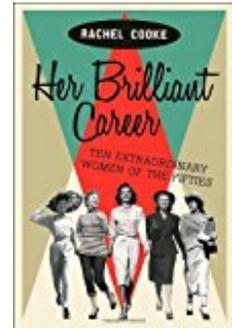


## Women of the Fifties Redux: A Mad Men Antidote

"One of the great up-sides of being the first of a kind," journalist Rachel Cooke writes in her chatty, informative, and inspirational book *Her Brilliant Career: Ten Extraordinary Women of the Fifties*, "was that guilt, at least as it pertained to working women, had not yet been invented. You looked at magazines for recipes and dress patterns, not to be told how bad you should be feeling for the way you chose to live your life." No doubt, mother guilt has been around since before Medea, but Cooke has a point. In the 1950s the mass media propaganda machine was only just oiling up for the dissemination of the debilitating Myth of the Good Mother that relentlessly harangues women today. Though the women with children portrayed in this book certainly contended with logistical childcare issues, not one of them ever considered the notion that she was depriving her children by working.



In profiling ten successful British women whose careers were at their height during the 1950s, Cooke gives us a view into fascinating, intrepid, sometimes scandalous lives. The result is a vivid portrait of an era that sharply contrasts with the *Mad Men*-type retro-sexist image in which a woman is primarily depicted as a "compliant, smiling creature who knows little or nothing of sex, and stands no chance of getting to the top of advertising or any other career."

In fact, a full thirty percent of the workforce was female at the time, and many women were agitating against oppressive laws and practices such as unequal pay in the workplace, the requirement of a marriage certificate to obtain birth control, mortgages denied in their own name, no legal recourse if raped by their husbands, and being bracketed with lunatics, idiots, and insane persons in the Income Tax Act.

Some of the women Cooke includes were intent on breaking into and rising to the top of exclusively male professions, while others achieved renown in careers traditionally more open to women such as journalism, gardening, and cooking. These particular women made it into Cooke's account because either she herself is passionate about their professions or they have particularly spicy stories. I appreciated the randomness of Cooke's choices and the diversity of the women's careers -- but I was disheartened at the absence of even one woman of color. Her experience would have added so very much to this book.

Long before the Slow Food movement or nose-to-tail and foraging cuisine became fashionable, the food and travel writer Patience Gray, author of the best-selling cookbook *Plats du Jour* (1957), had given up her glamorous London life and moved to an old sheep farm in Apulia without running water, electricity, or a stove where she lived by the credo: "Eat, preserve, wait

until the next bounty." She became an expert on how to make delectable edible weeds such as dandelions, wild chicory, broom rape, and tassel hyacinth. It would take her years to find a publisher for her second book *Honey from a Weed* (1986), with recipes for dishes like fox stew, wild boar, and fish soup but when she did it quickly became a cult classic.

Jacquetta Hawkes, poet and archeologist, was among the first to suggest that women might have ruled the ancient Minoans. Her mentor was the great Dorothy Garrod, the first woman to hold a Chair at Cambridge or Oxford. Hawkes wrote many books on widely varied topics including the very popular *A Land* (1951), illustrated by Henry Moore. "A literary peculiarity," writes Cooke, "it tells the story of Britain from the moment the 'white hot young Earth' dropped into its place 'like a fly into an unseen four-dimensional cobweb' to the present day, with daring recourse to both science and culture." Hawkes had a long illicit affair with the author J.B. Priestly, followed by a long and difficult marriage to him.

Noël Coward dubbed the Boxes the "Brontës of Shepherd's Bush." At the age of thirty-one, Betty Box was Britain's leading and only woman film producer heading up the Islington branch of Gainsborough Studios in West London while her sister-in-law, the writer Muriel Box, worked as one of Britain's few female film directors (others included Wendy Toye, Joan Henry, and Jill Craigie). One of Muriel's many films was the drama-documentary *Street Corner* about policewomen. For research she went to the Marylebone police station to examine the cell where Emmeline Pankhurst had been imprisoned: "I could not help wondering what that eminent suffragette would have said if she could have glimpsed the future and seen me, a woman-director, in the company of a female in the higher ranks of the police force, nattering away on the spot where she was forcibly fed. A sobering thought."

After working as a secretary at magazines and newspapers for twenty years, Margery Fish came to her calling as a gardener relatively late in life. She married her boss, Walter Fish, editor of *The Daily Mail*, when she was forty-one and he was already three years into retirement. They bought a country house in Somerset with two acres of land. Both were zealous gardeners but it wasn't until after Walter's death in 1947 that Margery turned her passion into a profession. She published several books on the subject, including *We Made a Garden* (1956) about the joys and perils of both gardening and marriage, and *Gardening in the Shade* (1964), now a gardening classic.

Sheila Van Damm was a race car driver, pilot, and manager of the Windmill Theatre, a variety and revue theatre best known for its nude *tableaux vivants*. She was part of a lively and ultimately tragic *ménage-à-trois* with broadcaster-journalist-public personality Nancy Spain and magazine and book editor Joan Werner Laurie. How the threesome managed their careers, children, and love lives results in one of the book's most riveting chapters.

Alison Smithson, an architect, and her partner-husband Peter Smithson were leaders of a design movement called the "New Brutalism." Alison designed the "ruthlessly spare" steel-and-glass Smithdon High School in Norfolk completed in 1954. Considered the most modern building in Britain at the time -- "There's been nothing like it," claimed Alison, "since Inigo

Jones" -- it is now Grade II listed, as are three other Smithson buildings. The couple supposedly shared housework and childcare equally though baby Simon slept in a hammock beneath Alison's drawing board, not Peter's.

Rose Heilbron, first woman in Britain to lead a murder case, second to be appointed a high court judge, boldly broke through many barriers for women in the legal profession. As Cooke points out, however, despite the great strides made since then, today of the ninety-one high court judges only seventeen are women and only one woman sits on the supreme court. The statistics are similarly poor for women at the top levels of almost any profession. While Cook encourages us to rejoice at the pioneering contributions of the women of the fifties, she also keeps us keenly aware that though much progress has been made over the past sixty-odd years by professional woman, there is still a long way to go.

There are many delightful anecdotes and digressions throughout Cooke's collection of profiles, many in the form of ubiquitous footnotes. Like rabbit-holes at the bottom of the page they invite us to plunge into another world. For example, in one we learn that John Bratby, a painter Patience Gray disliked, "was married to the painter Jean Cooke, a much more talented artist than him -- and, threatened by the competition, he was known to paint over her work when he ran out of canvases of his own. He would also beat her." Another footnote describes the childhood memory of one of the Van Damm-Spain-Werner Laurie offspring who recalls being taken to Marlene Dietrich's "London *piéd-à-terre* for tea, whereupon Nancy and Marlene disappeared 'for an hour and a half,' leaving him all alone." Mrs. Henderson, the original owner of the Windmill Theatre, we learn in yet another, "would sometimes arrive at the theatre in disguise and, on one occasion, auditioned as a novelty act: dressed in an animal skin, she pretended to be a polar bear, which danced ponderously about the stage on its hind legs."

I revelled in Rachel Cook's footnotes, but even more in her wonderfully engaging book that has established her subjects in particular, and women of the 1950s in general, as people we can be inspired by -- anything but footnotes to history.

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