

MARGARET FORSTER

Margaret Forster is one of Cumbria's most prolific writers. Since her first novel in 1964 she has published a book almost every year - a mixture of biography, memoir, social history and fiction that finds its way more surely to the literary sections of the bookshop than to the stacks of popular pulp. Margaret is not a 'romantic' author in the modern, pejorative, sense of the word - for thirty eight years in fiction and non-fiction, she has explored the rich territory of family relationship - the tyranny of love and obligation that has provided the fabric of both tragedy and comedy for generations of literary ancestors. Her fiction is wholly unclassifiable. From her first 'provincial girl about town' novels through a succession of turbulent anti-heroines and a brief excursion into gothic romance (the *Bride of Lowther Fell*), to her more recent explorations of social issues and forays into 'faction', there is no recognisable 'Forster novel' in the way that one can identify a Mary Wesley, a Joanna Trollope or a Margaret Drabble. They are not romances, or aga-sagas, bodice-rippers, or clog and shawls; not regional novels à la Cookson or du Maurier, nor does she produce the literary exam paper fodder of authors such as Margaret Atwood and Carol Shields.

If there is to be any classification at all it can only be that the subject matter of her novels is the family life of the contemporary, upwardly mobile, working and lower-middle classes, and the day to day issues that confront them. It's a universal subject. We are all part of one family or another and our experience of family life teaches us how the world works. As one historian put it recently, 'kinship networks [are] a vital means of understanding power relations.'¹ Within this frame Margaret's work is uncompromising. As one reviewer has put it, 'She is a chronicler of our cruel little ways within the family; she can be harsh; she gives no quarter whatsoever.'²

Margaret Forster was born in the northern city of Carlisle in 1938. Her family was firmly working class. Margaret's mother was a nervous, repressed woman who

found daily life difficult to cope with and took refuge in religion; her father was stubborn, laconic, emotionally detached - a man who was not on speaking terms with his brother for all of thirty years. At the time of Margaret's birth he was a fitter at the Metal Box factory and they lived in a two bedroom council house on the outskirts of the city in the new estate of Raffles - then considered a model in urban regeneration, but which after the war became run-down and eventually notorious.

Margaret, named after her maternal grandmother, was the middle child and the most difficult of the three siblings. She admits that she was 'noisy and demanding and given to tantrums . . . Fiery, selfish, ambitious . . .' But precociously clever. Margaret was a child who 'talked in long sentences at two and never stopped asking questions and wanting to try to read.'³ By the time she was four she could already do so and the local headmistress was so impressed she was admitted to the infants' class almost a year early.

Throughout her childhood Margaret witnessed her mother's response to the demands of her family, friends and neighbours, the sacrifice of self that left her exhausted and depressed, and soon came to the conclusion that her mother was trapped by the traditional domestic role accepted by generations of women. Long before feminism was a word in her vocabulary, Margaret resolved that she would never do the same. 'I would not marry and therefore would not have children. I would keep out of the trap and I'd be safe. . . The circumstances of my mother's life and her unhappiness were the spur to make my own life into something different. I would not and could not be like her.'⁴ The way to escape, Margaret became convinced, was through education.

In *Hidden Lives*, Margaret's family memoir, she describes her own feelings of difference and the difficulties she found in fitting into the role her family expected of her. When her father accused her of trying to be something she wasn't, the eight year old Margaret was faced with the knowledge that she was not the child everyone thought she was; there was a secret self that defeated familial expectations. 'I wasn't . . . a nice little girl which is what my mother wanted me to be. I was by then already

difficult, moody. I'd left behind that pretty little dear they'd all drooled over.'⁵ School was the only place where that other self could emerge: 'I was bright-faced, eager, absolutely desperate to please.' Margaret's mother tried to impress on her daughter the traditional female values -

'I mustn't think being clever was as important as being nice and good. She wanted a sweet, kind, thoughtful, willing-to-help daughter ready to follow in her footsteps in that respect. Instead I was already walking away from this calling. I didn't want to learn to be any kind of carer. I wouldn't accept that my role as a female was to serve on the domestic front. My father raged against my disobedience. I wouldn't wash dishes, set and clear tables, bring the coal in, or in any other ways help my mother.'⁶

Margaret was slapped and then strapped, but she refused to submit, spending much of her time at a friend's house. 'If I had to be at home I read my library books. I'd sit absorbed, hearing nothing, until my father would snatch the book away and shout, 'Get your nose out of that book and help your mam, or else!'⁷

At ten Margaret passed what was then called the 'Merit' exam (later known as the eleven plus) and gained a coveted place at the Carlisle and County High School for girls, where - driven by her thirst for knowledge and her need to escape the confines of her environment - she quickly excelled. Her parents were both proud and anxious, fearful that Margaret would get 'above herself' and become totally unfit for what they saw as her role in life. She was being educated out of her class and away from her family. 'My mother . . . saw it as creating that very gulf she dreaded. The more I read, the further away I grew.'⁸ There were few books at home - their titles predictable: the Bible, prayer books, home medical encyclopaedias, cookery books, a few children's books, no novels, poetry or biography. There was no money for such things and even less interest.

'I could never discuss anything I'd read at home. Trying to talk about the contents of books was showing off and there was no need for it. My

reading was seen as a weapon I used against my family, a way of absenting myself from their company. “All she does is that damned reading,” my father complained, and it was true. It made me strange to them.’⁹

Margaret was undeterred. Everything she saw around her convinced her that she wanted a different life and that there was only one way to achieve it. ‘The vital thing was to be independent, to be single-minded, to have a goal and allow no distractions.’¹⁰ That goal had already been suggested by her teachers: university. And not just any university - it had to be Oxford or Cambridge. There were now grants for students whose parents couldn’t afford the fees. In addition Margaret worked in Marks & Spencer on Saturdays and during the holidays either in the post office or at the steam laundry to earn extra money. Her experience of unskilled work made her even more determined. She didn’t want what other women wanted - ‘some kind of pleasant job for a few years until Mr Right came along. . .’ Others viewed with hostility her need to escape what they saw as her natural destiny. ‘To *want* so much, as I did, was to be hard and selfish and strange. It was not normal to be so restless, to be so demanding. Aiming at Oxford or Cambridge was showing off. . . It was unsettling, disturbing . . .’¹¹

Ironically, by the time she was seventeen Margaret had already met the man she was to marry. Hunter Davies was, if not exactly the boy next door, very close to it. Educated at the boys grammar school in Carlisle and with a similar working class background, Hunter and Margaret attended a debating society that served as a kind of youth club for sixth form students, and soon became close friends. They had shared aspirations. ‘Together we wanted to escape the limits of our social background and gain what our city couldn’t give us. We wanted to go in the same direction,’¹² Margaret wrote later. The relationship continued even after Hunter went to Durham University two years ahead of Margaret’s admission to Oxford to read History on an Open Scholarship.

