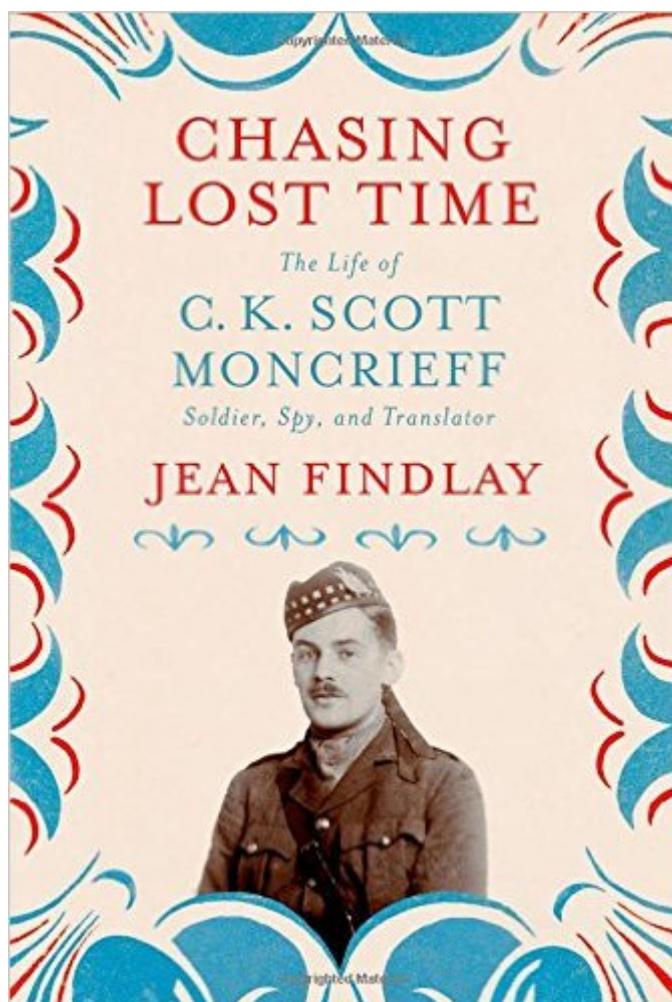


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Chasing Lost Time: The Life Of C. K. Scott Moncrieff: Soldier, Spy, And Translator



Synopsis

The thrilling first-ever biography of Proust translator C. K. Scott Moncrieff, penned by his great-great-niece "And suddenly the memory returns. The taste was that of the little crumb of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray (because on those mornings I did not go out before church-time), when I went to say good day to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me . . ." With these words, Marcel Proust's narrator is plunged back into the past. Since 1922, English-language readers have been able to take this leap with him thanks to translator C. K. Scott Moncrieff, who wrestled with Proust's seven-volume masterpiece •published as *Remembrance of Things Past* •until his death in 1930. While Scott Moncrieff's work has shaped our understanding of one of the finest novels of the twentieth century, he has remained hidden behind the genius of the man whose reputation he helped build. Now, in this biography •the first ever of the celebrated translator •Scott Moncrieff's great-great-niece, Jean Findlay, reveals a fascinating, tangled life. Catholic and homosexual; a partygoer who was lonely deep down; secretly a spy in Mussolini's Italy and publicly a debonair man of letters; a war hero described as "offensively brave," whose letters from the front are remarkably cheerful •Scott Moncrieff was a man of his moment, thriving on paradoxes and extremes. In *Chasing Lost Time*, Findlay gives us a vibrant, moving portrait of the brilliant Scott Moncrieff, and of the era •changing fast and forever •in which he shone.

