

Institution: University of Leicester
Unit of Assessment: UoA 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Reconfiguring the Life and Work of Muriel Spark in the Twenty-First Century
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Martin Stannard's <i>Muriel Spark: The Biography</i>, the first biography of this major European novelist, has had widespread international impact. It has repositioned Spark in British, American and Italian literary culture, generating interest in Spark as an iconic figure in terms of Scottish culture and national identity, and women's writing. It has inspired new cultural events based on Spark's life and works, and new editions of her writing. It has been significant both economically and culturally, selling over 15,000 copies worldwide and being serialised both as a BBC Radio 4 'Book of the Week' and in the <i>Guardian</i> in 2009. It is now regarded as the seminal work on Spark by a large readership beyond the academy.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p><u>Research context</u></p> <p>Spark is a major author and a popular one thanks to the serialisation of <i>The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie</i> (1961) in the <i>New Yorker</i>, and to its 'translation' from an avant-garde metafiction into a celebrated realist play and film. Spark was a sophisticated aesthete, theologian and craftsman, a writer's writer, arguably the first British magic realist author, long before Angela Carter and the 1980s boom in magic realism.</p> <p>The intellectual problems faced by Stannard in writing his biography of Spark were therefore how:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (a) to explain her complex artistic history and theory (she began as a poet and critic); (b) to unpick her religious conversion to Roman Catholicism from a largely Jewish background; (c) to explain why she walked out of her life in Edinburgh to start afresh in New York, and how this related to thematic concerns about exile, feminism and freedom in her writing; (d) to explain the attraction to, then revulsion from, New York, the ambivalence to her home city, and her steady gravitation towards Italy; (e) to make all this accessible to both a popular and an academic audience. <p><u>Research background</u></p> <p>Stannard, who joined the University of Leicester in 1979, is an international authority on 20th-century Catholic-convert literature. Spark praised Vol. 2 of Stannard's biography of Evelyn Waugh, <i>No Abiding City: 1939-1966</i> (1992). Famously reclusive up to this point, she invited Stannard to become her biographer, offering unrestricted access to her papers, interviews, exclusive rights for seven years and free quotation from copyright material. She had just sold most of her personal archive to the National Library of Scotland but many other documents remained at Spark's home in Tuscany, and others were spread across American research libraries, particularly Princeton and the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin.</p> <p>Stannard carried out extensive research visits to the USA, Scotland and Italy, and interviewed over sixty witnesses to build an archive from which to work. He traced uncollected poems, stories, essays, interviews, and journalism, which are now all recorded in the book's bibliography. Contracts were signed in 1993 and the book written with the support of a variety of major research grants, including a Leverhulme Fellowship (section 3).</p> <p>For his work in progress Stannard won an Arts Council Writers' Award for biography in 1998, judged by Michael Holroyd, presented by Andrew Motion (Chair) and the Right Honourable Chris Smith, M.P., then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.</p>
3. References to the research

Martin Stannard, *Muriel Spark: The Biography* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2009; New York: Norton, 2011; UK p/b Phoenix, 2010; US p/b Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxvi + 627 pp.

Martin Stannard, 'Muriel Spark', *New DNB Supplement* (Jan. 2010, 7,000 words)

Martin Stannard, 'Venice Observed: East Meets West in Muriel Spark's Territorial Rights' in Kirsten Sandrock and Owain Wright (eds.), *Locating Italy: East and West in British-Italian Transactions* (New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), pp. 169-79.

Key Awards

'Biography of Muriel Spark', British Academy Research Grants, 1994, £7,800 and 1995, £3,700.

'Biography of Muriel Spark', Leverhulme Research Fellowship, 1998-99, £15,925

4. Details of the impact

Stannard's work on Spark has raised her cultural prominence within a broad range of contexts, has generated new editions and adaptations, and has contributed significantly to ongoing debates on the ethics of the ever-popular genre of the literary biography.

Reach

The first authoritative account of Spark's life and work, the book has had an extended reach through its serialisation in the *Guardian* and its selection as BBC Radio 4's 'Book of the Week' (2009, aired for a week twice daily). Radio 4 achieves listener figures of 1.2 million (BBC figures), and *The Guardian* had a circulation in 2009 in excess of 300,000. Stannard's was the lead interview on Mark Lawson's Radio 4 'Front Row' (27 July, 2009). After the Lawson interview, Stannard published 'Meeting Muriel Spark' in the *Sunday Times*; other media interviews and invitations to major festivals and lectures followed.

Sales and Publications

The hardback book to date has sold 11,000 copies worldwide, the UK paperback c. 4,000 copies, + 180 e-books, generating a turnover in the region of £250,000. The interest generated by the biography has fed into the production of a number of new editions of Spark's work which have been published since 2009, in particular seven books and audio books from the Edinburgh publisher Canongate, Carcanet's new edition of her autobiography *Curriculum Vitae*, and Edinburgh University Press' hardback editions of Spark's novels.

