

Georgina Masson 1912 – 1980
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A Portrait. Friend in Focus, Background Blurred by Milton Gendel

Georgina Masson was the pen name of Marion Johnson, known to her friends as Babs. Her biography has thus far remained nebulous except for a few ascertained facts and fond anecdotes of her outstanding and engaging personality. There are teasing hints of a lively imperial sort of on-the-road life before the Second World War, in an article in the *Washington Evening Star* when Babs was lecturing and doing research at Dumbarton Oaks. The interviewer was amazed to hear the serious, industrious scholar state playfully, “I thank God I was born greedy and idle.” She went on to describe herself as having “kept house” - presumably during her marriage - in Egypt, Morocco, Algiers, Malaysia, the Congo, France, Switzerland and Italy.

Seemingly square, in manners and style, Babs was a true bohemian, living by her wits and arts and turning poverty into glamour. She could stay with the Salisburys at Hatfield or be the guest of the Swedish royal family at the Castle of Gripsholm, then return to her long-time home in Rome to resume her make-do life, write a chapter of her current book and collect the ingredients to make her own cold cream.

Babs went Home, as she called England, making the H audibly upper case, twenty-five years ago, finally free to leave Rome after the death of her dog Willy, who of course she could never have subjected to the English quarantine. A mongrel foundling, the dog was the mainstay of Babs’s domestic life. Her friends, though, saw an overweening outsized yellow cur, a brute with one flop ear, a long lank tail and calculating beady eyes. We called him, not in front of Babs, the Abominable Willy. When she sat at her desk writing, Willy, after eyeing her chair, the most comfortable in the room, would firmly nose her out of it and then fold himself on the seat in her place with a sigh of satisfaction. “Oh Willy,” Babs would say fondly and move herself to some precarious end table to get on with her current book or article.

She was self-taught, not having gone beyond secondary school, but had the disciplined curiosity to produce her series of notable books, including biographies of Fredrick II and Queen Christina, histories of the Roman Republic, the Borgias and the courtesans of the Renaissance. Her major interest though was in gardens and gardening, subjects that have a particular hold on the English, often burgeoning into active practice in their mature years., During her three decades of life in Rome, Babs created a garden herself and wrote her well-known books on Italian gardens and villas, the first such surveys since Edith Wharton’s *Italian Villas and Gardens* came out in 1904.

The one book that has kept the name of Georgina Masson in print since 1965 is her *Companion Guide to Rome*, now going into its latest edition, revised by John Fort. A shelf life of a generation and a half is a record for a tourist’s handbook these days, and a tribute to the diligent grace of the author. It continues admirably the grand guidebook tradition established by Augustus Hare and Baedeker, though Babs's immediate mentors were H. V. Morton and J. P. V. D. Balsdon, masters of classical English travel writing marked by the personal approach to the sites and sights of history and their social contexts.

Georgina Masson dedicated her hardy perennial to the memory of the now forgotten Swedish journalist, Gunhild Bergh. Miss Bergh, “who was herself a part of Rome,” as the dedication reads, was a sturdy figure dressed in black with a black hat like a seven-layer cake, a black reticule swinging from her hand and thick-soled black shoes. In that attire, armed with zeal and

determination, she was celebrated for having walked around the Mediterranean twice, as she sent her dispatches to the *Aftonbladet* in Stockholm.

Masson or Babs, who was over fifty at the time, was also sturdy, with a businesslike body and open, inquiring good looks. She had arrived in Rome at the end of the Second World War, attached officially or by sentiment to the British Fifth Army. Previously she had been stationed in Paris, dealing with public relations or, some said, military intelligence. In any case, either during or after her marriage to an army officer, she was employed by the Foreign Office from 1943 to 1947. A vivid personality, sociable and outgoing with a non-stop flow of conversation, she befriended people in every walk of life and her talk was peppered with the names of these friends and acquaintances.

They were democratically mixed as she brought them in by their first names. When she referred to Filippo it wasn't clear whether she meant Prince Doria Pamphilj or his concierge of the same name. Peter was Peter Nichols of *The Times*; Elena, Elena Croce, daughter of the philosopher; Hugh, the art historian Hugh Honour; Charlie, Monsignor Charles Burns of the Vatican Archivio Segreto; Fago, Fago Golfarelli of the state tourist agency; Alvar, Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios; Iris, Iris Origo; Archie, Archibald Lyall; Sue or Geoffrey, Jellicoe; and of course the great friend of her last years, Kathleen, the poet Kathleen Raine.

