**Claire Tomalin**

**by Erica Wagner**

Biography would seem to be one of the finest jewels in Britain’s literary crown; But Claire Tomalin, one of Britain’s finest biographers, surely, remembers when this was not at all the case. “It was despised, when I began,” she says plainly. “I went to a conference in Oxford after writing *The Invisible Woman* and one of the dons said to me, ‘You’re just writing gossip, aren’t you?’” She allows herself a wintry smile before adding, “He’s dead now. Anyway, I thought that was a bit much. People have always been interested in the lives of other human beings, going back to Plutarch. That is the most common human interest, isn’t it?”

*The Invisible Woman*, Tomalin’s ground-breaking account of Charles Dickens’ long relationship with the actress Nelly Ternan, was published in 1990. Now, coming up for three decades later, Tomalin is headed back to Oxford, this time to collect the Bodley Medal, which might be considered sweet revenge on that deceased don. “I’m slightly embarrassed about it,” she says of the award, “but I couldn’t refuse it. Being a Cambridge girl” — she graduated from Newnham College in 1951 and was made an honorary fellow in 2003 — “it’s rather wonderful to have a medal from Oxford.”

We are sitting in the airy sitting room of the beautiful house in Petersham she shares with her husband, playwright and novelist Michael Frayn. Outside, snow blankets Richmond Park and the river is icy; inside, yards and yards of bookshelves keep things cozy. Tomalin will be 85 this year, but looks a decade younger, her sparkling silver shoes adding an extra spring to her step, I’m sure. And she has now turned her acute biographical eye upon herself: her memoir, *A Life of My Own*, was published last year to wide acclaim. Telling her own story, however, was a task she embarked on with no little hesitation. Janet Malcolm has written that the biographer is “like the professional burglar, breaking into a house, rifling through certain drawers that he has good reason to think contain the jewelry and money, and triumphantly bearing his loot away”: it’s quite something to decide to burgle your own house.

When she sat down to write it, she says, she recalled a long-ago conversation with the publisher André Deutsch. “He took me out to lunch many years ago and said, you ought to write a novel. And I said, André, I don’t write fiction. It was many years later that I thought, yes — but I have a story. I’ve told other people’s stories; why not mine?” She calls the experience “a moral exercise”, and it’s not hard to see why. This isn’t a book of gossip: in some regards the loot remains safely in the drawers. Yes, she gives an entertaining account of the affair she had with Martin Amis when she was 40 and he was 25, but that’s because “the *only* thing that a lot people know about me is that I once had an affair with Amis!” she laughs — noting that this is information long in the public domain, and that it wasn’t she who spilled those particular beans. (And before the book was published, she sent her account to Amis for the once-over: “he was very sweet about it”.)

But the heart of this book isn’t in the names she does or doesn’t drop; it’s in the emotional arc of literary success carved out from the kind of hardship that would knock most of us to the ground. The younger daughter of a French father and an English mother, her parents were ill-matched and went through a bitter divorce when such things were the cause of shame. Her own first marriage to the journalist Nick Tomalin was difficult: and then in the autumn of 1973 Nick was working for the *Sunday Times* and reporting from the Golan Heights during the Yom Kippur War; he was killed when a heat-guided missile struck the car in which he was travelling. She raised their four children: three daughters and a son, Tom, born with spina bifida. Her daughter Susanna committed suicide after her second year at Oxford, when she fell prey to the terrible depression that would lead her to take her own life; it seemed to her mother that her beloved child “had been wrung out until almost nothing was left but a small husk of herself.” [245]

Tomalin’s sorrows are depicted unflinchingly in *A Life of My Own*, but this is far from a catalogue of despair. She brings a clear-eyed observation to every aspect of her life, drawing on letters, her own diaries, notes she kept at the time — like the diligent biographer she is, she lays her sources out plainly. But there is too the power of memory: of the day in October 1973 when Harry Evans — then editor of the *Sunday Times* — and the journalists Hunter Davies and Ron Hall came to her house in Gloucester Crescent to tell her of Nick’s death. “There are bits of your life which you can play through in your head. I can see myself, I can see them coming in, sliding round, their backs to the wall -- the whole thing. Having to tell the children — and having to ring his mother, his father, and having failed to ring his sister, who’s never quite forgiven me that she heard it on the news. That’s all absolutely clear.”

