

## John Mortimer: an appreciation

By Emily Pender

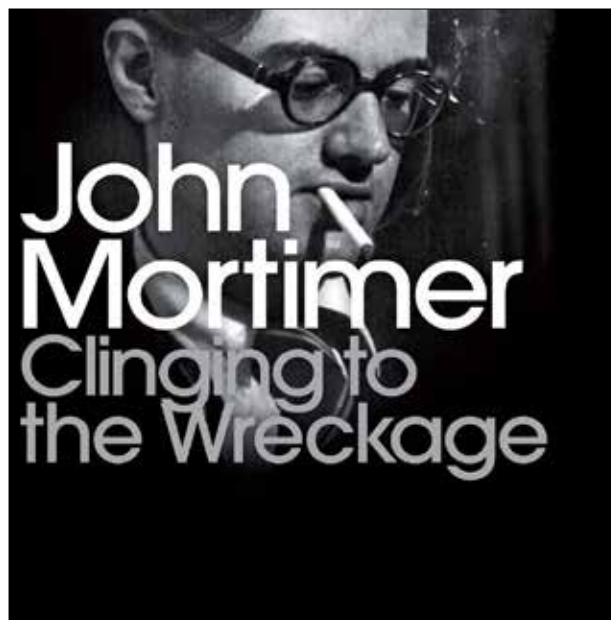
As someone who has admired John Mortimer since watching the first episodes of *Rumpole* on television and reading the stories in the seventies, I find myself in the virtual company of many others, particularly lawyers; and as I have grown older in the law (like *Rumpole*) I have found that the pleasure of the comedy of Mortimer's writing is enhanced by the depth of his understanding of life and of people.

But trying to understand and appreciate the real life John Mortimer is like acting in a criminal trial, where the defendant has one story of what occurred, the prosecution have another, the police have a third that they are saying and a fourth (or even a fifth) that they are not. The reality may be in some yet undeveloped combination of the various versions, independent of what actually happens in court. John Mortimer is hard to understand and one of the interesting things about the exploration of his character is that a man famously keen on publicity and unable to resist the chance of an interview, was in fact deeply reluctant to reveal or discuss the truth about himself.

Re-reading the two biographies of John Mortimer, the *Devil's Advocate* by Graham Lord and *A Voyage Around John Mortimer* by Valerie Grove, reminded me of a story told about the Reverend Sydney Smith, who on a visit to Edinburgh in the late eighteenth century heard two women screaming at each other across the street from their rooms on the top floor of opposite tenements. Smith said to his friend, 'They will never agree, because they are arguing from different premises.'

Even the titles of the books indicate their different approaches, Grove's indicating that she understood the limits of what she had learnt about her subject; whereas Lord's title and contents assert that he has grasped the essence of his subject, and didn't like what he saw. His biography of a man who was brilliant, funny, subtle and compassionate is written by someone who appears devoid of these qualities, and worse, unable to understand them. Grove's writing shows her to have a deeper understanding of the complexity of her subject and his relationships.

It is an irony that Mortimer himself might have appreciated, that Lord's unrelenting vituperative attack on him leads one to sympathise with and instinctively defend his subject, whereas Grove's much more affectionate and reasoned portrayal



leads one to a deeper understanding of Mortimer's flaws (such as his compulsive infidelity) and their impact on the people who loved him. When Lord has a page of illustrations labelled 'Mistresses in the seventies' with a picture of three beautiful women, one of them married to Denholm Elliott at the time—you can't help suspecting a note of envy underlying the censure.

One of the things that one has to wonder at in reading about Mortimer is how he managed to get so much done. He was married twice, had nine children, (including the four step children of the novelist Penelope Mortimer, his first wife, and an illegitimate child with Wendy Craig, the actress); he supported eight children and his wives; he ran a busy and successful practice at the bar; he wrote novels, stage and radio plays, film scripts, articles and reviews; he worked on numerous boards of theatre and arts bodies; he gave interviews constantly but appeared always to have time for a long lunch. The members of the *Rumpole* association of distinguished lawyers from America charmed JM on their visit to London with their cry (à la *Rumpole*) of 'Lunch! I'm particularly fond of lunch'. Mortimer obviously lived life to the full, he loved women, wine, food and friends, the theatre, music and writing, inter alia. His enjoyment and relish for life pervade his work. Lord quotes his children's and first wife's derision at Mortimer's often quoted assertion that he got up early to write before

breakfast. 'He gets up at 10 to go to the Caprice'. But for anyone who has tried to bring up children while running a practice at the bar, the immediate thought is, 'Where did he get the time to write? And even if he found the time, where did he get the energy?'

