grandson of Darwin; he is also kin to John Maynard Keynes the economist and Geoffrey Keynes the Blake scholar. Emma Darwin, Charles's wife, was a Wedgwood, the potter family distinguished for its role in Neoclassicism, canals, and liberal thought. Given to marrying first cousins, the Wedgwoods and Darwins constitute an intellectual tribe hard to match in European society.

This biography may well be a reply to one written ten years ago by John Bowlby, *Charles Darwin: A New Life*, the theme of which was that Darwin repressed grief and suffered for so doing. He had frequent attacks of hysterical weeping and vomited every afternoon at four. He himself admitted the guilt he felt at removing a creative and benevolent God from Victorian belief. Annie's death seems to have been the decisive event—it sealed Darwin's conviction that nature is indifferent and that human life is a pitiless struggle to survive.

Keynes's biography has something of the charm of *Period Piece*, his great-aunt Gwen Raverat's classic account of life at the Darwins'. *The Origin of Species* was written in a big house full of children, servants, dogs and cats. Here Darwin was virtually a recluse most of his life, after his years on the *Beagle*. He gave no lectures and had no university connections. His theory keeps thousands of scientists busy today and has an army of opponents.

The most transparent example of an evolutionary process is language. The development of Latin into Italian, Spanish, French, Romanian, and several other lesser tongues is analogous to the derivation of the grains from some primitive grasses in (perhaps) the Caucasus. John McWhorter's **THE POWER OF BABEL: A NATURAL HISTORY OF LANGUAGE** (Henry Holt, $26) is an essay in origins, and is as theoretical as Hawking and Gorst in trying to see into the deep past. Language may be 150,000 years old; that is, contemporary with humankind's ability to make tools and draw on cave walls.

Language is both very conservative (we speak a derivative of Indo-European) and rapid. There are Hawaiian children who speak as their native tongue a pidgin evolved by their parents. There are ad hoc languages: Russian loggers and their Norwegian customers, for instance, using a mixture of Russian and Norse useful only for loading timber onto ships in a fjord.

Just as Hawking would like to know what happened at the Big Bang, so linguists would like to know what language was spoken in Eden. Was it as complex as Amerindian languages or Inuit? When did prefixes and suffixes come in? There are pioneers who think that they are finding ghostly traces of the Primal Language. McWhorter, however, is skeptical; he doesn't buy their theories.

Linguists tend to be even more unearthly than theoretical physicists, but McWhorter is a clear and witty writer. Pay attention to his footnotes: they're his comic asides. He has a personal anecdote, usually scandalous, for practically every example of usage. And how many languages he is familiar with, never mind fluent in, he never discloses. We come to believe that he knows all 6,000 of them, including the 800 or so spoken in Papua New Guinea. It's there, by the way, that the clearest traces of Adam-and-Eve-speak can be found. ■

THE VINDICATIONS

The moral opportunism of feminist biography

By Cristina Nehring

Discussed in this essay:

Her Own Woman: The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft, by Diane Jacobs. Simon & Schuster, 2001. 333 pages. $28.

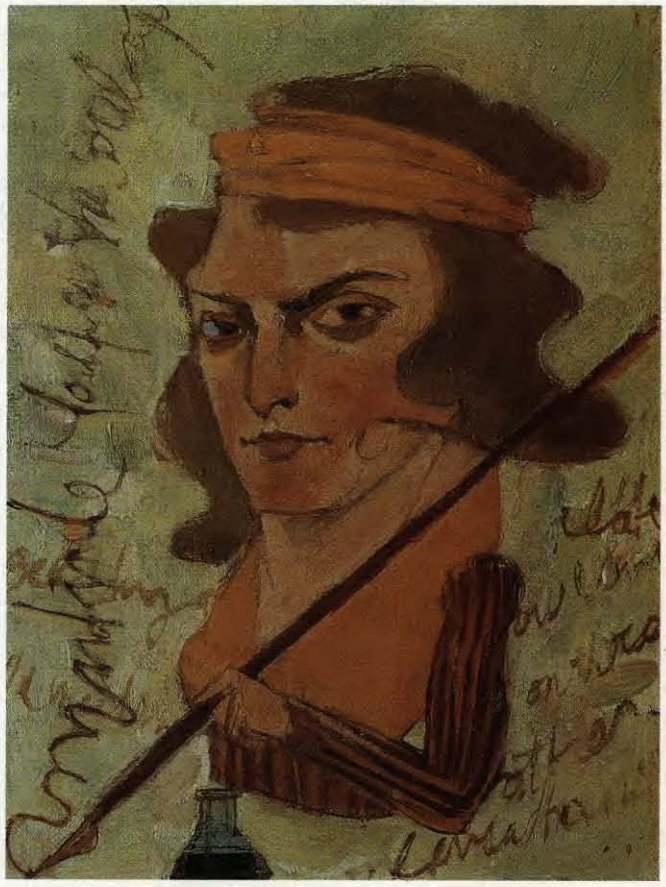
"I have no biography," said the Jewish scholar Gershom Scholem, "only a bibliography." Many a great writer could have said the same. There is something almost absurd about a "Life" of Flaubert, for instance, or a "Life" of Jane Austen: dedicated servants in the temple of art, they *had* no lives, because they were always writing.