In her teens Margaret’s rebellion against what was expected of her was in full

flight. She wore the black clothes that would later be described as ‘beatnik’, cropped her hair unfashionably short, and refused to wear high heels and stockings. In nineteen-fifties Carlisle this made her an oddity, but she didn’t care. Margaret revelled in her difference. All her sights were fixed on either Oxford or Cambridge and both invited her to interview. Margaret found Cambridge unappealing, but her interview at Oxford’s Somerville College brought her into contact with the legendary Janet Vaughan whose background was quite similar to her own. Janet not only had working class origins, but had managed to combine a high-flying academic career with marriage and motherhood. She was just the sort of role model that Margaret needed. At this point in her life her ambitions had begun to crystallise and focus on writing. Margaret had already decided that she would become a biographer.

After all the anticipation, the reality of Somerville College was a great disappointment. ‘It was oppressive, I hated it and I wasn’t going to fit in.’ Scholarship, the ‘life of the mind’ which Margaret had longed for as an alternative to female domestic drudgery, bored her. But Oxford brought, not only the knowledge of contraception that allowed sexual liberation, but contact with educated women who juggled homes, children and careers successfully. For the first time Margaret began to realise that ‘if I earned enough money I, too, could have it all, I could enjoy every aspect of a woman’s life if I found I wanted to.’¹³

Margaret used her experience of Oxford as the basis for her first published novel *Dames’ Delight*. Morag is the first of Margaret’s spiky, rebellious, in-your-face heroines. Like her author, Morag is a working class girl from a council house in Carlisle who wants to escape the existence she despises. The reality of Oxford is a shock. Morag’s first evening in college is completely the opposite of what she had expected.

‘I thought I’d never seen a more revolting sight than all those crowded tables full of jabbering excited females. They were so ugly. I went from face to face and felt more and more depressed. . . The sight of the high table distressed me even more. These were the dons who were

going to be my new masters, or so I imagined, and I felt I had to take their measure quickly. When they got up at the end of the meal they all walked as though their knickers were about to fall down, with their hands hunched protectively somewhere in the region of their navels.’¹⁴

As a northern girl, used to straight talking and a direct approach, Morag finds the oblique tact and the avoidance of issues frustrating. Original thought is not encouraged in tutorials.

‘She had got on to books and happened to mention one awful one which I had actually read. Naturally, I sat up at that and said eagerly that I’d read it and she said what did I think of it? ‘Terrible,’ I said, ‘as dry as dust.’ There was a long silence. . . . the atmosphere of outraged disapproval had penetrated even my thick skin. I began to feel more and more miserable as I saw what I had let myself in for. What did I care about history anyway? I hadn’t a scholarly bone in my body.’

Seeing her own image in a mirror in her scholar’s gown, Morag stops to take a closer look. ‘The gown was incongruous. There was I, frivolous, flippant and caring more about how long it took me to set my hair than how long it took to do an essay.’ Like Margaret, Morag doesn’t really fit in. She despises the other students especially:

‘The type with the flat chest and rabbit chin who blushed when we had male butlers for big dinners (young women with the voices of forty or fifty). . . . It was discouraging. Everybody wary of everybody else and finding refuge in keeping their distance so that they ended up howling with loneliness. . . .’¹⁵

The men disgust her as well as the women. Morag goes to a Union debate and is outraged at

‘the general idiocy so proudly displayed. It was a terrible thought that this lot was going to occupy the benches of the House of Commons in much the same way as they did that place. They cat-called each other all

the way through and spent a lot of time banging their feet on the floor. And they did it all with such glee, as though it was only right and proper that the hall should be made a nursery.’¹⁶

The sexual freedom Morag sees around her doesn’t appeal to her strong northern values either. ‘I am sickened by all this emphasis on sex.’¹⁷ Morag seethes at the petty rules imposed on young women as though they were children - more constricting than living at home: men not allowed in college after seven, everyone in by twelve. She discovers that although she is clever she is not intellectual, preferring *The Express* to *The Guardian*. ‘You’ve got to start doing something,’ her friend Tom says. ‘Such as what?’ ‘Act, write, or go into politics.’¹⁸

When Morag passes her preliminary exams, despite not really trying, she is shocked to find that she has achieved a distinction. She feels a fraud. ‘I was reflecting that even in the exam field Oxford was dead phoney. A distinction, after that tripe.’ Her tutor asks her if she is happy at Oxford. ‘I hate it,’ Morag admits bluntly. ‘Anything I ever had before I came, Oxford has taken away. Like enthusiasm.’ Morag falters because she knows the woman won’t understand. ‘The place stank, but I couldn’t put my finger on why. . .’ She decides to tolerate it for the two more years it will take to obtain her degree. ‘. . . what else was there to do? Theoretically, two years of living at other people’s expense in a state of permanent leisure ought to have been idyllic. If I couldn’t enjoy that, what was I going to enjoy, for God’s sake?’¹⁹

By the time she left Oxford, Margaret had made two major decisions. She was going to marry Hunter Davies and she was going to give herself time to write a novel. Aware that by marrying she was conforming to the very template she had treated with such scorn, Margaret made sure that her wedding made as few concessions to tradition as possible. A register office marriage with only two witnesses, no parents present, no bridesmaids, dresses, reception or any of the other trimmings. Her parents were horrified - she was letting them down, first by getting married ‘throwing herself and her education away’ and then by having such a ‘hole-and-corner’ ceremony.

Register offices were for divorcees and shotgun weddings. Margaret got a post as a teacher at a school in Hampstead while Hunter began work as a journalist, and during the long summer vacation she wrote her first novel which was promptly rejected by the agent she sent it to. Undaunted, Margaret put it aside and began *Dames' Delight*, writing in the evenings and at the weekends. 'It wasn't a good novel but at least it got me started.'²⁰ Its acceptance gave Margaret the courage to stop teaching and turn to writing as a career. She wrote her second novel, *Georgy Girl*, in 1964 while pregnant with her first child.

