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Book Review: Ian Archie Beck, *Through the Lens of Janet Stone: Portraits, 1953–1979* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2018; ISBN: 978-1-85124-259-7)

Judith Aronson^{1,*}

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*Correspondence: judith.aronson@simmons.edu

¹Simmons University, Boston, USA

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The title *Portraits, 1953–1979* leaves out an essential fact: the book not only presents Janet Stone's portraits (which are first-rate and characteristically personal) but is also an illuminating treatise about the photographer herself. A fascinating personality, she represents a certain kind of woman of her generation, whose talents were all but overlooked in her lifetime. She would probably be as well-known as her shy husband Reynolds Stone, the engraver, letter-cutter and painter, had she lived in the twenty-first century.

The book is in two sections: a 30-page 'Introduction', which gives the biography, history and personal context of Janet Stone's life by her admiring son-in-law Ian Archie Beck, and which includes what may well be the most memorable photographs in the book, followed by 'Portraits' (nearly 50) of the many famous figures – 'artists, writers, composers, musicians, typographers, printers and so on' – who visited her and her husband over 25 years as well as her four children. Each sitter is accompanied by a short biography on the facing page.

For me, the second section pales by comparison to the first. No question, the 'Portraits' are well conceived and executed; traditional close-ups – a single one of each person's head and shoulders, some front-on, some in profile – capturing what you sense is a unique facial expression at a particular moment. Here are distinguished personalities of the mid-twentieth century, a treasure to have, including Edward Ardizzone, Jill Balcon, John Betjeman, Kenneth Clark, Geoffrey

Keynes, Iris Murdoch, John Nash, Frances Partridge, Peter Pears, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Stanley Morison. There they sit in the same place on more than 40 consecutive recto pages. Such a sequence cannot but blur the individuality of a face. Yet some are truly outstanding portraits, for example those of Benjamin Britten, Julian Bream, Mollie Gascoyne-Cecil, Jonathan Gili, Siegfried Sassoon and Laurence Whistler.

However, what opens the book is a beautifully written and evocatively touching memoir, with many an informal photo, of varying sizes and composition, throughout. It features an array of characters, less as portraits than featuring in scenes of the life that Janet Stone led with her husband until his sudden death, aged 70, in 1979. She was an outgoing, exceptionally social person, full of eccentricities including a flair for unusual clothes – all of which makes for delight. ‘She was something to behold. Tall, slim, elegant and entirely comfortable in her own idiosyncratic style, she was above and beyond the mainstream of fashion of her time.’ She ‘presided over what was in effect a “salon” at Litton Cheney’, the Dorset residence she and her husband moved to in 1953, staying there until his death. ‘Perhaps both the salon and its hostess were the last of their kind.’

Part of the charm of the story is the contrast between wife and husband: she outgoing and direct, he reserved and indecisive. ‘He proposed several times and always took it back, which was too irritating, as I find it perfectly easy to decide on husbands, or houses, and he couldn’t decide on anything, let alone a wife.’ Nevertheless, they married, had four children and led what was apparently an idyllic life. Later in their lives when the Second World War broke out he became a conscientious objector – only to change his mind when, as she suggests, neighbours would no longer speak to them.

Reynolds Stone was ‘from an academic background’ and worked at Cambridge University Press, developing his artistic skills there. Janet was the favourite of five children of the Bishop of Lichfield, where they lived in the palace. It appears that she inherited much of her character from her mother, Clemence Barclay, ‘who was by all accounts an eccentric’.

Ian Archie Beck spends much of the ‘Introduction’ setting the scene at the Old Rectory and its garden. He describes it as a kind of Arcadia, to which visitors came year after year and were encouraged to stay as long as they wanted – and did.

There was a blur of faded William Morris willow boughs wallpaper and an all-round air of settled, slightly bohemian comfort. The guestrooms had brass bedsteads. There were steel engravings of

cathedrals on the walls. A bedroom fire might be lit in cold weather... It all looked and felt a little like a scene from a nineteenth-century novel or perhaps the setting of a Chekhov play.