I suspect this energy was one of the keys to the second question about John Mortimer, which is, how did a man who bore more than a passing resemblance to Toad of Toad Hall, manage to seduce so many women? Again, Lord, in his scathing denunciations, appears to miss the point. He describes Mortimer as 'fawning over women' because of his failed relationship with his mother. I think the assumptions underlying this description reveal more about Lord than his subject. The kind of women who loved and admired JM as wives and lovers and friends aren't the kind of women to admire someone who 'fawns'. I think one clue to Mortimer's success is the story about him visiting her told by Shirley Anne Field, a beautiful young actress and one of the 'mistresses of the seventies'. She had been in one of his plays but at the time of this visit a few years later was married, not working and alone a great deal with her baby as her husband was away in the airforce:

One Friday morning John rang-'Darling! We haven't seen you, the sun's not shining when you're not around'-and arrived to whisk her out to lunch, just as she was about to feed her baby. John took over, cooked the spinach, mashed it and fed it to the baby on the kitchen table. He improvised a carrycot from a vegetable box, draped the box with a shawl, put the baby in it, and took mother and baby to the Baroque and Bite in Regents Park, a floating restaurant on the canal. (Lord, p220-221).

A man who will take a woman out to lunch when she is feeling low is a pearl, but a man who will feed and take her baby as well, is a pearl beyond price. Mortimer liked women for what they were and he enjoyed intimacy. For him women were a subject not an object. And I think this, apart from his energy and humour and generosity, may have been the clue to his success.

This attitude of acceptance and understanding of people as they are, is also characteristic of Mortimer's writing. One famous example of this is his second book of autobiography, called *Murderers and other*

*Friends*. One of my favourite stories in this book is about him doing a bail application for a murderer, whose instructions to Mortimer in the cells of Brixton prison were that he needed to get out because the tea was weak and they had taken away his copy of the Savoy operas. Mortimer felt that these were somewhat slight grounds for a bail application but put them to the judge, who, unexpectedly, was deeply sympathetic to his client's plight. Mortimer's writing is full of the wonderful contradictions of law and life but also of the tragedy of unhappiness and injustice in people's lives, both rich and poor.

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Lord dismisses Mortimer's writing as facile and shallow. But apart from Rumpole, and Mortimer's other novels, *A Voyage Around My Father* is a fine play which I believe will stand the test of time. One reason that Lord fails to grasp Mortimer's work is that a great deal of the power of his writing comes from what is unsaid. Mortimer himself said to Lord:

I'm very English. England is very beautiful and at their best the English people are admirable. They're very interesting to writers because they never say anything they mean. Americans say what they mean and it's boring. With the English you have to deduce what they mean from what they don't say.

But Lord, like the president of the US whose lips were seen to move when he came to a stop sign, can't understand this, and his failure leads him to misread and misunderstand not only what Mortimer said and did and wrote but also what others say about his subject.

Mortimer wrote very fast and fluently. The first Penelope Mortimer said that he had wasted his talent by being driven to make money ( in the early stages

of his career, to support her and their family). Peggy Ramsay, Mortimer's famous literary agent, whose client list in the seventies looks like a *Who's Who* of English literature, said that she believed that he had been seduced by success and had sacrificed his real talent as a writer to it. Perhaps the need for success and admiration and approval, as well as an inability to communicate directly what he felt, were the results of his being sent to boarding school at an early age, or the emotional repression of the society he grew up in. But perhaps too, some of his best writing is about what is unspoken; it may stand the test of time better than some of the explicit savagery of English theatre in his time.

Lord's biography is more detailed than Grove's about Mortimer's cases as an advocate but again he is keen only to disparage his work. His political stance is so different from Mortimer's that perhaps it is impossible for him to appreciate Mortimer's work e.g. in the Oz trial, defending freedom of speech.

Another key to Mortimer's success in his work and writing may have been his detachment, which allowed him to write fast and to handle big cases with panache, whilst perhaps relying on the diligence of his juniors for the detailed preparation. And his detachment on a personal level could be hurtful. Grove explores this in a sensitive and interesting way, particularly in regard to the first Penelope Mortimer,

who like John Mortimer, used their marriage and lives and family as fuel for her writing. I hadn't realized until I read the biographies, that the classic sixties book and film of *The Pumpkin Eater* was based on their marriage. Grove also remarks perceptively on the heroism of John Mortimer's second wife, also called Penelope, who was the organizing genius enabling Mortimer's life of work and writing and family and friends (including regular weekend lunches for twenty) particularly as he grew older and more infirm.

Mortimer didn't spell out the pain of life he saw, he made a joke of it and celebrated stoicism, survival and the ironies and comedy of existence. His belief in justice and the law as the tattered standard of individual liberty and freedom of speech make him an inspiration to many of us for whom these things are also important, especially lawyers. His character may have been flawed, but whose is not? In his life and writing he chose not to judge people for their flaws but to celebrate them for their individuality and to understand and sympathise even with those he most disagreed with.

In the end, his life and work seem to me to embody the slogan of Amnesty International, for whom he also worked, 'Better to light a candle than curse the darkness'.