Georgy Girl hit a nerve. Three young single people sharing a flat in London - their rebellion against parental values, their liberated sexuality - it was all on the front edge of the sixties revolution. The novel is pacy and plot driven and there's some good writing -

'It was a vicious, wet Sunday. By eleven o'clock it hardly seemed light at all, and the grey thickness of the rain clawed imploringly at the window panes. The square was deathly quiet, no traffic, no passers by, it was sealed off. From one corner emerged Peg, with a pack-a-mac over her gaberdine and an umbrella held stiffly and vertically overhead. Like a smudge on a radar screen, she thumped across the square and up the steps to Number Seventeen.'²¹

Meredith Jones is another of Margaret's spiky heroines who refuse to conform to expectations and embrace traditional female values. Meredith's flatmate George is her antithesis - not particularly attractive physically, but affectionate and homely. Much of the dramatic tension in the novel is between these two female types. Meredith's boyfriend actually prefers George and when Meredith has a baby it is George who looks after it. Families aren't born the author seems to say; a 'created' family can function better than a real one. Unloving parents are a feature of the book. George's 'real' parents, Ted and Doris, are very distant, lavishing more care and attention on their employer James and his beautiful house than they do on their daughter. They are better parents to James than they are to George. The 'real'

parents of Meredith's baby Sara don't want her at all. They go off and leave her with George, who has come to 'adore and think and live and breathe' their baby.

'Really, she hadn't guessed how she would react to Sara either, even though she had thought so much about her. She had never imagined love for a baby, especially a baby that wasn't yours, could be so strong and emotional. When she'd held her for the first time, there was a physical sensation not unlike one of desire. The same weak feeling in her stomach, the same breathless anticipation.'

In a neat conclusion George marries James, even though she isn't in love with him because she knows he will provide the security she needs to blossom and a home for the baby she's adopted. Her parents are given the sack without a twinge of guilt, and sent out into the world to fend for themselves.

Dysfunctional parenting is also the subject of Margaret's third novel, published in the same year as her second. *The Bogeyman* is now very hard to get hold of. Written with her first child Caitlin watching in the high chair and a film contract for *Georgy Girl* already under negotiation, the content of the novel is a savage indictment of familial relationships. Rather weaker than the first two in terms of character and plot, it is a very dark book. There is a sadistic, bad-tempered father (the bogeyman of the title), a weak and ineffectual mother and two cold and appallingly unattractive children. There isn't a single sympathetic person in the book, apart from the au pair whose arrival precipitates the family's destruction. There is violence and abuse, both physical and emotional, on almost every page. The faint ray of hope offered to the reader in the last chapter is scarcely credible in the light of what has gone before.

Themes run through these first three novels that Margaret was to return to again and again - dysfunctional families, and difficult, non-conforming heroines who have bad relationships with their parents. The fathers in these stories are emotionally detached from their families and treated with indifference, contempt or straightforward hatred. The reader is almost bound to speculate that Margaret's own insistence that she did not love her father informs their portrayal. Her adolescent

clashes with him - both parties stubborn and outspoken - are analysed with brutal honesty in the second of her family memoirs, *Precious Lives*, written in 1998 after his death. As a mature woman and successful author, their roles reversed, Margaret found herself motivated by duty and gratitude towards her father rather than love. Living at a distance she is thankful that she can hand the care of him over to others. At ninety-five he is still prejudiced, dictatorial and ferociously independent, but his carers are amused rather than repelled by him. 'What a character!' they exclaim and one of them asks 'What was he like when you were young?' 'He was a nightmare,' Margaret remembers. 'My appearance, while I was growing up was endlessly commented on and always critically. I was getting fat . . . my hair looked as if a mouse had chewed it . . . my spots were all barnacles . . .' Worst of all, for a self-conscious teenager, was the endless criticism of her clothes. 'Why didn't I wear nice frocks/high heels/nylon stockings/a decent coat?' Margaret realises that his insulting personal remarks have no power to hurt these unrelated women. 'The closer he got to dying the more outrageous he could be and they would go on admiring his spirit.'²²

But in 1965, even with all the distance between London and Carlisle, Margaret was still struggling to get her father into perspective. Her mother was less difficult to understand. With the birth of her first child Margaret found herself faced with the same female dilemmas her mother had wrestled with. Career or family? Her mother had regretfully given up a job she loved to look after her husband and family and now in old age bemoaned the fact that she had done nothing with her life. Having her own home and a child made Margaret understand her mother better and realise how much they had in common. Margaret also realised how lucky she was - writing was the ideal career to combine with a family . . . 'any career taking me out of the house would be unmanageable. It would present impossible choices, impose unacceptable strains. It would show I was, when it came to the crunch, exactly like my mother and grandmother; family first, no argument.' But like other women before her, Margaret found that 'Being a wife, mother and writer was a balancing act.'²³ Although Margaret found it more difficult to write with a child, she refused to consider

domestic help. 'I liked to do everything myself. I enjoyed the routine housework everyone else seemed to find odious.' Instead of an au pair Hunter and Margaret juggled domestic obligations. Two evenings a week Hunter bathed the children and put them to bed. Monday was his day off and so he took charge while Margaret wrote. After *Georgy Girl*, she wrote two novels 'very quickly, both light affairs but acceptable enough. I was fond of saying it was like knitting, really, just something I did to amuse myself, quite effortless.'²⁴ Her career as a writer seemed assured, though her parents remained doubtful. For Margaret's mother it wasn't a 'proper job' like teaching, more a kind of lucrative hobby which would surely have to be given up as the demands of her family increased.

One of the stipulations in Margaret's contract for the film rights of *Georgy Girl* was that she write the film script - something she had no experience of at all, and she was also four months pregnant with her second child. Though Margaret made a start, it quickly became apparent that this kind of writing made a lot of professional demands she wasn't prepared for. 'One thing writing for myself, at home, quite another writing to orders, other people's orders . . . How clearly this episode showed me the limits of my own energies. Being a novelist fitted in with motherhood, being a scriptwriter didn't.'²⁵ With great relief, Margaret handed the job over to Peter Nicholls, whose name appeared in the credits alongside her own, and went back to writing novels - this time with two small children underfoot.

The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff, published in 1967, is a remarkable novel for a young woman of twenty eight to write. Margaret manages to get right inside the head of Maudie, a puritanical, working class, elderly Glaswegian, unable to show love and affection to anyone over the age of nine and resolutely determined not to need it herself. Alone and abandoned at sixty eight she sets out on a tour of duty round her three, very different, children. It's the first time she's been outside Glasgow; the first time she's had real contact with her children since they left home. Her expectations are based on weekly letters and her own imagined picture of her children's lives. The result is disappointment and, as Maudie becomes aware of her failure to communicate

with her children, and theirs with her, she begins to realise that she is trapped behind the barricades she has erected against human emotion. What she had valued as independence is really only a stubborn refusal to engage. This determined separateness is thrown into relief by having to be part of a family again: 'By herself, she was lonely, but with her children she was isolated.'