Mary Wollstonecraft was not always writing. The work that she published in her lifetime was done in haste, between other (to her, usually more important) commitments. Six weeks were spent on the book to which she owes her continuing reputation, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792); less than four went to the one that thrust her into the limelight in her own day, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). A mere three months went to *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), a work that was immensely popular with contemporary audiences, and that recommended her to the man who became her husband, the philosopher William Godwin. "If ever there was a book calculated to make a man fall in love with its author," he wrote, "this appears to me to be the book." Sadly, Godwin and Wollstonecraft had little occasion to test their love: five months after their surprise wedding (both had publicly denounced the institution of marriage), the originator of Western feminism died in childbirth. She was thirty-eight.

She had two suicide attempts behind her at the time, and therein lies a tale—the tale of a passionate, confrontational life, a life, to the regret of many twentieth-century feminists

Cristina Nehring's last essay for Harper's Magazine, *"The Higher Yearning," appeared in the September 2001 issue.*

who would have *liked* to champion her, steeped as much in emotion as in thought, in theory-breaking practice as in theory. Today's feminist scholars like their heroines simple, like them practicing what they preach and preaching what they (the scholars, that is) preach, too. Wollstonecraft fails utterly in this regard. She attacked male oppression roundly and rigorously—and well before the rest of us—but she assailed female acquiescence to it as well. One can understand why the critic Katha Pollitt, who, at a recent reading in New York City, distinguished feminists who like women from feminists who don't, numbers Wollstonecraft among the latter. Pollitt has just edited a new Modern Library edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* and knows that rather than celebrate the special virtues of women (their "nurturing" qualities, emotional fluency, etc.), Wollstonecraft bitterly attacked what, at least in her place and time, she saw as women's peculiar vices: overwrought sensibility and underdeveloped reason, coquetry, obsession with romance, excessive fondness for clothes, cowardice. To be sure, she largely blamed male pedagogy for inculcating and rewarding these vices; nonetheless, the *Vindication* hardly reads like a love letter to women.



And yet Wollstonecraft *did* write love letters to women, as Diane Jacobs's new biography, *Her Own Woman*, richly documents. In fact, the first love letters she wrote were to her girlhood friends Jane Arden and Fanny Blood, with the latter of whom she wanted to cohabit and make a life. In each of these relationships, we can distinguish most of the elements, and all of the tones, that marked Wollstonecraft's later relationships with men: deep, though not specifically sexual, jealousy, heady emotional idealism, bossiness, chronic fear of unimportance, and frequent threats that Wollstonecraft will cease communications—all followed by further communications, demanding an answer.

Allusions to the young writer's *already* pained past are also de rigueur. At fourteen Mary writes to her friend Jane, "I have once been disappointed," and hints ominously at the consequences of yet *another* disappointment—this one issuing from Jane. "I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship," she warns her classmate: "I must have the first place or none." The letter goes on to mention no fewer than three other teenagers whose place in Jane's life Mary resents: "When I have been at your house with Miss J— the greatest respect has been paid to her; every thing handed to her first," Mary pines. "If I did not love you," she explains in the next letter, "I should not be angry.—I cannot bear a slight from those I love." Indeed, she could not. And the more she suffered from these slights, the more of them, in her eyes, she received—from her female as well as, later, her male loves. Her complaints to Jane typically end with both a self-assured demand ("I shall expect a written answer to this") and a contradictory claim that Mary is resigned to complete rejection: "P.S. I keep your letters as a Memorial that you once loved me, but it will be of no consequence to keep mine as you have no regard for the writer."