Filippo Doria, taken with her intense interest in Rome and his historic villa on the Janiculum, let her the stable block that lies in a hollow below the Palazzina Corsini, one of the main dwellings in the vast tract of countryside preserved within the city. Conceded the generous space at a grace-and-favor rent, she turned it into an English drawing room with eighteenth-century chairs and tables, objects such as a Georgian knife-box and an assortment of little oriental rugs. The antiques may have been family heirlooms, but there her friends had little to go by. Even her name was hard to pin down. Georgina Masson was the name of one of her grandmothers. She signed contracts and papers as Marion Johnson. It was either her own maiden name or that of a former husband. Or both. Babs had been married sometime in the past to an army colonel whom she never wanted to see again. She would add that she had adopted her nom de plume so that her husband could not trace her and claim any of the proceeds of her books. As to family matters, on another occasion she told me that her father had been garrisoned at the Khyber Pass. Recently John Fort discovered that she had been born at Rawalpindi, probably the closest center to the Pass with adequate hospital facilities.

More than twenty years since her death, Babs's surviving friends have no clear picture of her early years, just a few flashes of her life before they knew her in Italy and in England during her last two years. A clue to Babs's education emerged when a friend consulted her about sending his daughter to a school in England. "Pity she has no army connection. I recently visited my old school at Bath. It is the school for daughters of officers of the British Army and it struck me as still very good." Her schooling there must have taken place in the twenties of the last century, as she was born in 1912. That evidently marked the end of her formal education. For the rest she was self-taught, both as writer and photographer. When I knew her she took all her pictures of sites, gardens and villas with a Rolleiflex. Before that there was a heroic phase when, as reported by John Julius Norwich, she acquired a good lens and made herself a contraption like a box camera. She would take her pictures then rush to shut herself in a closet serving as a darkroom and - naked when there was sweltering heat in the summer - hopefully develop her negatives. To copy prints and documents she contrived a device carpentered for her with a sliding camera support that closed in on the subject - original do-it-yourself macrophotography.

Her practical approach to life, and its niceties, reminded me of Mrs. Beaton, though she went well beyond *Household Management* to career and life enhancement. She wrote and photographed,

typed and cooked, gardened and entertained. With no steady companion beside the Abominable Willy she did not lack for company, and in fact had a constant stream of visitors. Her firmness of purpose could be combative when aroused on occasion by bad behavior or injustice. Once, as she was escorting a young woman visitor around the Roman sights, they were accosted by a couple of obnoxious drunks. When they became too insistent Babs floored both of them by a flailing attack with her handbag.

She could be just as unmitigated verbally when she felt she had a legitimate grievance. Alvar Gonzalez-Palacios, director of the periodical *Arte Illustrata*, asked her for an article on the importation of exotic flowers to baroque Italy. Her research on that subject was building up to what she considered her life's work, and she produced an admirable, scholarly, readable text titled *Flowers as Collectors Pieces in Seventeenth-Century Italy*, illustrated with her photographs of pertinent prints and paintings. Babs was enraged when after publication, in June 1970, her photographs could not be returned, as they had been lost. Then at a dinner party at Harold Acton's she came face to face with Gonzalez-Palacios, scowled at him and announced loudly to the company, "I will not sit down to dine with a thief!" They were seated as far away as possible from each other. As homage to her scholarship - and charm, after all - Gonzalez-Palacios, though ruffled, did not hold this outburst against her.

Less violent but just as inflexible was her reaction when she returned from a trip and found Willy looking gaunt with his ribs showing. The owners of the Villa Doria, by that time Orietta, daughter of Filippo, and her husband Frank, noticed that Babs would not return their greetings. Friends intervened and were told by Babs, "Yes, I cut them dead and will not speak to them. When I went away I gave the portiere at the gate money to buy food for Willy. Evidently he pocketed the money and let Willy scrounge for himself. It's not the Dorias' fault? Yes it is. The portiere is an ignorant, primitive old boor. They who know better should have kept an eye on things." It was useless to argue that she might be sawing off the branch on which she perched. The Dorias were amused, however, and approved her firmness of principle, even though it was somewhat convoluted.

Aside from such telling scrapes, life in the Villa Doria Pamphilj was agreeably pastoral.