Maudie's visits are as difficult for her children as they are for her. 'Are there any happy families, do you think?' one of the characters asks.²⁶ Maudie changes their lives and becomes subtly changed herself. She realises that she must not expect anything from others, even her children, because in the end

'everyone was on their own. . . Even when you had been physically joined to someone you were on your own, and even when you had created someone they were not an extension of yourself but someone separate, on their own. . . It made it more bearable to realise that her search had been fruitless before it began, because everyone was on their own.'²⁷

Maudie turns this bleak message into a kind of triumph and returns home stronger and rather more human than she had been when she set out.

In the novel Margaret explores with great tact the difficulties of the middle class children of working class parents - the strange social shift made possible by free education, contraception and the vibrant sixties economic boom - a process she herself had been part of. Margaret's best novels are all rooted in fact. One of the things that most fascinates me as a reader, is the way a writer transposes fact into fiction - actual experience and observation into art. For no work of fiction is entirely imagined - writers are thieves - they steal other peoples lives and stitch them into their own work.

In *The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff* Margaret uses her experiences of maintaining a relationship with her own parents and her Scottish mother-in-law. Maudie pays a visit to a small island near Malta, where Margaret and Hunter spent part of a sabbatical year on the proceeds of *Georgy Girl*, and the narrative owes much

to visits made by their parents - who, like most working class people of that generation, had rarely had holidays and had never been abroad. Margaret felt sorry for her mother's inability to remove her clothing in the heat, even on the beach, suffering in the Mediterranean summer sun encased in corsets and stockings, petticoats and cardigans. Maudie, on a similar excursion 'already sweating in best coat and dress and laced shoes,' has to be accompanied by essentials such as 'umbrella, gloves, smelling salts, purse, handbag, cough sweets, watch. . .'²⁸

In 1966, the year before the new novel was published, *Georgy Girl* was shown in the cinemas starring Lynn Redgrave. The film was a hit and Margaret suddenly became a 'name' in fiction. *Maudie Tipstaff* benefited from the publicity. 'Author of *Georgy Girl*' was printed on the cover and it rapidly became a book club choice. Margaret's future was assured. She was able to afford a second home in Cumbria, buy her parents the bungalow they had always longed to own and concentrate on writing with the knowledge that she was financially secure. A clutch of books followed at yearly intervals. The novels - *The Park* (1968), *Miss Owen-Owen is at Home* (1969), *Fenella Phizackerley* (1970), *Mr Bones Retreat* (1971) and *The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury* (1974) all have certain features in common. Their heroines are feisty, prickly, unlikeable women - either physically unattractive (Miss Owen-Owen), or unnaturally beautiful (Fenella Phizackerley). Mrs Pendlebury is an older woman - reclusive, difficult, neurotic. Damaged by a tragic incident in her past she has withdrawn from human contact and is - almost - rescued by the seductive wiles of a small child who lives next door. But there is no happy ending, no salvation for her. The snobbish, determined Miss Owen-Owen is similarly incapable of alteration, though Fenella Phizackerley does achieve happiness of a kind. *The Park* was a departure from the usual narrative form, focussing on a group of unconnected women who walk regularly in the park during the day. Their lives run in parallel until a tragedy brings them all together. But once again the main female character is a managing, rather unpleasant personality. Bolshy women who refuse to fit into stereotypes are Margaret Forster's speciality.

During this period, Margaret wrote her first biography - *The Rash Adventurer* (1973) which is an account of the life of Bonnie Prince Charlie. Having told Janet Vaughan during her Oxford interview that she wanted to be a biographer, it had taken Margaret sixteen years and eight novels to get there. Her biographies are as readable as her novels, with a strong narrative line - not scholarly compendiums bulging with irrelevant detail. There are some who might say that they are a little 'safe' and do not always ask the hard questions, but a biography does not have to be controversial to be good, and her scholarship is unimpeachable. Her first choice of subject was interesting. Prince Charles Edward Stuart was something of a local hero in Cumbria. He stayed at the George Hotel in Penrith and the nearby Battle of Clifton Moor was the last ever fought on English soil. Many people harboured Jacobite sympathies at the time of the rebellion and paid dearly for it. Contemporary local memoirs record the retreat, as his soldiers were hounded back toward the Scottish border, and the river Eden was thick with floating bodies. Margaret's biography was well-timed. Antonia Fraser had recently had a best-seller with *Mary Queen of Scots* and interest in Mary's dispossessed descendant - a similarly romantic figure - was still strong. The styles of the two authors could not be more different - Fraser the 'portmanteau' school of historical biography, cramming every detail in; Forster's focus on the narrative and the evolution of character.

Five years later, Forster published another - this time a literary biography that is not in fact a true biography at all. *Thackeray*, listed variously under biography and memoir, 'edited' by Margaret Forster, should more accurately be described as a fictional autobiography. The jacket blurb describes how the book came about.

'William Makepeace Thackeray was once so disgusted by an unduly fulsome biography he was reading that he threw away the volume and said to his daughters, "Let there be none of this when I go." They saw to it that there was not. Yet what an autobiography this most witty and self-aware of Victorians could have written if he had chosen.

Regretting that he had not, Margaret Forster decided, after reading every

word he had ever written, she would let Thackeray speak for himself. The result is one of the most imaginative literary creations of modern times.’

Margaret took her cue from Thackeray himself in a lecture where he placed fictional portrayal in a finer light than biographical representation. ‘Out of the fictitious book I get the expression of the life of the time; of the manner, of the movement, the dress, the pleasure, the laughter, the ridicules of society - the old times live again, and I travel in the old country of England.’²⁹ Margaret became convinced that this was the way to do it. Thackeray should be allowed ‘to write his own life using the very full published private papers together with the rich manuscript sources’. The result would be a biased account of the writer’s life, but Margaret was happy to abandon the supposed objectivity of the biographer. ‘I had no desire whatsoever to know how far Thackeray was telling the truth about himself.’ How much of the text is quotation from Thackeray and how much Margaret’s paraphrase is delicately glossed over.

‘Would I paraphrase Thackeray’s own writings? Decidedly not - and yet I knew it would be quite impossible not to use his actual words when they sprang unbidden to my pen. Should I therefore erase them, or acknowledge them? I have done neither. To anyone who knows their Thackeray the phrases will leap out of the page. To those who do not, it is my fond hope they will be indistinguishable. I see nothing immoral in this method. . . It is of course impertinent of me to presume I can write in the style of Thackeray . . . [But] . . . I believe Thackeray would have been amused by my impertinence. . . It might have made a better book to have approached Thackeray’s life from every angle, but it would not have been such fun and to all those who may say this is neither one thing nor the other - neither fiction nor fact - I would say with Thackeray that it is through fiction we get our fact and that there is precious little fact that, when closely examined, is indisputably fact.’

