

## Rose Macaulay

by Sarah Lonsdale

Rose Macaulay was born in 1881 into a middle-class family of intellectuals and clergymen. She read avidly from a young age and had begun publishing poetry and then novels in her early twenties. As a young girl she had wanted to be a foreign correspondent, but she was, and always would be, she ruefully admitted, prevented from this because of her sex.

She satirised conditions in wartime Britain in her novel *Non-Combatants and Others* (1916), one of the first full-length pieces of fiction to scrutinise the effects of the war on the British Home Front.

Macaulay's own war work included a short period working on the land in rural Cambridgeshire, which she enjoyed, and as a VAD nursing auxiliary at a home for wounded soldiers near her home, which made her miserable. Macaulay and her recently widowed mother later moved to the semi-rural south Buckinghamshire village of Hedgerley. With its row of ancient cottages, scattered 'big houses' and Gothic Revival stone church, Hedgerley inspired the Little Chantreys of *What Not*, from where the novel's female protagonist Kitty Grammont, the efficient young civil servant at the Ministry of Brains, commutes into London.

Macaulay had personal experience of the 'queer life' of a civil servant, having worked for the War Office from January 1917 and then for the Ministry of Information from early 1918. Indeed *What Not* is dedicated to 'Civil Servants I Have Known'.

After a year at the War Office, Macaulay was transferred to Lord Beaverbrook's Ministry of Information. Under the Directorship of John Buchan, by then a well-known novelist and war historian, the Ministry of Information attracted many writers and intellectuals, including H G Wells. Macaulay worked for the Italian section of the Department for Propaganda in Enemy Countries under another press baron, Lord Northcliffe, as she was fluent in Italian. (She and her family had lived on the Ligurian coast near Genoa from when she was six to thirteen, and she had a lasting love for southern Europe, setting many of her novels partially in and around the Mediterranean.)

The chief of the Department's Italian section was the author and ex-priest Gerald O'Donovan who would become the secret love of Macaulay's life, her 'beloved companion', until his death in 1942. O'Donovan was a married man and for a long time Macaulay kept her relationship secret from members of her family, although the affair became common knowledge amongst Macaulay's literary circle fairly soon. The deeply passionate feelings Macaulay felt for Gerald find expression in *What Not* heroine Kitty's secret and also illicit love for Nicholas Chester.

Rose Macaulay wrote *What Not* in the final months of the First World War, when writers and thinkers had begun debating what kind of Britain might emerge from the trauma of 'the war to end wars'.

By the end of the war Macaulay had published nine books and was beginning to make her way in literary London. But concerned that her employment at the Ministry of Information would soon cease, she successfully applied for a 'behind-the-scenes' job on the liberal *Daily News*, although a nervous breakdown prevented her from taking up the position. Instead she wrote freelance articles for a wide range of newspapers and magazines, from *Time and Tide* and the *Spectator*, to *Good Housekeeping* and the *Daily Mail*. She was thus both an intellectual observer of, and an engaged contributor to, this powerful new phenomenon in society, the mass media.

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