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Warm and Worldly Book Gossip

John Kenny

V.S. Pritchett: A Working Life

By Jeremy Treglown

Chatto & Windus

308pp, £25.

Even when a life has not been long it is generally assumed that even the heaviest hardback wrist-breaker can only do it approximate biographical justice. When a writing life has been almost coterminous with a calendar century, and when the written record left behind is particularly voluminous, we might expect any related biography to be equivalently lengthy. In uncovering the life and compositional versatility of V.S. Pritchett (1900-1997), however, Jeremy Treglown has wrapped up a formidable longevity and output in an appreciably wieldy package.

Treglown, currently a professor of English at the University of Warwick, has also written reasonably concise biographies of Roald Dahl and Henry Green, and in this Working Life of Pritchett he is equally controlled in face of an extraordinary range of material. Ten chapters in the form of chronologically organised but free-ranging essays do well in all senses by this jobbing Londoner who literally lived by his journalism, essays, travel writing, novels, autobiographies and, most importantly for posterity, by his literary reviews and short stories.

For the eminent career that emerges from Treglown's account, surprisingly little has been written on VSP (this byname was used by most of his friends, family and colleagues, and he liked its humble anonymity.)

Sir Victor Sawdon Pritchett was the lower-middle-class child of an apparently downtrodden but voluble mother and a Christian Scientist father whose talent for bankruptcy (by the time VSP was 12 the family had moved house an equal number of times) would haunt the son during his early career as he made his way shakily from commission to commission. The young VSP was nicknamed "the Professor" at home and he frequently felt like "a tolerated joke". This figures heavily in "The Fly in the Ointment", one of his many patently autobiographical stories (a favourite with many readers once tutored through Augustine Martin's erstwhile Inter-Cert anthology, Exploring English I).

Though he lamented the fact that he grew up in a house without a dictionary, in the first of his two autobiographies, *A Cab at the Door* (1968), VSP remembered being "caught by the passion for print as an alcoholic is caught by the bottle". This passion flared in Paris where he lived for two years after fleeing from six years of the leather trade he was consigned to on leaving school at 15. He became, in his own phrase, "the autodidact abroad"; he learnt French quickly and, despite unattractive jobs and penury, he steadily formed a confident sensibility.

A joke he sent to the Paris New York Herald was his first publication. His self-

education was gloriously, if sometimes inadvertently, independent: “When I read in memoirs about the Paris of the Steins, Sylvia Beach, Joyce, Hemingway, and Scott Fitzgerald,” he wrote in his second and better autobiography, *Midnight Oil* (1971), “I am cast down. I was there. I may have passed them in the street; I had simply never heard of them. Nor had I any notion of what they were trying to do.” A young Irishman in a cowboy hat, it seems, had to explain to him one evening in Montparnasse the critical fuss in progress over Ulysses.

In 1923, the *Christian Science Monitor*, which had printed some apprentice essays, appointed him Irish Correspondent. While reporting on the Civil War, he fell in love with Ireland and the Dublin literary scene; he had tea on occasion with James Stephens, Yeats and O’Casey, and he was a frequent Abbey visitor. While he published a number of works on Spain where he was also a correspondent (*Marching Spain* (1928) was his first book), his various travels in Ireland were crucial to his early development. Looking back, in *Midnight Oil*, on his first trip he remarked: “Unknown to myself I was headed for the seventeenth century”, but in retrospect he felt he had witnessed something culturally vital. His first novel was *Clare Drummer* (1929); he revealed that the grotesque comedy of one of his most popular stories, “Sense of Humour” (1938), was directly inspired by his perception of the Irish national character; *Dublin: A Portrait* (1967) was among the more successful of his numerous travel books.

His private life was problematic early on. Ten years of stressful reporting trips together and apart in Europe, America and Africa, along with endemic personal differences, eventually estranged him from Evelyn, his young Anglo-Irish wife, and by 1934 he had met the spirited Dorothy Roberts who would become his second and, despite some tribulations, final and lifelong wife.

From the beginning, he wanted primarily to be a novelist, but his output in the genre is not especially notable (*Mr Beluncle* (1951) is perhaps the most successful). His success, however, with the literary essays and reviews, mainly on fiction, he wrote for a long list of newspapers and periodicals both sides of the Atlantic would warrant his own claim to be “a Man of Letters ... at the tail-end of a long and once esteemed tradition in English and American writing”. He was eager to secure the value of such a tradition: “We have no captive audience. We do not teach. We write to be readable and to engage the interest of what Virginia Woolf called ‘the common reader.’ We do not lay down the law, but we do make a stand for the reflective values of a humane culture.”

John Updike has commended VSP’s ability to see books as “a set of excuses for warm and worldly gossip”, and, though his middle years would see him teaching in American universities, VSP always argued he was “travelling in literature” rather than systematically studying it. He permanently deplored what he termed, in his essay “As Old as the Century” (1980), the “technological habits” and “specialised ironmongery” of academic criticism. The academy has been relentless in returning the favour by not taking VSP or his brand of criticism seriously.

Short prose forms suited VSP. His stories, admired by adepts such as Eudora Welty and William Trevor, accurately echo the spoken voice to a degree constantly compared to Dickens. Many (“The Liars”, “When My Girl Comes Home”, “The Camberwell Beauty”) are considered among the masterpieces of the genre, and his aesthetic of short fiction is by far the most frequently discussed aspect of his career.

As he entered old age, VSP felt like a man who “has become almost nothing.”

Treglown, however, has admirably written VSP back into life for us. There are many intriguing bio-storylines here: friendships with A. Alvarez and Gerald Brenan; part-collaboration with Hitchcock on *The Birds*; what Treglown describes as the “encryption” of the life within the fiction. The combination in this tidily in-depth biography of primary and secondary sources with first-hand information from an impressive list of interviewees provides everything needed, not only to entice us back to VSP’s work but to imagine ourselves in behind the aura of an accomplished oeuvre. What we find is an enduringly curious, quietly ironical, kind and intelligent man with a mischievous aliveness that was surely his greatest aide in working as hard as he did.

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