Margaret added that she had ‘never enjoyed writing anything as much as I have enjoyed writing this’.³⁰ But I did not find it an easy book to read, nor Thackeray as amusing a person as Margaret would have liked me to, and I found myself longing for some objective commentary, or biographical illumination towards his relationships. This, for me, was not a successful foray into the twilight world of fiction. Reviewers too found it almost impossible to categorise.

In the decade that followed, Margaret wrote four more novels and made two more excursions into the world of non-fiction. *Significant Sisters* is a popular account of eight key figures in the history of the development of feminist ideology, with passages of commentary by the book’s author. Written passionately and with great understanding and perception of the difficulties faced by early ‘feminists’ before a definition of the term had even been coined, Margaret sees them in the context of society as it then was, rather than looking back and judging their words and behaviour by the mores of our own day. In the introduction and conclusion that top and tail the book, Margaret reflects on the influence these women’s lives and ideas have had on hers. As a young woman Margaret had wanted ‘to have it all’, now, as a successful author in her thirties with three children, a husband with a high-flying career and two homes, she begins to analyse the cost.

‘Researching the material for this book,’ Margaret admits, ‘has . . . radically altered where I stand . . . I have always wanted to be everything - wife, mother, housekeeper, writer. More significant, there was no role I disliked. The problem was not choosing but taking all of them on at the same time and surviving. I have survived, but I do not approve of how I managed it. I think the cost, to myself, has been great.’³¹

Nineteenth-century feminism told women they had to choose between the domestic and the public sphere. Twentieth-century feminism tricked women into believing that they could have both. The ideal of female emancipation - and also its central dilemma - is set out in the quoted words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton: ‘The

woman is greater than the wife or mother; and in consenting to take upon herself these relations she should never sacrifice one iota of her individuality.³² But Margaret understands that the problem for women is much more complex than the authors of seminal feminist texts have been prepared to admit.

‘I have gradually come round to understanding that there is still a trap. It isn’t marriage itself; it isn’t motherhood alone; it is some subtle force which is not yet either fully understood or controlled. There is something in women which prevents them striking out as men do.’³³

Margaret was also exploring these ideas in her fiction. *Private Papers* (1986), the novel that immediately followed *Significant Sisters*, features a mother who, like Lily Forster, gives up her life for her family in a way that her daughters are unable to accept. Margaret was returning to a subject she had already explored, with devastating clarity, in 1979. *Mother, can you hear me?* (possibly Margaret’s most auto-biographical novel) is an account of mother/daughter relationships and how patterns of relating can be passed down through the generations. The parents are uncannily like Margaret’s own. When Angela’s father insists ‘anyways, I’m managing,’ it’s the voice of Margaret’s that we hear, and the impossible standards, the unspoken emotional demands of Angela’s mother owe much to Lily Forster’s selfless devotion and its effect on Margaret. ‘She was a Mother, and Mothers stood like rocks, immovable and solid, while all the rest eddied around them. . . A Mother, Angela thought, should be there when you come home to soothe and explain and support.’³⁴ It’s a standard Angela finds unattainable, and her failure leaves her full of guilt and self-recrimination. She tries to avoid making her daughter feel the familial obligations that have constricted her own life, creating other problems as she does so. ‘It’s all much too complicated,’ a confused Angela tells her daughter. ‘You can’t talk glibly about love and duty just like that - I don’t know what I feel, except guilty and responsible.’³⁵

By now Margaret’s own domestic routines were well established. Always an early riser, she got up in the morning and wrote until lunchtime - walking, shopping

or doing chores in the afternoons. Winters were spent in London - in the same house that she and Hunter had bought when they first married - and summers in Cumbria, first in a cottage near Caldbeck and then in a larger, more secluded property at Loweswater. As her international reputation has grown, Margaret's novels have (as she has herself) remained rooted in Cumbria, although only one is wholly Cumbrian - her gothic romance *The Bride of Lowther Fell*, set in the Caldbeck fells. But in other novels her characters attend hospitals in Carlisle, or live in a community that is recognisably Cumbrian. If they live in the south, they have working class northern roots which they are trying unsuccessfully to leave behind. While not as self-consciously Cumbrian as those novels written by her contemporary Melvyn Bragg, the influence of Margaret's native landscape on her work is clear.

Success brought all the normal demands made on an established writer - publishers wanted Margaret to publicise her books, literature festivals wanted her to give talks and do workshops - all of which are a drain on a writer's creative energies but which are now part of the standard contract. Although in the late seventies she did consent to be on the BBC's advisory committee on the Social Effects of Television, and to sit on the Arts Council Literature Panel, she steadfastly avoided the literary circus acts that promoting a book now entails. As an adult, Margaret still refused to conform to other people's expectations of what she should do. As well as declining invitations to talk about her books, she was also reluctant to attend the social events and literary networking opportunities her more gregarious husband enjoyed. She detested dinner parties. 'I would always rather be somewhere else, preferably at home.'³⁶ Margaret was lucky to be well known enough to be able to refuse to do what she found uncomfortable - one of the few authors to maintain her privacy and resist the publicity circuit. It should be a lesson for publishers that her books sell well even without it.

During the eighties and early nineties, Margaret's novels seemed to be more and more concerned with the exploration of sensitive social issues. In *The Battle for Christabel*, the world of politically correct bureaucracy in fostering and adoption is

exposed. Christabel is orphaned by her mother's death in a climbing accident. Immediately, there is a battle for who is to have the five year old, since Rowena (a single mother) had not appointed a legal guardian in the event of anything happening to her. Grandmother, aunt, mother's lover, friend and foster mother all have claims. Since Christabel is of mixed race origin, colour and class are an issue and she becomes a victim of the social politics of the day. After a long legal wrangle that benefits no one, Christabel is adopted by strangers. As a reader, you can't feel it's the right decision, but it's a decision and everyone has to live with it. Life is like that.

Mother's Boys (1994) less successfully tackles the modern problem of street crime. It's narrated by two women, the mother and grandmother of two boys involved in a violent, sadistic attack - one as victim, the other as attacker. Together they help each other come to terms with what has happened, and the boys are gradually revealed as much more complex individuals, whose roles are not as clear-cut as they appear at first. Both, it seems, are victims. What the novel lacks is the sense of passionate involvement with the characters and the dense personal detail that informs the books that were to follow.

