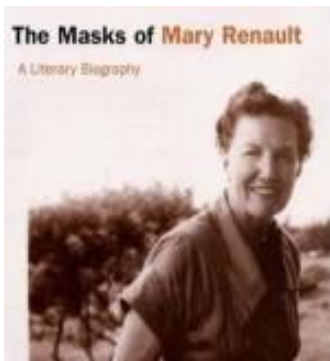


# Mary Renault's Bristol

by Jonathan Rowe

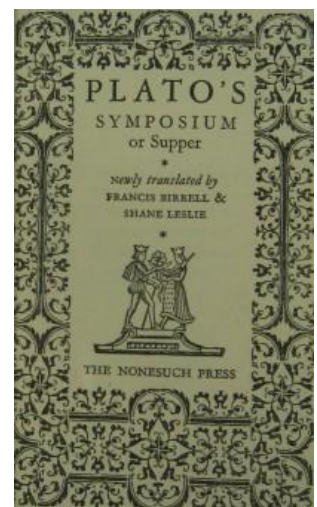
According to The Mary Renault Society of North Carolina, when President J.F. Kennedy was once asked who his favourite author was he replied "Mary Renault". Today Mary Renault (1905-1983) is best known for her historical novels set in Ancient Greece and their vivid fictional portrayals of Plato, Socrates and especially Alexander the Great but her 1953 novel *The Charioteer*, seen as a landmark work in gay literature, is set in a fictionalised Bristol ('Bridstow') and Mary Renault has many Bristol connections.



She was born Eileen Mary Challans in 1905 in Forest Gate, London, where her father Frank Challans was a doctor. Mary had an unhappy childhood and her relationships with both parents were strained, her mother in particular preferring her younger sister Joyce. Mary was educated at Clifton High School for Girls where she was sent in 1919, for the first year as a boarder and then lodging with the parents of a school friend Beryl Lewis, who lived near the school in College Road.

In 1924 Mary (known as Molly as a child) and Beryl wrote a musical comedy *As The Gods Decree – a Musical Tragedy of the South*, based on the story of *Dido and Aeneas*, which included their own lyrics to popular songs of the day such as *If You Were The Only Girl In The World*, and *Felix Kept On Walking* (Felix the Cat was a hit cartoon cinema character of the day). Mary and Beryl were avid silent screen fans and devotees of Saturday matinees in Bristol picture houses where cowboy star Tom Mix was Mary's screen hero.

At Clifton High Mary enjoyed English and History, was terrified by Maths, struggled with Latin and Greek but by the end of her time there had passed the Higher School Certificate. Sadly both Mary and Beryl Lewis did not enjoy their schooldays and apparently spent much time yearning for the place to burn down! However it was in the excellent school library that Mary first read the complete works of Greek philosopher Plato which were to influence so much of her later books, not least of all *The Charioteer*. It was also the headmistress at the time, Miss Eleanor Addison Phillips, who had studied at St Hugh's College, Oxford, who first suggested that Mary should apply for a place there.





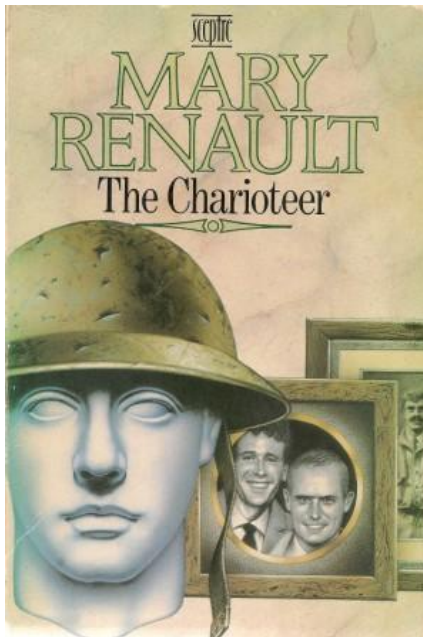
**2 Hughenden Road**

Mary Renault left Clifton High to read English at St Hugh's College, Oxford (1925-1928) where author J R R Tolkien was one of her tutors. She then returned to Bristol where her parents had moved in 1926 when her father left general practice to become Deputy Health Inspector in the city. From 1926-1932 the family lived at 2 Hughenden Road, Clifton. On leaving Oxford Mary joined her parents and sister in Bristol and rented a basement flat in Charlotte Street and spent four years here working in several mundane desk jobs, including time at a boot and shoe factory, and the laboratory of a chocolate factory. In 1931 she contracted rheumatic fever and because of this lived at Hughenden Road for a year before her parents left Bristol and moved to Stoke on Trent.

In 1933 Mary returned to Oxford to train as a nurse at the Radcliffe Infirmary. Here she met another trainee nurse, Julie Mullard, who was to become her lifelong partner. They were to be together for fifty years until Mary's death. In 1939 she published her first novel *Purposes of Love* under the pseudonym Mary Renault (she always pronounced it 'Ren-olt' as opposed to the French car pronunciation commonly used today). She took the name from a character in the Restoration tragedy *Venice Preserved* by Thomas Otway. In 1940 Mary and Julie moved to a flat in Clifton near the Suspension Bridge. They were assigned to Bristol Royal Infirmary in Marlborough Street (presently threatened with demolition) and then to Winford Hospital which had been designated a EMS (Emergency Medical Services) hospital. Extra wards were added to deal with both military wartime casualties and air raid victims consisting of about six lines of temporary Nissen huts. Winford had originally been built as an orthopaedic hospital in 1930 and closed in 1996. The site has since been redeveloped as a small housing estate known as High Winford. At Bristol Royal Infirmary and Winford both Mary and Julie were caring for military casualties evacuated from Dunkirk in May 1940. Experiences and memories of this time were to become the background for *The Charioteer*. Later Mary returned to the Radcliffe Infirmary in Oxford until the end of the war in 1945.

