

# Not so groovey, Bob

## Groovey Bob (The Life and Times of Robert Fraser)

Harriet Vyner

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There is no explanation of who the people who contribute to this book are—the majority of whom are not that well known, this is a festschrift, a tribute by pals for other pals.

Robert Fraser was the son of a slightly loopy banker. He failed at Eton and was thus sent into the King's African Rifles (a soul destroying combination). He got into the art world by spending his early days in the US where he visited the Betty Parsons gallery and took a few notes. The sybaritic pleasures, were all the more tasty for him when spending other people's money. As he grew sick of NY's early 60s bondage bars, the idea came to him to start a new gallery in London and punt fairly established US artists in the UK. A lot of the west coast and east crowd hadn't then exhibited in Europe.

His father (a Christian Scientist) offered uselessly lenient advice—and was talked into parting with the cash for the gallery (an early white cube designed by Cedric Price—who said he was the ideal client). He did seem to pay the money in those days, a habit he would grow out of over the years as one turns the pages.

Enjoyment or interest in reading this book is reliant upon the reader making their own amusement—at the expense of the parade of various old hippies—but it has none of the art of epistolary novels like Smollet's *Humphrey Clinker*, although it does have some connection to Stoker's *Dracula*. Early indications paint a cute picture of him as a cross between the Fast Show's Swiss Tony and Rolley Birkin QC. Later ones are not so funny as he descended into forms of abject depravity, which would disgust and anger most people: including nights out with Gilbert and George preying on young boys—or 'chicken' as they liked to call them.

The problem with unleashing a parade of old roués regaling us with tales of their sad exploits and pathetic existence—the cast of this book does lean towards Norma Desmond's old card pals, and I know this is the London art world in all its glory—is that as we are ultimately invited to smell waft after waft of their own emissions—they all end up talking about themselves:

"Dave Medalla: there was a Picasso exhibition at the Tate. I'd been acting pretty funny and got thoroughly drunk, drinking all this red wine and sherry—I was so young! My uncle, the ambassador, had taken me along to this big benefit supper. They wanted to invoke Spain with flamenco dancers, so I jumped on the table and had done an odd version of Flamenco. Robert had really loved it! he and Sir Roland Penrose and his wife, the photographer Lee Miller. So I was just zonked out of my head, that's all I remember."

That one gets worse—it's all just such blundering bathos:

"Anita Pallenberg: ...Whether the drugs has anything to do with it I don't know".

"Jim Dine: I thought his views of art were great, although I was never very clear what they were."

The period is thought of as one of a lowering of class values—and Fraser is presented as an example of this. The liberation was exclusive—reinforcing aristocratic values albeit those of the Hell fire club.<sup>1</sup>

When Fraser's gallery closed down as he awaited trial, a group of his artists got together in support to stage an exhibition; and to bitch about not

being paid. This is Richard Hamilton (one fairly sensible voice throughout) talking to the Press (at one point I thought it was on the invite):

"We are not going to have any kind of statement sympathising with his habits. A number of artists have suffered materially at his hands over the last year or so. Some of the exhibitors have sworn never to show in the place again..."

Fraser influenced the cover of *Sgt. Pepper* and Peter Blake's contributions tend towards telling us he is still pissed off about not getting paid royalties which he was stupid enough not to bother to negotiate properly at the time. Also it still rankles him that it came out looking like a collage rather than a photograph of a full size set. More than thirty years later he's still counting up imaginary sums of money in his head like some Beckett character.

The author Harriet Vyner had a tenuous alcohol relationship with Fraser and makes the pretty hopeless admission that:

"He didn't reminisce at all or talk in depth about anything, but when I was with him there was an atmosphere of glamour."

Right. And that through the haze of booze has qualified her to lash this together.

The book has very little to offer on Fraser and the 'Railing Stains' (as he no doubt referred to them) arrest and subsequent trial<sup>2</sup>, it repeats chunks of previous books, such as that of the Stone's em ...Substance Technician, Spanish Tony. This is Keith Richard's memory of events:

"When you're on an acid you take things in a different way...There's a great thundering at the door and we're all relaxing in front of a big raring fire. George Harrison had just only left. I think they were waiting for him to leave. It was some tip-off from a chauffeur, a newspaper, shabby stuff.

Knock at the door. And we looked through the window. There's all these little people, wearing the same clothes! We took it with a sense of bemusement: 'Oh, do come in.' Then they read the warrant. 'Yes, that's fine, OK, please do look around.'"