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Customer Reviews

One knew Charles Kenneth Scott Moncrieff from his translations of Stendhal, Pirandello, the Song

of Roland, the Duc de Lauzun, the Letters of Abelard and Héloïse, and, most especially, Marcel Proust. But one little suspected his many other dimensions: critic, poet, soldier, spy, saucy and sometimes salacious wit, guardian and provider to his many, fatherless nieces and nephews, Catholic convert, child of an attentive, loving, and independent-minded mother (who read Ruskin, one of Proust's favorite authors, to Charles as a child), discreet homosexual, ardent Scot -- a literary figure who had the admiration of contemporaries of no less stature than Conrad, Eliot, Coward, Chesterton, Pirandello, Waugh, Graves, Owen, and many others. It amazes you that he packed so much into a life of only forty-one years, the last third of which was spent in chronic pain from trench fever and from war wounds received while leading his men in an assault on the German lines at Monchy on St. George's Day, 23 April 1917. (Following multiple surgeries and repeated convalescence, he continued to serve in military intelligence despite the severity of his wounds; and he kept his faith in Britain's cause.) After the war, though haunted by the deaths of many friends and family members, Scott Moncrieff worked hard to establish himself. He not only translated "Swann's Way", but corresponded with Proust the month before the author's death; and, in fact, he began his translation of "Swann's Way" as a labor of conviction of its high merit, well before he found a publisher for it. His translation is thus the only one by a Proust contemporary, who shared the sensibility of that early modern era.

This is an interesting book for two categories of readers, I think -- (1) those who enjoy Proustiana, and (2) those who enjoy biographies of eccentric Englishmen of the 1910-1930 period. I happen to belong in both categories. However, those who only are interested in the Proust part will find, probably, only about 15 pages of this very interesting. Those pages are, however, QUITE interesting. It is a happy mystery that Proust's work found, accidentally, such a good translator so quickly. Now, CKSM's methods, approach and results as a translator will always be controversial -- partly because any translation is a stretch, and partly because the professoriat cannot be happy to give CKSM, a non-academic, his due. His method was quite odd. (His Stendhal translations are still among the best available and show that he was, simply, a gifted translator, and didn't just get lucky because he was "first" onto Proust.) However, I believe that any sensitive Anglophone reader will find CKSM's version (as cleaned up by Terence Kilmartin) seductive and full of the authentic Proustian note. (Compare the recent "new" translations edited I think by Lydia Davis....not many major changes, and very unclear what changes there are, are improvements). Yes, he sometimes speaks in a dated tone, but would you expect a Frenchman born in 1870 and writing about a pre-WW I world to sound modern to 2014 ears? Of course, Proust did not read CKSM's translation

and, given his poor knowledge of English (he couldn't have written his Ruskin book if his mother hadn't helped him with the English text), would not have been able to judge it even if he had.

This excellent biography of the man who made *A la recherche du temps perdu* available in English translation has been published in Britain but weirdly not in the United States. What is Random House thinking? All the dreck that is published every year, and something that is unique and worthwhile gets passed over! (Later: I see that Farrar, Straus has picked it up, and will release it in February. Good for them!) C. K. Scott Moncrieff was an interesting man and a wonderful product of the post-Victorian society into which he was born. Though a Scott (which is why his double-barrel surname has no hyphen) he is the very model of an Englishman, as he proved in the trenches of the First World War. His great-grand-niece does a splendid job of telling us about his family, his education, and his military service -- which to an American is quite startling, with Scott Moncrieff seemingly spending as much time relaxing in hospitals and gentlemen's clubs as he does fighting the war. That's not to belittle his courage, however; it just reflects the times he lived in. He was wounded in action, and his wounds very likely shortened his life. Postwar he found a career as a journalist, poet, and -- above all -- translator. His production was prodigious. Simply reading Marcel Proust in translation is a year's work for an individual of above-average intelligence, but Scott Moncrieff translated six out of seven books in the very few years that were granted to him, meanwhile rendering other French classics into the English language. (Reading "Chasing Lost Time" inspired me to go to my bookcase and inspect my venerable paperback of "The Charterhouse of Parma." Sure enough, it was a Scott Moncrieff translation.

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