Mary Wollstonecraft was a deeply vexed genius. I quote these letters not to disenchant readers with her but to suggest the vehemence of her passions, which were always as pivotal in her life as her Enlightenment "Reason," and which often propelled that reason to its highest achievements. For all of her attacks on female "sensibility" in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, Wollstonecraft was nothing if not "sensible," nothing if not volatile, herself. As she realized only later (and as many scholars have not realized yet), her volatility was essential to her thought: it sparked, nourished, and often transformed it. "We reason deeply, when we forcibly feel," she wrote a couple of years before her death. If this is true for every writer and philosopher, it is doubly true for Wollstonecraft.

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman is a work of violent indignation, written from Wollstonecraft's firsthand experience of the miserable options open to European women in the eighteenth century and of the deliberate diversion of their attention from studies

Illustration by N. Ascencios

that might improve their lot to trivial obsessions that could only make them pleasing to, and dependent on, men: clothing, romance, coquetry, cooking. It is indignation that gives the book the tumbling, repetitive intensity that distinguishes it; indignation that colors its often spectacularly vivid metaphors: "Confined . . . in cages like the feathered race," Wollstonecraft writes, women raised as fine "ladies" rather than capable workers "have nothing to do but to plume themselves, and stalk with mock majesty from perch to perch." It is indignation that lends Wollstonecraft's sentences their first-person, *J'accuse*-like confrontational edge: "I lament" begins one paragraph; "I here throw down my gauntlet," another. And it is indignation, in combination with great literary gifts, that allows Wollstonecraft to alternate between cutting humor and poignant lyricism, to mock the gentleman who "lifts up his voice to guard" his girlish "trembler" from "the frown of an old cow"; but also to evoke the pathos of Englishwomen trapped in carriages "that drive helter-skelter about this metropolis . . . pale-faced creatures who are flying from themselves."

It was a different but equally personal passion that led Wollstonecraft to reconsider certain of the ideas in the *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, notably those on matrimony. Love, she had said there—romantic, erotic love—is antithetical to a good marriage and to the conduct of life's "sacred duties." It interferes with child rearing, among other more important occupations, and women should be glad of its absence. In *Maria, or The Wrongs of Women*, a novel written a few years later, in 1796, Wollstonecraft presents just the sort of loveless marriage she would have approved in the *Vindication*. Yet her heroine (transparently modeled on herself) rightfully discards it. "I should despise [a woman] who could endure such a husband as I have sketched. . . !!!" she railed in a letter to a friend.

What had happened in the interim? Wollstonecraft had become involved with her first lover, the much-maligned Gilbert Imlay. Her passion for him revised, humanized, and deepened many of her theories. This, as Diane Jacobs astutely emphasizes, was one of Wollstonecraft's significant gifts as a thinker: she changed. She was not the same philosopher at thirty-eight that she had been at twenty-nine. Revolutions and relationships had entered her thought and ripened it.

But if Wollstonecraft's thinking was sharpened by her feeling, her *lover's* thinking—or, more exactly, his peace of mind—was not, as a rule, similarly enhanced. Here again it proves useful to recall Wollstonecraft's impassioned and impossible letters to her teenage girlfriend, for they qualify the conventional view of the man on whom the most ink has been lavished and the most abuse heaped by Wollstonecraft scholars: the American writer and businessman Imlay. As Wollstonecraft's most incisive biographer, Claire Tomalin, wrote in 1974, the letters Mary penned to Jane "set up an emotional pattern she was never to break." Strange, then, that most modern writers on Wollstonecraft—Tomalin included—seem not to take this fact into account when they judge the man Wollstonecraft loved more than any other in her life.

Wollstonecraft was in Paris when she met him, engaged by her London publisher, Joseph Johnson, to observe the French Revolution. At thirty-three, she was at the height of her career. After several miserable years in her twenties spent working as a governess, "lady's companion," and teacher (the main jobs open to single women), the *Vindications* had catapulted her into the public eye—and an admiring eye it generally was. To the occasional jealous chagrin of her two sisters, who were as husbandless and talented as she was, Mary was making her living as a writer. She had come a great way from the helplessness and neglect all of them had known in northern England at the hands of their alcoholic father and battered mother.