Babs had friends among the tenants to whom the Dorias had let various cottages and farmhouses. The estate was a vast private enclave, walled and gated, that had the atmosphere of an exclusive country club. In the rocky hollow at her front door Babs created a lush garden. There she planted native shrubs like oleanders that flowered in various colors and the seeds of fruits and vegetables that she ate. Avocado pits had gone into the ground beside her door and become a little grove of towering trees. She often entertained in her garden when the Roman weather was clement. A picnic she organized there in the spring of 1963, in honor of Evelyn Waugh, who had come to Rome, as he said, to do his Easter devotions, was attended by his great friend, Lady Diana Cooper (the Mrs. Stitch of his novels), the Duke of Leeds, Lady McEwen, Judy Montagu, Alvisé and Betty di Robilant, and Patrick and Jenny Crosse. Waugh provoked Babs and the other English guests by refusing to sit on the ground, as he preferred to eat comfortably and unpicnic-like at a table.

The idyl of country life while living in Rome came to an end after Babs had been installed at the Villa Doria for more than two decades. The city and the state had begun expropriating the villa in 1958 and completed their acquisition of the property in 1971. Babs then announced that she would have to leave now that the villa had become a public park. Her reasoning was that Willy would chase other dogs that would be brought in for their airing. So what, her friends said. "Don't you see? Willy is too big to be controlled. I couldn't hold him even on a lead. He will go for the dogs, terrify their owners and their children and I would have to face lawsuits. It's no good, I'll have to leave."

Meanwhile with the boom known at the time as the Italian Miracle, Rome had become jammed with cars. Babs had the idea that she would find a rural haven in the Tuscan countryside. She appealed to Harold Acton who referred her to Signora Traballese, wife of a Florentine attorney and landowner. She was offered an apartment in a house secluded in the woods near Impruneta. Babs was enthusiastic, explaining that Willy could run free without molesting anyone, she could have peace and quiet for her writing and the place was an easy drive to Florence with its great libraries for her research. The daydream lasted the better part of a year. Awkward reality set in when she found that Tuscany was peopled with retired senior citizens, mainly English, for whom she was new blood and something of a celebrity at that. The dropping-in on her solitude was constant, as was the ringing of her telephone to invite her to lunches, teas and dinners. The final blow came, when a young couple with three small children moved into the isolated house on the floor above Babs.

Desperate, Babs announced to her friends that she had to return to Rome. There was a problem, however; grace-and-favor rents of twenty thousand lire a month no longer existed. She would need at least a hundred thousand a month for an apartment to house herself and Willy. A friend suggested that she return to Villa Doria Pamphilj. No, she could not do that. The door was locked and she had returned the keys. The friend persisted, offering to help break in and reoccupy the place, as the city administration might never get around to evicting her. Shocked by the lawless proposal, Babs adamantly refused to be a party to anything so nefarious. The friend should have known better, as Babs was so scrupulously law-abiding that when she received payment for her lectures on Italian seventeenth-century gardening at Dumbarton Oaks, she consulted the U.S. embassy in Rome about paying income tax on that sum to the Internal Revenue Service. To resolve Babs's problems Elena Croce consulted Peter Nichols and myself as to the amount of money needed. She informed us shortly that her Committee for the Defense of the Southern Landscape (in Italy) had a fund that could supply the sum, but how could one get the highly independent Babs to accept the benefaction? She found a way; a few days later I received a telephone call from an exultant Babs. "You can't imagine what a stroke of good fortune I have had! You know I've been racking my brains how to pay the rent in Rome? Well, Elena has offered me a consultancy on her landscape committee and it pays just what I need to rent an apartment on the Janiculum or in Monteverde."

Soon she was back in Rome, installed in a ground floor flat with garden for Willy's benefit, close to the American Academy where she could do her research in the library. Babs remained there until Willy died in 1978 and she was at last free to go to England. Her nostalgia for home was aggravated by the affliction of cancer, which proved terminal. The last two years of her life she lived close to her old friend Kathleen Raine and the Chelsea Arts Club. She had received the honor of membership in the Royal Society of Literature and had a pension from the Royal Literary Fund. The royalties from her Roman guidebook she bequeathed to the Society of Authors, the rest presumably to members of her family, indistinct figures in the vagueness of Babs's biography. Her negatives she left to the American Academy. What would have been the major opus of her life's work was the history of the importation of the exotics that glorified the Italian gardens of the seventeenth century. Her copious notes on this subject, really whole texts, based on primary sources in European and American archives and libraries, she left to the Fondazione Caetani where she had done a considerable part of her research. She thus expressed her gratitude not only to the institution, but also to Margherita Caetani and her daughter Lelia, the last of their line. As well as to Italy, the state that had recognized her merits by conferring on her the title of *Ufficiale dell'Ordine al Merito della Repubblica Italiana*.

The cottage Babs created in the Villa Doria Pamphilj has been converted by the municipal street cleaning department into a garage with metal doors. Her former garden is a paved area for the maneuvers of the garbage trucks.