It is these vivid moments, conveyed with clarity and no sentimentality, which give her account her own life its power. There is no self-pity: indeed, quite the opposite. She is hard on herself. She should have spotted that Susanna was in danger; she should have taken better care of her elderly mother as she began to decline. When I mention her mother, she recalls a shop in Gloucester Crescent, and the way the family who ran it cared for their elderly mother. “Her daughters cared for her without ever considering themselves,” she says, laying powerful emphasis on the words. “Her grandsons all trained to be doctors -- a marvellous story. I feel ashamed,” she says. “I tried. I had Mummy to stay, I had her at Christmas; she was incontinent, doubly incontinent, and my daughters simply wouldn’t stay in the house. And then I was trying to teach Tom continence, and I thought I couldn’t really deal with Tom and Mummy. But I should have done.”

I am startled by her inability to forgive herself. I offer that perhaps part of the problem is that women — and it is almost always women — who feel responsible for solving these insoluble situations, feel forced to take this burden on their shoulders. She is blunt in her reply.

“Well, we are,” she says. That’s it. We are.”

And all the while, of course, she was forging a career as a literary editor, first at the *New Statesman* and then at the *Sunday Times*, and a biographer, a profession she did not embrace fully, by her own account, until she left the *Sunday Times* in 1986. So she castigates herself, too, on the matter of how long it took her to really get going. “I wish I’d started writing sooner!” she exclaims. “I started so late. My best book was published when I was I was 69.” Do the math and you’ll see she’s talking about her biography of Samuel Pepys, *The Unequalled Self*, which was published in 2002 and won the Whitbread Book Award. But her first book, a biography of Mary Wollstonecraft, had been published in 1974, and the books came steadily after that— even if their author thinks the pace was not quite steady enough. She has written about Shelley and Dickens and Thomas Hardy; about Katherine Mansfield and Dora Jordan, actress and mistress of the Duke of Clarence, later King William IV.

“One of the things I’ve realised is that I’ve always written about people who’ve had a struggle,” she says. “I’ve never written about royals, or people who were born into good fortune. I don’t think I want to write about people who have an easy time.” I have the sense that this is narrative instinct rather than any overt sense of understanding what struggle is like; though she draws a delicate parallel between some aspects of Dickens’ character and that of her father. Émile Delavenay was a vibrant French academic who worked for the BBC and Unesco. He lived to be 98, and Tomalin became very close to his second wife, her stepmother. “Two good men, two men who aspired to be good -- Dickens especially. And Dickens was incredibly generous, and good in almost every way. But found himself *driven* to be bad; and then had the difficulty of trying to deal with being bad. So you do find… links,” she says, after a little hesitation. “When you’ve written a lot of lives, you begin to see certain patterns.”

It could be argued that *The Invisible Woman* shifted the public perception of the man who many consider to be Britain’s greatest novelist; Tomalin was a pioneer in altering the literary landscape, one in which Great Men had been, for the most part, the only worthy subjects for biography. Richard Ovenden is Bodley’s Librarian; the Bodley Medal is in his gift, and it was that pathfinding aspect of Tomalin’s work which led him to his choice. “That very much featured in my thoughts,” he says. “In part because this is the centenary year of women’s suffrage, and I wanted to celebrate the achievement of women in this year. But I was thinking of Claire not just as a great biographer, but as someone more broadly in the world of letters who has been an inspiration, and influential across a long period of time. She has been at the forefront of the rightful return to prominence of the lives of significant women. She really paved the way.” He adds that when he first thought of her, “I hadn’t yet read her autobiography; what a remarkable life in letters she’s had, what significant challenges and struggles in her private life. To raise a family, and work in a very male business as a journalist, particularly at the *Sunday Times*. And then to forge almost a new career, a second career — and be even more successful.”

Tomalin is not in the least grand about her success. Indeed, she’s a little troubled about what comes next. She worries that writing her memoir has drawn a kind of line under the writing life: for the first time she’s not sure what she’ll do next. She thought she’d write about the Marquis de Condorcet, who she describes as “the first Frenchman to say that women were the moral and intellectual equals of men in the 1780s”. But she’s worried he’s too niche for the British — perhaps especially in the age of Brexit, about which she despairs. But somehow I have a feeling she’ll solve her problem, particularly when I ask her what advice she’d give to an aspiring biographer. She laughs. “Make sure you really want to do this!” she says. She has written a life of her own; but other lives, I am quite sure, still await her keen, skilled eye.

A Life of My Own *by Claire Tomalin is published by Viking*

The Bodleian Libraries will present biographer Claire Tomalin with the Bodley Medal, the Libraries' highest honour. Tomalin will receive the award at the FT Weekend Oxford Literary Festival on 17 March 2018, when she will be in conversation with Bodley's Librarian, Richard Ovenden.