But Wollstonecraft was also just out of her painful first brush with romance, involving her publisher's dramatic, bisexual painter friend Henry Fuseli. The relationship, which receives far too little space in Jacobs's biography, was never consummated, possibly because Fuseli had just married. But conversation and flirtation flowed freely, and Wollstonecraft was very much in love. Things ended as she realized that he grew indifferent to her the more she inundated him in amorous attention and correspondence; indeed, when her letters to him were reclaimed after her death, many had never been opened. Unable to make headway with her beloved, Wollstonecraft—always the revolutionary in matters matrimonial and never easily dissuaded—turned to Fuseli's wife, Sophia, appearing on her doorstep to announce that she, Mary Wollstonecraft, intended to move in with the newlyweds. For while she respected Sophia's rights to her husband's *body*, his conversation had become "indispensable" to her; ergo, she intended to live with them. It was only when Sophia kicked her out in primal horror that Wollstonecraft gave up on this relationship and moved, miserably, to Paris.

Enter Gilbert Imlay, expatriate, author of one travel book and one novel, both replete with social criticism and idealistic designs for institutional reform. He agreed with Wollstonecraft that marriage as it existed in Europe (with legalized male tyranny and no possibility for divorce) was a disaster. So neither rushed for the altar when they fell in love. And fall they did; Wollstonecraft's "whole character seemed to change," according to Godwin's *Memoirs of Mary Wollstonecraft*, when she met Imlay: "Her sorrows, the depression of her spirits, were forgotten . . . her temper overflowing with universal kindness." Imlay visited her constantly and addressed adoring letters to her house in the Paris suburb of Neuilly. Before long, he had listed her in the American embassy as his wife: despite their anti-conjugal views, a pretense of marriage to an American increased an Englishwoman's safety in revolutionary France. When she became

pregnant, he pronounced himself thrilled; they moved into his Paris apartment together. Both had debts, and now they had a child on the way, so when his export business called him to the port of Le Havre he went, for a week, then for a couple of months. He wrote to Mary almost every day, but it was no help—she became increasingly frantic. When, on one occasion, two days passed with no letter, she told him that, "A few more of these caprices of sensibility would destroy me." Her letters became polemics. She assailed Imlay for his greed and for the shallowness of his affections; she told him how much better and deeper a person she was than he.

Imlay invited her to join him in Le Havre. After several months of surprising happiness, business called him away again—to Paris, then to London—and the scenario repeated itself. He summoned her to join him, but by the time she arrived—with great reluctance, stemming, she claimed, from a new distaste for England—their relationship was on the rocks. In the London house Imlay prepared for them, Wollstonecraft "waged a campaign to ruffle him," as Jacobs admits: "disputing, complaining and raging whenever he gave her the chance." But despite such admissions, Jacobs chooses to malign Imlay when, exasperated, he moves out—leaving Mary house, servants, cook, a vow of friendship, and an unusual pledge (in light of the absence of legal ties between them) to give her half of what he earns for the rest of his life. Jacobs's paragraphs drip with sarcasm; she accuses him of "perfidy," of "indifference," of general depravity. She is hardly alone in this view: apart from Janet Todd, whose voluminous *Revolutionary Life* (published in 2000) is more circumspect, most writers on Wollstonecraft—from the savvy Claire Tomalin to the breezy Emily Sunstein—have tarred Imlay blacker still.

This is particularly odd, given that even in the midst of her recriminations, Wollstonecraft herself seems to have known him for a brighter soul. Her confidence in his virtue and devotion emerges in her choice of threats: if he continued to "disdain" her, she would stop accepting his money. At the same time she was trying harder and harder to "shock" him, in Todd's words, into renewed ardor. When her polemics failed, she tried—or pretended to try—to kill herself. She dispatched a suicide note well before the event, and Imlay arrived before she could touch the laudanum that was to poison her. She "determined to continue to exist" afterward and agreed, at his suggestion, to make a three-month journey as his business envoy. The idea was a smart one: it occupied Mary, whose overactive heart hated nothing more than passive waiting, and gave both of them some time off to think about a possible future.

Wollstonecraft made an impressive go of this trip, unusual for a woman to undertake alone in that era, particularly a woman with a new baby in tow. She used the time to write *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*. Sadly, she also used it to drive Imlay away for good. Perhaps he was already too distant to have been retrieved; if not, her correspondence during those months would have put him to flight. "It is my misfortune," she writes, "that my imagination is perpetually shading your defects ... whilst the grossness of your senses makes you ... overlook graces in me." She rages at him to "forget me ... if other gratifications are dearer" and then explodes when he fails to send a second letter to a port at which she stays a day longer than planned. "You might have known," she declares, "had you thought, that the wind would not permit me to depart."