After publishing five successful contemporary novels, mainly with hospital backgrounds, and some with veiled gay and lesbian characters, Mary and Julie emigrated to South Africa in 1948, leaving the grey and repressive atmosphere of post war Britain. There she made the shift to the eight historical novels for which she is best known, beginning with *The Last of the Wine* (1956). She died of lung cancer in Cape Town in 1983 aged 78. Julie survived her for 23 years and died in 2006 aged 94. Mary's sister Joyce died in 2013 aged 102.

Today *The Charioteer* is seen as a highly influential and one of the most significant novels in what can be termed 'gay literature' but it also has much to say about contemporary issues and debates, not only about homosexuality and social acceptance, but also in the way it tackles attitudes to war, class and society. In many ways the book is astonishingly forthright about its subject matter, yet much of the language is elliptical, given the time it was published, fourteen years before homosexuality ceased to be a criminal offence in 1967.



The story revolves around Laurie Odell, a young soldier who is being treated at a EMS hospital outside 'Bridstow' for serious leg injuries after being rescued from the sea after Dunkirk. Here he meets and falls in love with Andrew Raynes, a nineteen year old Quaker and conscientious objector working as a hospital orderly. Here Mary Renault drew on her wartime experiences of the conscientious objectors working at Winford, some of whom were Quakers and the problems that arose with 'war heroes' being cared for by 'conchies'. Like pacifists in wartime, homosexuals were outcasts in 'straight' society, struggling to adjust to a sexuality seen as 'deviant' - a struggle symbolised by the charioteer in Plato's *Phaedrus*: one horse heaven bent, the other plunging

to earth, from where Renault took her title. This theme is underlined by Laurie's feelings for the naïve and innocent Andrew, and Ralph Lanyon who Laurie once hero worshipped and now a confident and sophisticated naval officer who he meets again after they were at public school together when Ralph was expelled for 'sexual misconduct' with another boy. Torn between his feelings for both Andrew and Ralph, by the end of the book Laurie has made his choice.

Renault describes a war torn Bristol - '*the burgher solidarity of the city was interrupted by large irrelevant open spaces, in some of which bulldozers were flattening the rubble*'. There are '*the Home Guard trenches*' and the '*Cathedral green air raid shelter*' which is the public underground air raid shelter on College Green where my own parents, before they were married, spent a night after being stopped by an air raid warden after a date at The Whiteladies Cinema. A pub near College Green is described as '*nastily modernised at large expense, chromium stools, the plastic leather, the sham parquet floor and florescent lighting*'. This may well be The Mauretania in Park Street. Originally built in 1871 it was extended in 1936-1938 by Bristol architect W H Watkins. The Mauretania was fitted out with mahogany panelling and other items from the interior of Cunard liner RMS Mauretania, which was decommissioned in 1934.

Laurie notices *'shops which looked as if they hadn't changed hands in centuries'* and *'the steep streets of flaking Adam houses that leaned over the Wells'* (presumably Hotwells). In one chapter he goes to an all male party in a Clifton flat – *'a massive late Palladian terrace of Bath stone'*. Other Bristol sites described include Durdham Downs and the Avon Gorge – *'Ralph ... took a half turn round the Downs and pulled off the road at the spot where cars stop to admire the Gorge ... the steep side of the gorge with it's sheer faces ... wooded slopes and a scoop of quarry. The ebb tide flowed sluggishly at the bottom, a muddy thread between two long slopes of slime'*. The Suspension Bridge is also featured as Renault writes *'The bridge gave gently on it's chains in the wind that swept along the gorge, there was only the darkling sense of loneliness and height'*.

Renault wrote *The Charioteer* thousands of miles from Bristol in Durban, and thirteen years after she had lived in the war scarred city she remembered. The book was published against the background of Cold War paranoia and McCarthyism in the USA where Communists were placed alongside 'perverts', the Burgess and Maclean 'gay spy' scandal in the British Foreign Office and a number of high profile homosexual court trials of the time including those involving the actor John Gielgud and Lord Montagu of Beaulieu. Soon after the Home Office set up the committee which resulted in the 1957 Wolfenden Report and led to the legalisation of consensual gay sex between consenting adults in the 1967 act.

Mary Renault's ground breaking novel paved the way for today's more tolerant society and attitudes. At the time she received many letters supporting reform and praising a major work, some from surprising readers. One correspondent wrote *'I do not know when I read a book which affected me so much. I had to read it over and over. Your handling of the subject was so beautifully done that no one could take exception to it. Perhaps you will excuse this outpouring when I tell you I am an elderly widow'*. Many people thought the book was actually written by a man. Few could have known it was the work of a former Clifton High School girl who spent her formative years in Bristol and whose wartime nursing experiences in the city led her to write such a passionate, haunting and moving book which still resonates with readers today.

Jonathan Rowe (2015)