ashley Park, the rest of the family had to move out. Mrs Sassoon moved to Brighton in 1884 and Rachel, now aged 26 and in possession of her own personal fortune, went to London to train as a nurse at the Brompton Hospital. Nursing was seen as an acceptable occupation for girls, mainly because of the influence of Florence Nightingale but also because it had overtones of the philanthropic interests which were part of a well-connected upper class girl?s approved lifestyle. Rachel?s mother was deeply involved in a number of philanthropic projects and Rachel, too, was to become involved in many more. It was in London that she met Frederick Beer.

Considerable space is given to the history of the Beer family. Frederick too came from a Jewish background. The founder of the family?s fortunes was Frederick?s father, Julius, who was born in Frankfurt in 1836. His family had included wealthy court Jews in the 18th century and the family had become westernised. By the time Julius was born the family wealth had gone, but he was well educated and ambitious. In 1855 he came to London aged 18 and set about making his fortune, initially through stockbroking, but then increasingly through investment in telegraphic and railroad communications. He never applied for British citizenship and remained attached to the culture of Germany, but he married an English Christian girl and thereafter abandoned the last vestiges of Judaism. Both his children were eventually baptised as Anglicans. His many

German compatriots in London gave Julius his chances; by 1870, when he purchased *The Observer*, he was a rich man. Julius died in 1880, leaving a fortune of £400,000 to his 22-year-old son Frederick. Frederick did not continue his father?s business enterprises, which were sold and converted into stocks and shares. All he retained were *The Observer* and a magazine, *The Electrician*, which his father had revived. He was a young, cultivated, Cambridge-educated rentier, highly eligible and virtually alone in the world.

How he and Flora met we are not told and the circumstances and effects of their marriage need some explaining. We are told that Rachel knew that in marrying Frederick she would incur the anger of her mother, who had reacted very badly when her brother had married a Christian. At the same time, we are also told that it was not uncommon for Jews to marry out of the faith and that, in the case of a daughter, this was not regarded as so bad, since, under Jewish law, their children would remain Jewish. One wonders whether the relationship between mother and daughter was so bad already that Rachel used her marriage to engineer a permanent break with her mother, which became a rupture with the entire family. An orthodox Jewish family would be deeply upset when a daughter married a Christian, but these were Anglicised Jews. On the evidence given there is something provocative about her behaviour; Frederick was not, it seems, introduced to the family and the day before her wedding Rachel was baptised. Her mother never forgave her and she was cut off completely from the Sassoons. Only her divorced Christian sister-in-law Theresa kept in touch. However, Frederick was a very wealthy man, eligible, apparently generous and easy-going. Would her mother reject him simply because he was not any more attached to the Jewish faith? The couple could live in luxury, indulge all their tastes and take their place in London society, though it seems that this place was fairly superficial, largely confined to public events and parties. Then there was *The Observer.* The paper was edited by Edward Dicey from 1870 until 1889, when he left, perhaps because the new wife was too interfering, perhaps because Frederick wanted to take a larger part in running the newspaper. By this time Rachel had decided that she wanted a newspaper of her own, but it was not until 1894 that a suitable paper became available. *The Sunday Times* was strictly speaking owned by Frederick, but he handed over all responsibility to Rachel and concentrated on his own paper.

Rachel made it her pulpit. Every week she would write an editorial under the heading ?The World?s Work?, and in this she was able to express her own views on any topic that took her fancy. Her range was wide. Before she actually started she sought the advice of W. T. Stead. According to Rachel, who admired his attitude towards the role of the Press and his campaigning for what he considered right and just, he told her that the trick was to guess in advance what people are about to do and then recommend that course so that readers will be impressed by you and you will gain influence. This was only made public in an article she wrote for the *Sunday Times* on garden cities in September 1901. If this really was his advice, it is perhaps evidence of his disillusion after his personal fall from grace over his handling of child prostitution, and Rachel does not appear to have taken it. Her views were strong and not always well informed. She had contempt for the political system and its members. One wonders whether she had ever attended a debate in either House. The Press Gallery might be closed to her, but women often attended important debates in the Strangers? Gallery. But she supported the call for improved conditions for the working classes, equality for women and the suffrage movement, without herself joining it. Overall she was an imperialist and took a fairly standard Liberal imperialist line on political events. Perhaps the most important event which occurred during her editorship was the retrial of Dreyfus in 1899. For this event there is more contemporary evidence than for anything else in which she was involved. Her Paris correspondent tried to hatch a scheme to persuade Major Esterhazy to admit publicly that he had forged the documents which had been the cause of Dreyfus?s original conviction. But Esterhazy was too wily to be caught and, in the end, the hoped-for scoop failed.

By this time Rachel had other worries. Frederick was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1896. It weakened him, so that gradually Rachel had to take over the running of the *Observer* as well as her own paper. She also insisted on nursing him herself. It was a huge burden to bear and, unsurprisingly, after his death at the end of 1901, she was soon unable to fulfil her journalistic obligations. By the autumn of 1902 she had ceased completely. From the description given she was suffering from clinical depression, unable to do anything. The result was sad. Her brother Joseph accepted the responsibility of settling both Rachel and her affairs.

Medical opinion was sought and she was declared to be of unsound mind. Her brother accepted this, but she was not put in an asylum. Joseph arranged for her to be looked after by several nurses in a large house outside Tunbridge Wells, filled with most of the treasures from her London house. Here she spent the rest of her life, finally dying in 1927. The two newspapers were both sold at very low prices, for the circulation, never high, had plummeted. So ended a career in journalism which only filled eight years of her life.

This is an interesting study, but there are drawbacks. First, the title hardly seems justified by the facts. True she edited a newspaper, but did this give her the influence she clearly wanted? I have not found any references to her in political papers of the period and the *Sunday Times* is not quoted by other papers. She seems a curiously isolated figure, sitting in her study at home and once a week descending on the paper?s offices. She complained that the great and the good would not talk to her about politics. But she seems to have tried to buttonhole them at parties. Flora Shaw, her exact contemporary at *The Times*, did not apparently have such problems and was widely respected. Secondly, a more technical point, the footnotes are not adequate. Citations of an author?s work should give page numbers, but this does not happen here. Sometimes statements are made without any evidence being adduced at all. Finally, although the authors have been very assiduous in reading round the subject and looking for sources, there is no substantial archive of Rachel?s or Frederick?s own papers. Too often they have extrapolated what she might have been thinking as a girl from what she wrote years later. But people change their views, even reinvent themselves. And we do not know anything very much about her life in London, clearly busy and multi-faceted, other than what can be found in the social columns of the papers or her own writings. Apart from her brother?s divorced wife, Theresa, she does not seem to have had any friends, just social acquaintances. Can that really be so? Or was she really such a difficult person that this explains why even her own nephew, Siegfried Sassoon, in later life never bothered to visit her and spoke of her insultingly and without affection?

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