New Audiences

As well as the financial benefit to publishing houses, the media, and the UK economy, the book has intellectual impacts spread across a huge range of readers worldwide, some of whom have been made aware of Spark for the first time (e.g. '[A] riveting account, but more importantly makes the reader eager to discover her novels, just as a good literary biography should' - *Waterstone's Books Quarterly*, Autumn 2009).

Audience responses have demonstrated that a range of communities has recognised and become involved in different aspects of the book, thus extending the pull of Spark for various audiences: the Scots, especially those from Edinburgh (her childhood, education and sense of national identity); the Jewish community (the dispute with her son over her racial origins); Catholics (her conversion and theological interpretations); Americans (her years in New York and close association with the *New Yorker*); Italians (her residence in Rome and Tuscany); literary historians (her life on the fringes of literary London during the 1940s and 1950s); historians (her life in Southern Rhodesia and her work for Sefton Delmer's black propaganda unit during the war); and feminists (the discussion of Spark's early critical and biographical work, especially on Mary Shelley).

Reviews reflected the range of ways in which the book has reshaped engagement with Spark ('Stannard offers fascinating new information about the abiding importance of Judaism in Spark's imaginative life' - Benjamin Ivry, *Forward*; 'Stannard's deeply committed, splendidly fashioned, fact and soul-searching biography is the veritable Book of Revelation' - Richard Wittington-Egan, *Contemporary Review*; 'I was thrilled when this was published, because I was able to better understand one of my favourite authors. It's a terrific mix of fact and sensational storytelling' Adele Parks, *Red*; and 'Muriel Spark is among the richest and most satisfying literary biographies of our time: not only a portrait of the artist herself but also a rendering of her literary and social context and a judicious examination of her works'. [...Stannard's] critical attentions do just what a literary biography should: make the reader hungry to explore her works' - Frances Taliaferro, *Wall Street Journal*). One benefit, then, comes through the expansion of public knowledge of cultural history across these many interest groups.

Spark and Scottish National Identity

The Scots saw the book as a national 'event'. Two dramatisations of Spark's work were specially staged for the launch of the book at the Edinburgh Festival in 2009. The Scottish government saw Spark as an iconic national figure, and the book was helpful to the Festival in its projection of Scottish national and cultural identity. Stannard was one of only two authors from the Festival invited to attend the formal Festival reception and to meet the Minister for Scotland at the Scotland Office. Stannard was interviewed at length by BBCTV Scotland (17 August 2009) and *The Scotsman* (27 July 2009). In 2011 Stannard was invited to form a panel on Spark for the World Congress of Scottish Literature in Glasgow, 2014.

Ethics and Literary Biography

The book was a news story even before publication due to the difficulties Stannard had encountered in trying to negotiate an agreed text with Spark. Ion Trewin ('Whose Life Is It Anyway?' *Independent on Sunday*, 20/8/09, 40-41) discussed the problems of being an authorised biographer and gave substantial coverage to Muriel Spark. (See also, Peter Allen, 'Biography of Muriel Spark Will Reveal Author's Tortuous Relationships', *Daily Telegraph*, 18/7/09). The book has become a classic case study in the areas of 'publishing ethics, privacy and copyright'.

Selected Impact Indicators

The range and extent of Stannard's public appearances demonstrate the widespread public interest in his work. He gave sell-out talks and interviews at major venues, for example, the Edinburgh International Book Festival (18/8/09), the Cheltenham Literature Festival (11/10/09) and the Glasgow Literary Festival (13/3/10). In addition, there was considerable internet discussion of the book by reading groups and bloggers, as well as reviewers and scholars.

In 2010 *Muriel Spark* was shortlisted for the James Tait Black Memorial Prize (biography section).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

'Meeting Muriel Spark', *Sunday Times*, Books, 26 July, 2009, 8-9 (3,000-word article).

'A Girl of Slender Means', 4,000-word extract from *Muriel Spark: The Biography*, *Guardian Review*, 18 July, 2009, 2-4.

27 British reviews and articles including

The Scotsman <http://www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/books/features/muriel-spark-s-biographer-martin-stannard-tells-why-her-native-city-was-pivotal-to-her-artistic-exile-1-1354957>

Daily Mail <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1206636/The-crimes-Miss-Jean-Brodie-Author-Muriel-Sparks-countless-affairs-pursuit-fame.html>

The Independent <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/muriel-spark->

Impact case study (REF3b)

[the-biography-by-martin-stannard-1768144.html](#)

18 US and Canada, reviews, including:

The New Yorker

http://www.newyorker.com/arts/critics/books/2010/04/05/100405crbo_books_mallon

Washington Post

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/05/21/AR2010052101671.html>

For details of reviews, TV and radio work, public appearances and prizes, see:

<https://swww2.le.ac.uk/departments/english/ref-impact-data/ref-impact-data-page-1>