



Helen Southworth. *Fresca. A Life in the Making. A Biographer's Quest for a Forgotten Bloomsbury Polymath* (Chicago: Sussex Academic Press, 2017, ISBN 9781845198213).

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The subject of Southworth's book is Francesca (Fresca) Allinson (1902–1945), a puppeteer, choral conductor, writer and creator of folksongs, whose life was cut short by drowning. She grew up in a gifted and thoroughly non-conformist family. Her brother Adrian, a painter, studied at the Slade school. Her father worked as a doctor at his practice in London, obtaining and practising his own unorthodox convictions about hygiene and diet. As a radical pacifist Fresca helped provide alternative communities for conscientious objectors (COs). Her fictional autobiography *A Childhood* was published in 1937, by the Hogarth Press, the publishing house of Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

In her preface Southworth explains she was drawn to her subject because of 'the extraordinary breadth of her experiences, her tenacity, her vitality, her engagement, and her conviction' (ix). But, according to the subtitle, the book is not in the first place about Francesca Allinson, about a woman whose life started promising, but ended tragically by suicide—'A life in the making'. It is the description of the search the writer undertakes to learn more about her subject: 'A Tale of Research or Biography as Detection and Jigsaw' (vii).

Southworth wants to give us a report of her activities to find information about Fresca, presenting her book as a detective story that shows the reader how she gathers the pieces of a puzzle that in the end has to reveal a portrait of Fresca. True to her intention, Southworth gives an extensive description of all the sources that lead to information, such as archives, family relations, photographs, the internet, letters, reports of people who knew her, and Fresca's own fictional autobiography.

Her investigations lead to an abundant collection of facts about the persons that Fresca was related to, family relations, her parents, brothers, nieces and nephews, friends and people she worked with. Some of them

had a central role in her life. In the first place, there was her very close friend Sir Michael Tippett, a British composer, president of the Peace Pledge Union, conscientious objector and openly homosexual. He dedicated his autobiography to Fresca. Secondly, there were persons with whom she had a more intimate relationship, like the actress Judy Wogan and the poet Den Newton, 18 years her junior. However, all the facts and names leave the questions about the nature of Fresca's occupations and relations unanswered. For example, why was she drawn to her career as a puppeteer, musicologist and writer? And how did her 'thyroid problem' affect her life? Her bad health is a recurring theme, but the exact nature and gravity of her illness remains a mystery.

Southworth collects her material in chapters that employ both a chronological and a thematic categorization. The first two chapters, 'A Childhood' and 'Coming of Age', contain information about Fresca's youth in London, her education, her bad health, her family, her choral work, her projects with Michael Tippett and journeys to Germany and New York. The next three chapters are about her lover Judy Wogan, her career and her idealistic bent ('Pacifism in the Face of a Second World War'). The last three chapters refer to her downfall: 'My Own Different Personal Life', 'No Remaining, No Place to Stay' and 'Love Under The Shadow of Death'.

These titles raise the expectation that some riddles about Fresca will be solved and the answers to the main questions about her life, relation and tragic end will be given. For example, who is Judy Wogan? This was obviously a person important to Fresca, a lover, friend, artistic companion and actress in the travelling theatre troupe, named Arts League of Service. But Wogan disappears behind the account of Southworth's search, the persons she speaks to, the institutes she visits and the factual information she digs up. At one point Southworth concludes that she knows a great deal about Wogan, but is 'still unsure about how she and Fresca met,' and what happened between the two women, she might have added. Why was Fresca attracted to her? Why did they break up and what did that mean to Fresca? The names of her acquaintances and activities keep accumulating without leading up to a better knowledge of their relationship.

In the beginning Southworth attracts interest for her research activities and curiosity about Fresca, but after two chapters, the hope for a vivacious anecdote or compelling insight diminishes. Collecting and presenting her materials, Southworth does not succeed in enlivening either her search nor her subject, despite the interesting quotes from letters, testimonies and autobiographies. She does not explicitly reflect on her information, neither does she discuss it. This is why the personality of Fresca ultimately remains obscure.

Did Southworth realize this and therefore devise strategies and arguments that would justify her project and make her subject worthwhile? Is that why she presents the book, not as a biography but as a detective story, or why she claims she wants to maintain openness to the story of Francesca and to investigate the common ground between her life and work and that of her contemporaries—‘to expose the biographical process, to show the project “in the making”’ (viii)? And why does Southworth present us with every scrap of information about the (possible) connection between Francesca Allinson and Virginia Woolf, without enlightening her reader in any way? Using the name of a person as famous as Woolf requires a good reason.

By making comparisons with contemporaries Southworth might have painted a broader picture of the artistic, political and social climate in which Fresca grew up. She could have focused on the conflicts that Fresca, as a woman with certain gifts, possibilities and great ambitions, had. Or she could have written a thematic chapter about the radical pacifism of Fresca, her family and friends. According to her brother Adrian, they had been brought up to consider the taking of any life—animal or human—as ‘a crime’. He writes in his autobiography that being the offspring of British, German and Jewish ancestors, contributed to their pacifism and feeling of freedom: all that distinguishes people of different nationalities comes up to ‘little variations of temperament and habits of life’ (26).

The above mentioned themes would make a good starting point for a comparison between Fresca and Woolf. Southworth’s material might have suited such an approach. The similarities are not difficult to find. Next to their radical pacifism, there are resemblances in their family backgrounds, in their craving for recognition, their bad health and influential fathers. The similarities between Fresca’s father and Woolf’s, the critic and biographer Leslie Stephen, are striking.

Both Allinson and Stephen were highly disciplined workers with strong opinions, enthusiastic mountaineers and authoritarian fathers who demanded confirmation from their wives. Allinson studied medicine and worked as a doctor at his practice in London, obtaining his own unorthodox convictions about the right lifestyle and medical methods. His chief concern was with the problems of hygiene and diet and his solutions consisted of Spartan habits, the exclusion of all flesh foods, stimulants and narcotics. He married Anna Pulvermacher, not out of love or desire, but because a married doctor inspires more confidence than a bachelor. Brother Adrian describes his selection of a wife as the recruiting of an employee. When the English middle classes did not provide Allinson with a suitable wife, he started looking for a woman in Germany. There he

found the practical and rigid Pulvermacher who shared his views on free thought and vegetarianism.

In her fictional autobiography *A Childhood*, Fresca's alter ego Charlotte holds the strict behaviour of her parents responsible for her inability to surrender herself to another person: 'My mother's restrained femininity, sobered through the worries and responsibilities of my father's career, had prepared me for nothing like this.' (132) And so she surrenders to her dreams and not to reality.

After Fresca's death, Tippett confirms her tendency to restrain in a letter to Fresca's friend Den Newton. He mentions her resistance to live on in a post-war world without health and the possibility to participate. In addition, he refers to her inability to fulfil her desire to love and share her life with someone else, because of a partly inherited restraint in combination with her own personal aims: 'Warmth and love were her natural world-& she strove to enter the dispersed love-world of the saint'; 'she remained to the end believing she was worthless' (193).

Southworth's book has an interesting subject, a woman who seems to have been wavering between opposites, who appeared vital, but was often in bad health, a loving and gay woman who wrestled with doubts about her personal worth, determined to follow her own goal, but longing for submission. If Southworth had approached Fresca from a specific point of view and arranged her material accordingly, she might have been able to unlock her from the sea of facts. Now Southworth's reader remains with admiration for her perseverance on the one hand and curiosity about her troubled subject on the other.