Such expectations and attacks, at a time when the two were supposed to be taking some time away from each other, proved too much for Imlay. His letters got less reassuring and less regular; and he failed to meet her at the end of her journey. He also turned to a new love. Wollstonecraft, in response, attempted suicide again. This time, she was pulled out of the Thames River by fishermen and nursed back to health by the Royal Humane Society, which, jaded by the attempts of many young women, reported

proudly that she was "conveyed home, perfectly recovered." A few weeks later she made an even more desperate, though equally characteristic, gesture, proposing to her free-thinking beloved that she move in with him and his new girlfriend. Ever good-willed, he took the suggestion far more seriously than had Sophia Fuseli; he even visited potential houses with her. Ultimately, however, the plan fell through. Imlay swore eternal friendship and financial support; Wollstonecraft retreated, repined—and ultimately recovered. A year later, in 1796, she was pregnant with the child of William Godwin, and the couple overcame their mutual objections to marriage.

How awful was Gilbert Imlay? His tombstone (he died in 1828) suggests that he was very much the social idealist: it charges passersby to "Speak of the social advances of the day." Both he and Wollstonecraft spurned conventional conjugal coupling; both believed, in her words, that "no motive on earth ought to make a man and wife live together a moment after mutual love and regard are gone." Imlay's love ran out. Perhaps she rushed it on its way; nobody ever accused her of being an easy companion—not even Godwin, who, in their five-month marriage, would come to know her moodiness in his own painful ways. In any case, by her own principles, Imlay had not only the right but the duty to leave her, and he did so in the most magnanimous and solicitous way possible. Perhaps feminist biographers today are more puritanical than Wollstonecraft herself.

But beyond puritanical, it seems to me, they are morally opportunistic. Imlay, though a writer, was a mediocre one; when he hurts a *real* writer—however reluctantly, inevitably, and, in the final analysis, non-disastrously—his crime is splashed across the literary firmament. Percy Bysshe Shelley is a great writer; when he commits the same sort of emotional crime—but more ruthlessly, frivolously, and fatally—it is his sweet nature that we find mythologized. In the epilogue of the very book in which Jacobs bitterly denounces the character of Gilbert Imlay, she copiously praises that of Percy Shelley, who eloped with Wollstonecraft's second daughter, Mary Godwin. Both Shelley and his companion were "beautiful and creative, with sweet tempers." After their elopement, Jacobs writes blithely, "Mary and Shelley traveled, bore children, and wrote masterpieces of the Romantic era." There is no mention of the eighteen-year-old pregnant wife that Shelley already had when he met Mary; no mention of the fact that shortly after he abandoned her to travel and write masterpieces with his new love, the girl killed herself. Like Wollstonecraft when Imlay left her, Harriet Shelley threw herself into an English river. Unlike Wollstonecraft, she sent no premonitory suicide note, attracted no fishermen, and drowned alone. Sweet-tempered Shelley celebrated his wedding to Mary less than three weeks later.

Not that their marriage proceeded as idyllically as Jacobs implies: the children they bore fell like flies (three out of four died in infancy). So did the only child of Mary Shelley's stepsister, Claire, who had joined the travelers and seduced Lord Byron. And Wollstonecraft's first daughter, Fanny, killed herself when Shelley departed with her sisters, abandoning her with the ever-preoccupied Godwin. She resorted, more successfully, to her mother's old strategy, laudanum.

As Percy Shelley followed his high-minded bliss, corpses fell right and left. It is not difficult to imagine why, after his own early death, Mary Shelley responded with horror to an interviewer who asked if she planned to raise their one surviving son to be like his freedom-loving father and "think for himself." "Oh God," she exclaimed, "teach him to think like other people." Social idealism had not served her well. In fact, if there is a point to be gleaned from the histories of these two generations of Romantics, it could be: rigid adherence to ideal freedoms is as cruel as rigid adherence to stupid laws. If one is unwilling to temper—or even abandon—one's enlightened visions in consideration of human need (as Godwin did when he saw Wollstonecraft's distress at mothering a second illegitimate child and proposed to her), one invites disaster. Personal freedoms, no less than public rules, must be observed with discretion and generosity, or the result is too often tragedy.