By far the most interesting novel from this period is *Have the Men had Enough?* (short-listed for the Sunday Express Book of the Year Award 1989), which was based on Margaret's experience of her mother-in-law's Alzheimer's disease and written, she told an interviewer, out of 'rage and pity'. Three female narrators, daughter, daughter-in-law and grand-daughter, cope with Mrs McKay's rapid decline into senility. The men of the family are less involved and the physical and emotional burden of coping falls on the women. The subtleties of emotional family politics are laid bare with absolute precision, and it's a perceptive study of a family pushed to the limits. For her daughter Bridget, caring for Mrs McKay fulfills a lack in her own life. She gives the love that she wishes had been given to her, hoping, always hoping to get it back, even when her mother is beyond even recognising her. For her daughter-in-law Jenny, Mrs McKay also fills a need, but creates the most immense conflicts, forcing her to decide what is really important, and revalue her own

relationships. For grand-daughter Hannah, this is her first real experience of illness, old age and death. Through it she begins to see her mother as a separate individual, and provides a pair of detached eyes through which to see the family struggle. Her own love for her grandmother, unburdened by the terrible conflicting needs and responsibilities of the adults, remains constant right to the end. It's a moving, satisfying book with moments of high comedy such as the excruciating Sunday lunch when Mrs McKay abandons the cutlery and uses her false teeth as a scoop to get her food from the plate to her mouth.

After 1990, Margaret's work became increasingly weighted towards non-fiction - and her biographical subjects often had fictional spin-offs. An award-winning biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning³⁷ was soon followed by a novel focussed on the fascinating life story of her maid. It was almost as though Margaret felt that the factual constraints placed on the biographer were too much of a burden and that the story had to be told again in a fictional form. She was not the first person to have done this - fifty years earlier, Virginia Woolf had written a biography of Elizabeth's dog Flush. *Lady's Maid* tells the story of Elizabeth Wilson, who gave up her own life and her child, to look after her famous namesake first in England and then in Italy. The novel is able to portray a less sympathetic side of Elizabeth Barrett Browning than the biography - the self-centred mistress whose own interests were paramount and who demanded absolute loyalty at whatever cost to those who served her.

Daphne du Maurier, an account of the author's life written with the co-operation of her family, was the point where Margaret really came of age as a biographer. Published in 1993, it brings the subject vividly to life and grips the reader with a strong narrative. Du Maurier is depicted like a character in one of Margaret's novels - prickly, difficult, at times very badly behaved, but somehow Margaret makes us care about her and gives essential insights into her complex, often contradictory personality. Writing the book, Margaret came face to face with both the nightmare and the dream of every biographer, previously undisclosed personal information - in

du Maurier's case a lesbian relationship. Margaret had actually finished the book when manuscripts came to light revealing a love affair with Gertrude Lawrence. Not only did she have to begin to rewrite the biography, but there was also the problem of whether the family would allow her to use such controversial material. In the event Daphne's children were extremely generous about discoveries that were inevitably painful for them, and they courageously stood by their mother and her beliefs about biography. 'She never at any time banned a biography about herself, once she was dead, . . . [and believed that] they should try to tell what she called 'all truth'. What she detested were biographies that were 'stereo-typed, dull-as-ditchwater, or very fulsome praising [sic]'.³⁸ Another worry was how the British public would react to such revelations about one of their most cherished authors, but the publicity they generated ensured that the book became a best-seller and the controversy soon died down. The biography was awarded the 1994 Fawcett Book Prize.

Since *Daphne du Maurier* (in 1993) Margaret seems to have concentrated more and more on non-fiction. Of the three novels she has published since then, two of them - *Shadow Baby* and *The Memory Box* - are rooted in fact and linked to her personal family memoirs *Hidden Lives* and *Precious Lives*. These highly acclaimed autobiographies³⁹ are possibly Margaret's best books yet - a beautifully written, sensitive but honest probing of family history and relationships without the disguise of fiction. Before the second half of the twentieth century, working class families rarely merited this kind of written record. Even if they had enough education to be literate, ordinary people didn't keep everyday household letters, had no time or energy left for diaries, often had no money for tombstones and weren't famous enough to be written about by others. In the years before oral history projects became fashionable a whole section of society led 'hidden lives'.

Such anonymity also made it possible for families to keep scandals secret from subsequent generations - and it's a rare family that doesn't have at least one skeleton in the ancestral cupboard. Many of these scandals are the result of the burden of unnatural sexual restraint placed on women for centuries. The birth of a child,

which should be an event of human celebration, has - for women not protected by the institution of marriage - been seen as a calamity. Illegitimacy 'ruined' a woman, tainting her own reputation and that of her innocent child, while the father of that child escaped any kind of blame or moral sanction. There is hardly a family in Britain which has not been affected by this harsh moral code during the last two hundred years.

Margaret grew up knowing that there were secrets in her family - questions that went unanswered, subjects avoided. There had been a mysterious visit to her mother's mother just before she died by an elderly woman in mourning dress who arrived in a chauffeur-driven car. No one knew who she was and Margaret's grandmother never revealed anything about the purpose of the visit. At her funeral a younger woman came to the door claiming to be her daughter, only to be denied by the rest of the family. It was a mystery, made deeper by the fact that Margaret's grandmother had never talked to any of her children about her life before the age of twenty three - her childhood and adolescence were a blank. As an adult woman in search of her own identity Margaret went in search of the truth. Virginia Woolf famously said that 'women think back through their mothers' and Margaret restates this as: 'We are our past, especially our family past. . . I can't understand my own history unless I understand my grandmother's, my mother's and that of the women like them, the ordinary working-class women from whom I come.'⁴⁰

The result of that search is more gripping and emotionally wrenching than any of Margaret's novels. She found herself retracing the lives of her grandmother and great grandmother.

'It was a strange feeling . . . to be walking past the house where my grandmother worked as a servant. . . The past - my grandmother's, my mother's, my aunts' - did not seem a foreign country to me as I daily walked its streets . . . The empathy with them was so strong, and the recollection of my childhood self so sharp, that we all walked together. But that perhaps is the point of any memoir - to walk with the dead and

yet see them with our eyes, from our vantage point.’⁴¹

In tracing her family history Margaret came face to face with the centuries old conflict of family versus self that women have always had to deal with and that was also a central issue in Margaret’s life despite more than a hundred years of feminism and social reform. The quality of life at the end of the twentieth century is undoubtedly much improved - ‘everything, for a woman, is better now, even if it is still not as good as it could be.’ But there is still the primitive pull of biology, love and duty that is particular to women and will probably always have to be negotiated by those who - like Margaret - decide that they want to have it all.

Shadow Baby - the novel that followed - is based on Margaret’s grandmother’s story, beautifully imagined. Two illegitimate girls born seventy years apart, go in search of their histories and it’s not until the end of the book that the connection between the two births is revealed. The novel is a frank exploration of the respective values of the times they lived in and their effect on women’s lives - one cannot help but conclude that it was not so much the illegitimacy that threatened the stability of the family unit, but the lengths people had to go to to hide it. Motherhood is also closely examined in the different relationships the children have with their adoptive and birth parents. Much of personal identity is to do with reflected likenesses - knowing who you are is in part knowing who you take after. This essential factor is missing in an adopted family, however strong the emotional bond between individuals. Margaret spells out the consequences of this very clearly.

