

Overrated...

Mary-Kay Wilmers

Daniel Johnson says the editor-proprietor of the *London Review of Books* is clear about her prejudices. Not so clear is why the Arts Council should fund her magazine



For Clive James, the *London Review of Books* is “the house magazine of the [British] intellectual elite”. With a circulation now approaching 50,000, the fortnightly boasts that is the most important literary journal, not only in Britain but in Europe. It easily outstrips its closest rival, the *Times Literary Supplement*, though it still only has about half the readership of its original model, the *New York Review of Books*. Last October, the *LRB* celebrated its 30th anniversary, apparently in robust health. With a circulation of this size, it should at least be breaking even.

Yet the *LRB* has always received an Arts Council grant, now around £21,000 per annum. No other comparable literary magazine has enjoyed such long-term, inflation-proof, no-strings subsidy from the taxpayer. The Arts Council offers no justification. It merely states that the money is used to pay contributors. Perhaps the Commons Public Accounts Committee will inquire into how the taxpayer benefits from singling out the *LRB* for preferential treatment.

The magazine’s accounts, as submitted to Companies House, do not include a profit and loss account, but they do reveal that the *LRB* has to service a debt of more than £23 million, paying interest at a rate of eight per cent, and rising by £3 million a year. It is a reasonable inference that the £23 million debt represents loans, plus compound interest, accumulated over 30 years during which the magazine has come under the control of one person, an Anglo-American heiress. Editor, proprietor and creditor: Mary-Kay Wilmers virtually *is* the *LRB*.

When the *LRB* was launched in 1979, inspired by a piece by Frank Kermode, its editor was Karl Miller, who combined the post with his duties as Northcliffe Professor of English at University College, London, and worked tirelessly to attract distinguished critics. Mary-Kay Wilmers—first deputy, later co-editor—was then married to Stephen Frears and close to Alan Bennett, who had introduced them. There is a certain irony in the fact that, as the magazine became increasingly dependent on the Wilmers fortune during the Thatcher-Reagan boom years, it flourished by feeding the British intelligentsia’s anti-Thatcherite fury. Friction between the fashionable crowd that surrounded Mary-Kay and the fastidious intellectuals around Karl was inevitable, and could have only one outcome: Miller departed in 1992, leaving Wilmers in sole charge. Since then, the *LRB* has grown steadily more politicised, its tone shriller, its coterie more exclusive.

Long before she joined the *LRB*, in the late 1950s, Wilmers showed her true colours on a trip to the Soviet Union. In Moscow, she recalls, her fellow Oxford students “went on the sly to visit [Boris] Pasternak” while she “instead travelled several stops on the Metro to look at some heavy machinery, out of a feeling—what possessed me?—that I should acknowledge what the Soviets did well.”

Whatever it was that possessed her then has never departed. She spent 20 years writing her only book, *The Eitingons*: an apologia for her Russian-Jewish relations Max, Motty and Leonid Eitingon—a shrink, a crook and a killer—which assumes that in the 20th century, unless you were a Freudian or a Stalinist, you didn’t really count. She describes herself as “neither communist nor anti-communist, captivated by the Left but never quite of the Left”.

The facts tell a slightly different story. In *Bad Character*, a privately-printed *festschrift* for her 70th birthday in 2008, her *LRB* colleague Jean McNicol compiled “You and Non-You”, a Wilmers glossary. Under “Stalin” we read that “bad Stalin and bad communism pieces don’t find favour” with the editor of the *LRB*. Wilmers tells a *Guardian* interviewer: “I don’t think it’s necessary to say how bad it all was.”

On Israel, however, she finds condemnation is all too necessary, having been converted by Edward Said. A list of her contributors reads like a roll-call of the anti-Zionist, anti-American Left, from Tariq Ali to Slavoj Žižek, from Eric Hobsbawm to Tom Paulin. Virtually the only Tory to have written regularly for the *LRB* was the late Sir Ian Gilmour, who hated Israel and Margaret Thatcher in equal measure. In an interview with Anne McElvoy, Wilmers was at least frank about her prejudice: “I’m unambiguously hostile to Israel because it’s a mendacious state.”

It was in the *LRB* that *The Israel Lobby* appeared in 2006. This article, by the American political scientists Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer, has unleashed a flood of conspiracy theories. Thanks to them, the notion of an all-powerful network of Zionist agents, neocon think-tanks and Jewish plutocrats manipulating US foreign policy has now become received wisdom in left-wing circles on both sides of the Atlantic.

This overtly or covertly anti-Semitic propaganda is now parroted in senior common rooms, where the *LRB* is required reading for the academically ambitious. Its influence permeates British culture through the arts and the media. The editor who takes credit for the *LRB*’s success must also take responsibility for its bigotry.