

to see in his own space-time: “Given the will,” said Mr Barnstaple. “Given the will.”<sup>72</sup>

Moylan’s book is an inspiring reading, especially against the present-day backdrop of a growing political apathy and disengagement. *Demand the Impossible* harbours a potent reminder that the radical Left, even though it had failed to mobilise a revolution, was once capable of reaching out to the limits of the imaginable. Moylan manages to communicate his own hope of willed transformation, reigniting the reader’s dwindling imagination and frequently disoriented will.

**DEBORAH McDONALD AND JEREMY DRONFIELD, *A VERY DANGEROUS WOMAN*  
(LONDON: ONEWORLD, 2015) ISBN 971-1-78074-7088 (HB) £20 / \$29.99  
[MICHAEL SHERBORNE]**

It’s unusual for a biography to omit the name of its subject from the title, but presumably the publishers think Moura Budberg is insufficiently well-known to lure prospective purchasers. Readers of the *Wellsian* will recognise her, however, as the international woman of mystery who became H. G.’s final mistress. This new biography supersedes previous attempts to get at the facts about the career of this enigmatic figure, without necessarily getting fully to grips with her personality.

Born in Ukraine, Moura was originally Maria Zakrevskaya, daughter of the Tsar’s chief prosecutor. By the age of sixteen she had developed an ability to charm, interrogate and manipulate, perhaps inherited from her father, and was ready to unleash these powers on a succession of male victims. At seventeen she wedded an Estonian aristocrat and reinvented herself as Moura von Benckendorff, international socialite. Moura’s love for the two children of her marriage seems to have been somewhat arm’s length, her love for her husband non-existent. Separated from her family by the Great War, she gravitated to St Petersburg in time for the Russian revolution and swiftly made herself mistress of its leader, Kerensky. She set up a salon where she could coax secrets from eminent guests and pass them to her husband, also to the British, and perhaps even to the Germans.

Moura had found her vocation, eliciting gossip from powerful men and using it to her advantage. Even the fall of Kerensky didn’t knock her back for long. She found a new role for herself at the British embassy, working for the man whom she would always consider the love of her life, the secret agent Robert Bruce Lockhart. Naturally, her loyalty to him did not preclude passing information to the Russian secret service, the Cheka, whom she found it prudent to keep on-side. Such was Moura’s duplicity that she even returned briefly to

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<sup>72</sup> Wells, *Men Like Gods*, 403.

her detested husband, hoping a visit to his bed would give her an alibi when she gave birth to Lockhart's child – in the event lost to a miscarriage. When an attempt was made on Lenin's life, Moura and Lockhart were rounded up, but while other suspects were disposed of with a bullet in the head, they were set free, possibly because of another of Moura's intimate friendships, with the deputy head of the Cheka.

Once Lockhart was safely back in Britain, and her husband had been shot dead on his estate by persons unknown, the ever-resourceful Moura started a new chapter of her life as secretary, translator and, of course, mistress to Russia's most prestigious author, Maxim Gorky. It was in this capacity that she met Wells on his second visit to Russia. Knowing a useful foreign contact when she saw one, Moura bedded him (he took little persuasion), leaving him permanently smitten. In 1921 she married a Baron Budberg to gain an Estonian passport. She then dispatched her second husband to Rio and never set eyes on him again. Although she kept in touch with HG and Lockhart, she spent most of the 1920s with Gorky in Europe, working as a literary agent, publisher and translator. 'Of very great intelligence and of considerable education,' reported the French intelligence service, 'she speaks fluently and without accent English, French, German and Italian – seems to be a very dangerous spy in the service of the Soviets.' They were wrong about the accent, which was almost comically heavy, but the Soviet connection is more convincing.

In 1929 Wells arrived in Germany to deliver a lecture at the Reichstag. Moura seized her chance, renewed her affair with him and followed him to Britain, ready to replace Odette Keun as his chief companion. Odette retaliated by labelling her the 'Baroness Bedbug'. Moura found Wells more patronising than her previous lovers, and also lacking in the kind of passionate devotion she had come to expect, but the reward for adapting to his temperament was a circle of prominent international figures whose table talk she could report back to the sinister monitors in the east. Wells seems to have deluded himself about how much she loved him. Lockhart and Gorky always had pride of place in her affections. Nor did her intimacy with Wells preclude supplementary affairs with Constantine Benckendorff, a distant cousin of her first husband, and Paul Schaffer, an anti-Nazi journalist whom some suspected of being really a Nazi spy. When Wells invited a host of notables to a 'marriage' party at the Quo Vadis restaurant, Moura refused to let him manoeuvre her into wedlock, assuring guests that the occasion was only their little joke.

Lockhart's memoirs and a spy movie based on them made Moura a minor celebrity. By the time of Wells's death, she was firmly established in London as a hostess, author, translator, literary agent and publisher. Everyone who was anyone came to her parties, including the traitor Guy Burgess, yet when Moura correctly told MI5 that Anthony Blunt was the 'fourth man' in the Burgess and Maclean spy case they declined to believe her. In later years she was a researcher for *Lawrence of Arabia* and had a bit part in a Peter Ustinov film,

Ustinov's father being her MI5 minder. A hard-drinking, cigar-smoking shoplifter who complained constantly that her funds were inadequate to her extravagant lifestyle, she should perhaps have cut a pathetic figure in old age, but instead was feted as a larger-than-life survivor from a more colourful era. When she moved home in 1963, the story received prominent newspaper coverage. She died at the age of eighty-two, having never produced her much-mooted autobiography.

In its absence, McDonald and Dronfield have done a sterling job in collating all the available information, not excluding her MI5 dossier, and turning it into a solid narrative. Their attempts to enliven their tale with passages of novelistic description are sometimes strained ('Moura parted the heavy curtain and looked out into the evening dark, moving close to the glass to see through the lamplit reflection of her own glittering eyes') and they are reluctant to give a consistent judgement or explanation of her personality. This seems to be partly from a desire to let the facts speak for themselves and partly from a wish to play up key mysteries. Did she use her Cheka connections to have her first husband shot? Did she conspire at Gorky's murder? Did she become pregnant and abort Wells's child, as she claimed, or was this a cover story for a secret trip to Russia? We are left to form our own assessment of Moura and, having done so, to draw our own conclusions about her motives and actions. This leaves the book slightly unsatisfying, but undeniably interesting. For anyone intrigued by the mysterious underside of twentieth century history, it will be a valuable read; for Wells completists, a necessary purchase.

**JOHN MCNABB, *DISSENT WITH MODIFICATION: HUMAN ORIGINS, PALAEOLOGICAL ARCHAEOLOGY AND EVOLUTIONARY ANTHROPOLOGY IN BRITAIN 1859-1901* (OXFORD: ARCHAEOPRESS, 2012), XX + 376 PP. £29.95. [RICHARD PEARSON]**

Wells's relationship to the currents of modern scientific thought is complicated. Rapidly evolving theories pervaded the cultural atmosphere of the 1880s and 1890s, and change, twist, new discovery, revision of thesis, were constantly in the air. It must have been something of an intellectual switchback ride itself, and Wells's own modifications to his personal understanding must have been something akin to the progressing interpretations of the future world made by the Time Traveller in *The Time Machine*. John McNabb's meaty and lavishly illustrated volume is an analysis of how anthropological and paeleontological knowledge intersected and became subject to both humanistic, scientific and popular debate in the nineteenth century. It is the kind of book that Wells would have liked. It is erudite, but accessible. It has academic rigour, but is sensitive to the popular reception of academic thought. It is a different kind of book to the