The Memory Box, one of Margaret’s most popular novels, continues to explore this subject. Catherine has been orphaned as a baby and brought up by a stepmother. Fiercely loyal to the person she regards as her mother, she has consistently refused to think of her birth mother at all, or to open the box left by the dying Susannah for her tiny daughter. Only at the age of thirty-one - the same age as her mother had been when she died - does Catherine open the box and begin to solve the riddle of its contents and her mother’s identity, discovering at the same time a great deal about her own. ‘In the slippery world of family secrets, Catherine learns that her mother is not

the only woman with a hidden past. She has to confront her own repressed memories, and admit what she has always refused to acknowledge: Susannah's genetic influence.' *The Memory Box*, writes a reviewer, 'tantalisingly explores the consequences, sometimes affecting several generations, of suppressing or massaging vital information.'⁴²

In the second part of her family memoir, *Precious Lives*, Margaret examines how individuals deal with approaching death and how knowledge of its imminence affects their families, by telling two very different stories - her sister-in-law Marion's premature and brutally quick decline from cancer, and her father's more gradual disengagement at the end of a longer than average life. Margaret never shirks an honest examination of her own motives and emotions. She watches the apprehension of Marion's visitors, 'Visiting the dying is so very tricky . . . There's not a single book of etiquette on how to be polite and say the right thing.'⁴³ The knowledge that Marion may only have a few months to live also affected what had been a close relationship with Margaret, who now found herself on the other side of an invisible barrier.

'I sat directly opposite her while she tried to sip the wretched soup. Too hot? Too thick? Queries about soup, and she was dying. It was ridiculous. . . . But . . . What did I so badly want to say that she didn't already know? That I was sorry she was dying? . . . *Sorry*, indeed. That I was sad, upset, distraught, furious? All about my feelings, and who wanted to know those? They were obvious, and irrelevant. I went on sitting there, while she went on slowly, slowly spooning soup into herself.'⁴⁴

Margaret also finds herself amazed - and at times enraged - at her father's fatalistic stoicism in the face of increasing disability and the loss of dignity and quality of life. 'In my father's opinion it was not up to you to pre-empt fate. When your number was up, it was up - that sort of homespun philosophy.' What Margaret observes in the case of her sister-in-law and her father is that 'the moment people

actually were dying the struggle to hold on to life became compulsive and fierce.⁴⁵ The relationship between Margaret and her father had never been close, but as their roles became reversed by his increasing ill health, Margaret fulfilled what she saw as her duty towards him, despite chafing at the burden of it. She constantly questioned her own need to do this. ‘Duty sounds such an ugly, cold, hard word, signifying a lack of love or pleasure or tenderness. . . It was awful to be going to visit my father out of duty. I wanted to be going to see him out of anything but that. I wanted to discover within myself feelings of genuine warmth and love, but I couldn’t.’⁴⁶ Even as she analysed her feelings and labelled them, Margaret was aware of something else - something much more complicated. A bond created by family relationship often repeated in the old proverb that blood is thicker than water. ‘There was something there . . . which was either not quite duty or which softened it into a feeling less repugnant.’ Something that compelled her to telephone him every day, write weekly letters and endure painful visits during the five months she lived in Cumbria. And Margaret finally acknowledges that, though her duty is informed by gratitude and pity, there is still something else. ‘Even if feeling better about being motivated by duty and gratitude and compassion . . . cheered me up, there was still a piece missing from the puzzle when I tried to understand the power my father had over me. . . What I was seeing, in these years of my father’s final decline, was evidence of some inner power to which it was impossible not to respond.’⁴⁷ What Margaret had not added into the equation was her father’s indomitable personality, against which she had battled as a child, but which now grudgingly excited admiration.

When he dies at the age of ninety-six Margaret feels not the great relief she had always expected to feel when his death eventually happened, but shock, and regret that she had not been there with him. Looking at his body in the funeral chapel afterwards, Margaret is surprised to feel ‘a certain tenderness and sadness’ for a man that she had actively hated as a child, though he had given her little cause.

The honesty of self analysis that makes these two memoirs such compulsive reading is also the quality that informs Margaret’s latest work of non-fiction, *Good*

Wives. Returning to the themes of women's role in society explored earlier in *Significant Sisters*, Margaret tells the story of three very different wives - Mary Livingstone, Fanny Stevenson and Jennie Lee. It is not just an account of their lives, but also of hers; not just a biography, but an account of the difficulties and dilemmas of practical feminism in the twentieth century. Margaret describes her own experience of marriage and her struggles with practical feminism as a wife and mother. She acknowledges the difficulties posed by hard-line feminist ideology, which never seemed to take account of the fact that women might actually desire children and wish to nurture them; that they had nesting instincts that might be satisfied by menial domestic tasks; that they loved and desired other human beings whose needs had equal priority with their own; that the much-vaunted right to a career for women might (as with their male counterparts) amount to nothing more than serving in a shop or drudging in a factory - an economic transaction that brought little fulfilment except for the money it provided. Margaret takes a long hard look at four different approaches to these female dilemmas, and asks 'Why, in the twenty-first century, in a social climate where it is acceptable to live in a partnership, and even to have children within one without any stigma, why . . . does any woman still want to be a wife?'

The book is subtitled 'Mary, Fanny, Jennie and me' and each biography is followed by a section of autobiographical comparison and analysis where Margaret lays bare the history of her own ambivalent relationship with marriage. 'I never wanted to be a wife,' she declares, 'That feeble creature who obeyed.' But in the end she too capitulated, surprised that, though it was no longer necessary for a woman to marry in order to be with a man or to have children, she still wanted to do it. Feeling guilty that she was compromising her principles, she insisted that she was getting married on her own terms, to avoid causing grief to her parents. She wore an antique silver ring rather than a conventional gold band and squirmed every time she was referred to as 'Mrs Davies', but is prepared to admit with the grace of hindsight that there was a certain unacknowledged pride in the 'that title and the badge of

office’.

In researching the book Margaret was shocked to find that ‘once the personal details of each woman’s day-to-day existence are revealed,’ despite the time lapse between Mary Livingstone, Fanny Stevenson, Jennie Lee and herself, ‘how similar their difficulties were to my own during forty years of being a wife.’⁴⁸ It’s a statement most women would agree with, despite the fact that ‘a wife today is not, or need not be, the same creature’ as a wife fifty or a hundred and fifty years ago. But the personal adjustments that have to be made are the same then as now - the struggle for space, the compromises, the loss of minor freedoms - whether married or simply living together. What has not changed is the basic nature of human beings, men and women and their individual and collective needs.