Sylvia Townsend Warner, their neighbour and a frequent visitor, described the ambience to William Maxwell in 1972:

He works at one end of a long room, walled with books, corniced with stuffed birds in glass cases. He works at a massive table, matted with every variety of confusion and untidiness, graving minutely on a small block. The other end of the room is a turmoil of wife, children, distinguished visitors, people dropping in – Janet's roaring lion House ... And there sits Reynolds not merely immune, but liking it. He likes to work amid a number of conversations he needn't attend to, he likes to feel people within touching distance of his glass case.

Reynolds Stone grew up in Dorset and encouraged the family to move there after some years in the Home Counties. It proved to be the ideal place for him, removed from the fast-paced life of a big city. Janet Stone put aside her initial career as a singer, believing in 'old-fashioned notions: her husband came first ... In the end she worked out a very Janet-like solution: the world would have to come to them'. They had many friends. 'She spoiled them thoroughly, with breakfast in bed, picnics at the beach or out in the countryside, and more.'

All this made for an ideal situation for her to photograph life at the Rectory in Litton Cheney. She created, in albums, a visual diary – a not uncommon practice in those days. Janet Stone would not have described herself as a photographer; she never printed her own pictures, but she figured out that with the medium format (6 x 6 cm square negatives) from her Rolleiflex twin-lens camera, she could produce sharper and more detailed images than she could with a common Brownie or 35 mm camera. She also had the advantage of seeming not to be intruding, since the Rolleiflex required her to look down into the viewfinder (rather than directly ahead), which gave virtually no hint of when a picture was being taken. The result: poignant, on the spot, realistic photos of whatever their subjects were engaged in. She knew when to click the shutter; the images availed themselves, as with Cartier-Bresson, of the decisive moment. She shunned artificial light, using natural light that streamed in through the huge windows or waiting until everybody was out of doors.

We see in the book the close friendship the Stones had with Iris Murdoch and her husband John Bayley; they must have given her permission to enter the bedroom where they worked during the day. We see a photo of Bayley sitting on a window seat, typewriter balanced on his knees while writing a review for the *TLS*.

Iris and John feature in a great many of the photographs in her albums ... John often displaying his sense of the absurd. No doubt it was his idea to lie as if dead in front of various gravestones or to line up with their heads across a disused railway track.

The photo in this spread is a highlight: 'Iris Murdoch, Reynolds Stone and John Bayley relaxing in a churchyard.' Their eyes closed, perhaps napping (see Figure 1).

Janet Stone was clear about her approach in her book, *Thinking Faces* (1988): 'My interest lay mainly in faces especially in profiles and in the faces of older subjects.' This did not stop her from recording her children and grandchildren as they grew, however, or from taking many shots with more than one person.

What might all this remind you of? First and foremost the *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* by Julia Margaret Cameron, published in 1926 for the Hogarth Press in an edition for which Virginia



Figure 1. Iris Murdoch, Reynolds Stone and John Bayley relaxing in a churchyard (Source: By permission of The Estate of Reynolds and Janet Stone).

Woolf wrote an evocatively touching memoir of the first of the great women photographers. For Janet Stone, however, the women sitters are also allowed to be famous (and the men perhaps handsome).

Note on contributor

Judith Aronson is Professor of Graphic Design at Simmons University, Boston, USA, and a photographer. In the 1970s she travelled and took photos in Southeast Asia, including a year working on the *Insight Guides*, and later became a photo-journalist in London for the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*. An exhibition of her colour photos, *Tactile | Mercantile*, with a catalogue, was sponsored by Isole Gallery and UnGyve Press, Boston, in 2006. In 2010 Lintott Press / Carcanet published *Likenesses, With the Sitters Writing about One Another*, her black-and-white portraits covering 30 years. She has held exhibitions in the USA, the UK (2010–18), and both Ireland (Cork, 2019) and Northern Ireland (the Seamus Heaney Centre, Queen's University Belfast 2020).