The same point could be made with another Romantic writer, William Wordsworth, generally portrayed as the poet of childhood innocence, wandering picturesquely through the woods with his "dear sister," Dorothy. Rarely is our view of his character qualified by the fact that, as he roamed serenely through the English Lake District serenading the daffodils, the girl he had promised to marry, Annette Vallon, was financially and emotionally abandoned in France—rearing his child alone, begging him, in angelic terms, to return, and feeling every bit as suicidal as Shelley's discarded wife.

One wonders about the standard for judgment used by today's enlightened—often feminist—literary biographers. After decades of formal feminist literary criticism, can we still be so fickle in our judgments, allowing the axe to fall on relative innocents, such as Imlay, while blessing the crimes of the "greater" writers as obsequiously as ever, even when those crimes are against the sex to whose rights we have become so loudly, proudly, and rightly sensible? Whence this moral relativism? We have advanced little since 1798, when Wollstonecraft was damned as a "whore." We have rounded up a different suspect now, but it's still the wrong one. It is still "justice, not charity," as Wollstonecraft once wrote, "that is wanting in the world."

It is justice that is wanting for Imlay, but justice, too, that is still wanting for the difficult, brilliant Wollstonecraft. Biographers continue to apologize for her emotional intensity; to this day, it is viewed as a quality that compromises—even disproves—her intellectual power. It is time we admit that a strong mind does not imply a docile heart.

Jacobs's new biography speaks little to these issues; in general, it neither enhances nor encumbers our conven-

tional understanding of Wollstonecraft. Like its predecessors, it pounds the patient Imlay and, in so doing, portrays its heroine as a weak and gullible victim. For moral opportunism cuts both ways in this case: it demonizes one party while belittling the other. Rather than let Wollstonecraft emerge as the great Falstaffian firebrand that she was, it presents her as a wounded doe; rather than allow her to excite the admiration and exasperation she deserves, it turns her into an object of pity—and the distance from pity to contempt is not great.

Jacobs's prose, moreover, is flat-footed—a shame, since the book seems to aim, among other things, at entertainment value. Academic references are rare, and many sections bristle with corny novelism: "She sensed danger in the Paris streets," we are told as Wollstonecraft enters revolutionary France. "But she was not in the habit of turning back.... The greatest adventure of her life lay ahead." Jacobs's writing is not equal to the high drama for which she gropes. The only advantage her book possesses over Janet Todd's longer, fairer, more scholarly and complete biography—to which it reads, in fact, like a kind of *Cliff's Notes*—is the very fact that it is shorter. Todd's book, strong as it is, suffers from a surfeit of detail. We hear about Wollstonecraft's menstrual periods, her countless tensions with her siblings, about whether or not she made love with Godwin on a given night. On the relationship with Imlay, Todd is indispensable; for the rest, Claire Tomalin's 1974 biography remains the most readable and acute. Neither Jacobs's historical thriller nor Todd's encyclopedia of domestic minutiae displaces it.

Most vital of all is a return to Wollstonecraft's own *oeuvre*, particularly to her *Vindications* and letters. To read them is to find gems in the dust: contradictions and crystallizations, passion and reason, mistakes and revelations. But the mistakes that Wollstonecraft made, it helps to recall, she paid for herself, in her own lifetime, with pounds of her own flesh. The revelations remain; they are ours. ■

ROADS TO SARAJEVO

A masterpiece of Vienna at twilight

By Matthew Stevenson

Discussed in this essay:

Thunder at Twilight: Vienna 1913/1914, by Frederic Morton. Da Capo Press, 2001. 387 pages. $18.50.

Archduke Franz Ferdinand (left) and Sophie von Chotek/AKG London

A few days before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, I finished reading Frederic Morton's *Thunder at Twilight*, which ends with the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand on June 28, 1914, another day that shook the world. Morton's portrait of Vienna 1913–14 was first published in 1989, but over the years the book's exquisite ragtime evocation of the Old World has stimulated enough interest to warrant a new paperback edition. By chance, I read it on an Austrian Airlines flight that went along the Balkan spine leading from Sarajevo to Vienna—those dark canyons, which broke not just the Austrian empire but most of Europe's imperial claims.

Morton's curtain opens on the ball season in winter, 1913. "On the evening of January 13," he writes, "... Vienna's Bank Employees' Club gave a Bankruptcy Ball. It was the

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