Margaret reveals a great deal about her own personality - particularly how much she values independence. ‘A good wife is very definitely an independent wife, one who does not rely entirely on her husband for sustenance of every kind.’⁴⁹ Many would not agree with this statement - there are relationships which last and thrive because one party is a giver and the other a taker and they fulfil each others’ needs perfectly. But for Margaret ‘independence has been of such vital importance to me that I’ve perhaps made it into a rod with which to beat my back.’⁵⁰ She has refused to enter into the nurturing wife-as-nurse, or wife-as-mother roles so many women fall into. Men should be encouraged to look after themselves. ‘I think wives should be tough. They should refuse to become surrogate mothers.’

Of much more difficulty than achieving a good relationship with her husband was the problem of reconciling the conflicting demands of motherhood and wifhood. ‘Being a good mother seems to me so much harder than being a good wife. . . I had what would be termed ‘separation difficulties’, having confidence only in my own caring.’ Margaret found it difficult to leave her children with anyone else, a baby-sitter or relative, even if that meant not being able to accompany her husband to functions or on trips abroad. ‘I put what I thought of as the best interests of my children before his pleasure. And he didn’t like it.’ One incident, recorded as fact in

*Good Wives*⁵¹ and as fiction in *Mother, can you hear me?*⁵², reveals how Margaret was persuaded to leave the children with a retired nurse who lived nearby and had often offered to babysit while she and Hunter went to the cinema. Her worst fears were realised when the manager walked down the aisles asking if there was a Mr and Mrs Davies in the house? The baby had begun screaming and ‘Nursey’ had been unable to calm him. This reinforced Margaret’s conviction that her children could not safely be left with anyone else, though she admits now that her over-protectiveness towards her children was perhaps unjustified - ‘It sounds so ridiculous now.’⁵³ But almost every mother will understand her dilemma.

The demands made on the ‘public’ wife are also addressed in the book. Margaret is very critical of Hillary Clinton and Mary Archer, who, she asserts, made a big mistake by appearing to condone their husbands’ behaviour. ‘All one can hope is that *in private* these public wives speak their minds. If they don’t, then they are failing their husbands as much as their husbands have failed them.’⁵⁴

What is most interesting in *Good Wives*, particularly to me as a writer and a woman, is how Margaret dealt with the conflicting importance of ‘his work’ and ‘her work’. From the beginning of their marriage Margaret was not only a writer, but a writer whose work was publicly valued, yet she admits that - probably on the grounds of relative financial status - it was Hunter’s job that was the ‘real’ job, hers the one that could be put aside. ‘It seemed entirely proper that when things were tough my work should go on hold and that he should be protected from whatever circumstances were making them tough.’ Even when Hunter left full-time journalism to become a freelance author the situation remained the same.

“‘I have to go and work now,’” he was given to announcing loudly at crucial moments. Somehow I never said it. Partly this was because writing had never seemed as important to me as the children, but also - and this was irrational - it was because I couldn’t rid myself of the belief that what he was doing was more serious.’⁵⁵

This admission saddens, but does not surprise. There is ingrained in women’s

psyche, even in the most successful of us, a natural inclination to put others' needs before our own and to undervalue our own achievements. Margaret, the author of twenty-eight books to date, many of them best-sellers, admits that, had she ever been forced to choose between her family and her self, her family would have come before her work. 'I am not proud of this. It is not right or rational. . . I am profoundly grateful that my sort of work has never demanded a straight choice from me.'⁵⁶ As a child Margaret saw her own mother having to make that choice and swore she would never do the same, but as an adult woman in the face of the emotional realities of a relationship, realised that she would have done exactly what her mother had done if it had ever been demanded.

The reading public has to be very grateful that such a choice has never had to be made and that after almost forty years of writing, Margaret's pen has never been sharper or more prolific than it is now. Major awards and literary recognition have, nevertheless, been slow to come, though reader response is full of praise and that appreciation is reflected in her sales. Perhaps it is Margaret's self-imposed seclusion that has denied her inclusion in those literary award lists. Or possibly she has been a victim of the 'literary establishmentarianism' that decides who is in or out of the magic circle, where youth and 'marketability' are valued and in which the word 'readable' is still a critical term. Posterity will eventually decide Margaret's place in the order of things and her best work may still be to come. She is without a doubt one of English Literature's most consistently high-achieving practitioners.



CHRONOLOGY

* *indicates non-fiction*

Dames' Delight	1964
Georgy Girl	1965
The Bogeyman	1965
The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff	1967
The Park	1968
Miss Owen-Owen is at Home	1969
Fenella Phizackerley	1970
Mr Bone's Retreat	1971
*The Rash Adventurer: the rise and fall of Charles Edward Stuart	1973
The Seduction of Mrs Pendlebury	1974
*Thackeray	1978
Mother, can you hear me?	1979
The Bride of Lowther Fell	1980
Marital Rites	1981
*Significant Sisters	1984
Private Papers	1986
*Elizabeth Barrett Browning	1988
* Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Selected Poems (Editor)	1988
Have the Men had Enough?	1989
Lady's Maid	1990
The Battle for Christabel	1991
*Daphne Du Maurier	1993

Mothers' Boys	1994
*Hidden Lives	1995
Shadow Baby	1996
*Rich Desserts and Captain's Thin	1997
*Precious Lives	1998
The Memory Box	1999
*Good Wives?	2001
Diary of an Ordinary Woman	2003

ENDNOTES

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- 11.Hidden Lives Ch. XIV, p.229
12. Good Wives, Reflections on Jennie Lee, p.291
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- 17.Dames' Delight Hardback p. 178
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26. Maudie Tipstaff Hardback pt 3 ch 5
27. The Travels of Maudie Tipstaff Hardback pt 3 Ch.5
28. Maudie Tipstaff Hardback pt 3 ch 4.
29. Thackeray, Introduction
30. Thackeray, Introduction
31. Significant Sisters, Introduction p. 10
32. Significant Sisters, Conclusion p.321
33. Significant Sisters, Introduction p.10
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45. Precious Lives, Vintage Prologue, p.14
46. Precious Lives, Vintage Ch VIII, p.194
47. Precious Lives, Vintage Ch VIII, p.198

48. Good Wives, Prologue, hardback p.8
49. Good Wives, Reflections on Mary Livingstone, hardback p.102
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52. Mother, can you year me? Ch 15, p.233
53. Good Wives, Reflections on Mary Livingstone, hardback p.105
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