There are one or two passages which are mildly related to the times, mildly informative if you flick around and compare things. Malcolm McLaren after noting that it was Fraser who encouraged the V&A to collect Punk memorabilia talks of the 80s:

"High culture was about to become low culture. I think by the eighties it was ...if it wasn't a product that was useful, it wasn't worth being on the block. That was the Thatcherite philosophy or, in fact dare I say it, a fucking mandate. Suddenly art schools were being closed down, suddenly you couldn't get grants to go to art schools. You know, what's the point of studying art if you can't use it to get a job? I could see that was having an effect. Bob was part of an old era that was not wanted on location any more."

This comes a page after testimony by the man running the system who obviously is no judge of character, old mendacity himself:

"Lord Palumbo: I trusted him because he was my friend, always someone I could talk to, to define/refine my own tastes. He was wonderful from that point of view. He was ideal. If you think of gallery owners of today, good though some of them are, none of them have his taste, his eye, his instinct and ability to spot a trend or a talent ten to fifteen years in advance of its time."

The UK didn't produce a really good writer on, and who was part, of the counter-culture of the 60s (if it exists I'd like to read it). Not someone who truly remained an outlaw. Some who should reflect on the past are reluctant to be seen 're-living the past' as if that was a sufficient definition of history.

## Notes

1. Apologies to The Club, which never really called itself the Hell-Fire Club. Its founder, Sir Francis Dashwood termed it 'The Knights of St. Francis of Wycombe', or 'The Monks of Medmenham', but seems to have attracted the 'Hell-Fire' label through the organisation's reputation, echoing that of earlier groups. They were a small group of selected members: Dashwood—a Member of Parliament being the leader. Other members included Lord Sandwich (who at one point commanded the Royal Navy), the politician John Wilkes, William Hogarth and poets Charles Churchill, Paul Whitehead and Robert Lloyd. Benjamin Franklin doesn't seem to have been at the core of any 'Hell-Fire' activities, despite the more spurious books written about the Club. The current Sir Francis quotes John Wilkes describing the group:

*"A set of worthy, jolly fellows, happy disciples of Venus and Bacchus, got occasionally together to celebrate woman in wine and to give more zest to the festive meeting, they plucked every luxurious idea from the ancients and enriched their own modern pleasures with the tradition of classic luxury".*

The Hell-Fire Club's Sir Francis was also founder of the Dilettanti Society.

I draw these remarks mostly from the wonderful Irish electronic magazine Blather devoted to the spirit of Flann O'Brien.

2. Although some points (such as the presence of all the Beatles) are disputed, there is an interesting account of the punitive use of drug busts against the 'rock elite' and the general development of drugs policy, in Steve Abrams "Hashish Fudge, The Times Advertisement and the Wooten Report" (7 April 1993) which is available on the net:

*"The News of the World replied to the article in the People by accusing the Rolling Stones of abusing drugs. (February 3rd) The same night Mick Jagger appeared with Hogg on the Eamon Andrews talk show. Jagger told Hogg that he too had been to university, and seemed to get the better of him. Then, I thought, he got above himself and announced, impulsively, that he would sue the News of the World for libel. The newspaper panicked and went to the Scotland Yard Drug Squad. The head of the Drug Squad, Chief Inspector Lynch later told me that he refused to act. He said that he was not expected to stamp out cannabis, but to keep its use under control. If he arrested Mick Jagger every lad in the country would want to try some pot. He was, after all, head of the drug squad, not head of the Lynch mob.*

*As is well known, the News of the World had more success with the local police in West Wittering, where Keith Richards lived. In the subsequent trial, Jagger's counsel, Michael Havers (later Lord Havers, also Mrs. Thatcher's attorney general in the "Spycatcher" case) alleged that the newspaper used an agent provocateur. The arrests were made on February 12th, but the story did not break until the 19th. Only the Telegraph named those arrested, Keith Richards, charged with the absolute offence of permitting premises to be used for smoking cannabis, and Mick Jagger, charged with possession of amphetamine. George Harrison has said that the Beatles were at the party that was raided, but the police waited until they left.*

*Perhaps the beginning of the entire sequence of events was the arrest on cannabis charges on December 30th 1966 of... John Hopkins (Hoppy), a member of the editorial board of the underground newspaper "International Times". The "underground" was a literary and artistic avant garde with a large contingent from Oxford and Cambridge. Hoppy, for example, was trained as a physicist at Cambridge. The underground had found an enemy in Lord Goodman, Chairman of the Arts Council, who went over the head of the Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, and appealed directly to the Director of Public Prosecutions to mount a police raid on the Indica bookshop where International Times was edited. Goodman had an animus against (Barry) Miles, co-proprietor of the bookshop with Peter Asher, and also a member of the Editorial Board of IT. In December 1966 Eric White nominated Miles to serve on the Arts Council Literary Advisory Panel. Goodman had been infuriated when his appointment was announced to the press on January 30th, and had him thrown off."*