JUDITH ARONSON

I first came across the work of Judith Aronson when I was the Christie's Research Fellow at Christ's College, Cambridge. I had been recruited to the College in 1979 by an intellectually formidable interview panel, chaired by the historian, Jack Plumb, and including Christopher Ricks, the writer, critic and Professor of English, who asked me about the origins of Vanbrugh's 'grand style' (it was only later that I discovered that his first book had been on *Milton's Grand Style*). Not long after I arrived, Plumb as Master of the college devised a scheme whereby Ricks's wife, Judith Aronson, at the time a photographer for the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, would take formal photographs of each of the Fellows for the historical record.

It was the first time in my life that I had ever sat for a formal photograph. I sat in front of a white background, which was placed in order to abstract the sitter from the surrounding epiphenomena of the room, in a professorial room of the college which had been converted into a temporary photographic studio. I remember the experience as being relatively painless in comparison to my later experience of sitting for photographers, including Richard Avedon, a friend of Judith Aronson when she was a graduate student and someone who used the same technique of whitedrops to abstract the sitter from the setting. I was required to sit down on an academically austere chair. There was a little bit of polite conversation. Then, click. Don't take too long or one's expression is frozen.

From my experience of formal photography, most portrait photographers take far too much time and effort in concentrating on the pose and setting. They are interested not so much in the character of the sitter as in the more general *mise-en-scène*. Judith concentrates on the expression of the sitter, although her training as a graphic designer also means that she pays close attention to the geometry of the composition. I like the photograph she took very much indeed, as it shows me still with a head of hair, rather long as was still the fashion in the late 1970s, fresh-faced and earnest, as I no doubt was, wearing a jacket which I had bought cheaply from Margaret Howell, and with my tie very slightly undone. I keep it on the walls at home as a reminder of lost hopes.

Since then, I have followed Judith's progress as a photographer. Some time in the mid-1990s, she reappeared in my life when Terence Pepper, the brilliant curator of photographs at the National Portrait Gallery, acquired some of her work for its reference collection, including some of the big colour prints which she had done for the *Sunday Telegraph* magazine: Keith Simpson, a horribly austere portrait of a forensic scientist (NPG x26036); Sir Ralph Richardson (NPG x125467); and a tousle-haired Jonathan Miller (NPG x26035), one only of a particularly fine group of photographs, another of which shows Miller slouched on a sofa in his living room with a transient cat disappearing out of the foreground.

Now, nearly thirty years later, I have had an opportunity of seeing and studying the photographs she has taken of others as well. Much of her work consists not just of formal, commissioned portraits, but

also photographs of friends, semi-formal, photographed in the sitting room or against a brick wall and often in groups which make it possible to observe changes in mood and character, the fleeting transience of expression. She is interested in the character and personality (often illuminated by their surroundings) of actors, academics, novelists, poets, set designers, film makers, artists, and intellectuals. In quite a number of the photographs, she depicts a world of studious high-mindedness, commemorating lunches in the Oxfordshire countryside where the talk is of poetry and books.

I have been browsing the imaginary pages of the book, beginning alphabetically with Saul Bellow, weather-beaten and wry, but with a Mont Blanc in his pocket and with someone who I first assumed was his daughter on his arm, but now realise is his wife. William Empson looks pretty fierce (he was described by one of his students in Tokyo as 'forthright' and 'uncompromising'). I didn't know what Richard Gregory looked like, although when I was Director of the National Portrait Gallery, I was involved in commissioning a portrait of him by Tim Hunkin, an inventor, who photographed him using a modern version of a nineteenth-century camera, with cheap reading glasses as lens.

Once one gets to Seamus Heaney, one realises that he is someone who is used to being photographed and so somehow can't help playing around in Harvard Yard (or is it just that he is aware that he photographs well ?), while the majority of Aronson's sitters are admirably and rather wonderfully unselfconscious, like the occasional voices one hears on the radio of people who are not used to being broadcast. Likewise, one has got so used to rooms which have been doctored and spruced up for portrayal in the *World of Interiors* that it is reassuring to see the unselfconscious interiors of people who don't particularly care how their houses look. This characteristic of unselfconsciousness extends to the quality of the photographs as well, which have a freshness of view which sets them apart from much professional studio photography.

Another characteristic is clear. These are often photographs of husbands and wives, as well as of father and son, parents and children, family and dogs. Relationships are an important part of the chemistry of friendship, of which these photographs are a documentary record.

Here is I.A. Richards, photographed somewhere in a park across the street from his apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts (he taught at Harvard for many years before his death in 1979); Ralph Richardson, caught slightly unawares as he winds his grandfather clock; Anne Ridler, the poet, sitting in a cottage garden, with her husband, Vivian, who was printer to Oxford University Press. The young Salman Rushdie appears at the time that *Midnight's Children* was published, looking a bit wind-blown and melancholy in one photograph, and sitting at an electric typewriter with a small child on his knee in another. Aronson has recorded a world of intellectual high-mindedness, where ideas count, and in which the intellect is properly respected, before the days when Thatcherism (or Reaganism) destroyed the social esteem accorded to the academic elite and before the cult of celebrity made writers into newspaper idols.

Here, too, is Simon Schama before I knew him, when he was a young and still fresh-faced don at Brasenose College, Oxford, before the days when he became an international superstar. I didn't know Wagnerian Michael Tanner when I was an undergraduate at Cambridge and wish I had: his room is a

scene of wonderful, astonishing chaos. And then there's a charming photograph of Keith Thomas, the brilliant historian of seventeenth-century magic, who absolutely detested the various portraits that I was involved in commissioning, including the picture by Stephen Farthing in the National Portrait Gallery of the founding fathers of *Past and Present*.

Of course, in browsing through the photographs I have inevitably concentrated on those where I know, or think I know, the sitters. The full set includes the more formal compositions which were appropriate for publication; but for me the liveliness of the photographs lies in the more informal pictures which are a record of the intellectual and literary élite of the second half of the century in London, Oxford, two Cambridges and elsewhere. The subjects, some of whom may not have liked being photographed, are caught slightly off-guard, but the more memorable precisely because they didn't have to pose too obviously. My favourite is the one of Ivor Richards, heavily cropped, and the sad, lined face of his wife. One does not know what they are thinking.

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