



The Woman Who Shot Mussolini

Frances Stonor Saunders

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The astonishing untold story of a woman who tried to stop the rise of Fascism and change the course of history

At 11 a.m. on Wednesday, April 7, 1926, a woman stepped out of the crowd on Rome's Campidoglio Square. Less than a foot in front of her stood Benito Mussolini. As he raised his arm to give the Fascist salute, the woman raised hers and shot him at point-blank range. Mussolini escaped virtually unscathed, cheered on by practically the whole world. Violet Gibson, who expected to be thanked for her action, was arrested, labeled a "crazy Irish spinster" and a "half-mad mystic"—and promptly forgotten.

Now, in an elegant work of reconstruction, Frances Stonor Saunders retrieves this remarkable figure from the lost historical record. She examines Gibson's aristocratic childhood in the Dublin elite, with its debutante balls and presentations at court; her engagement with the critical ideas of the era—pacifism, mysticism, and socialism; her completely overlooked role in the unfolding drama of Fascism and the cult of Mussolini; and her response to a new and dangerous age when anything seemed possible but everything was at stake.

In a grand tragic narrative, full of suspense and mystery, conspiracy and backroom diplomacy, Stonor Saunders vividly resurrects the life and times of a woman who sought to forestall catastrophe, whatever the cost.

The Woman Who Shot Mussolini Details

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From Reader Review The Woman Who Shot Mussolini for online ebook

Adrian says

The life of Violet Gibson, daughter of Irish aristocracy, who got it into her head to assassinate Mussolini in 1926. Standing but a few feet away in a crowd she leveled a pistol at his head and fired. The gun misfired and clipped the leader's nose. The author does well bringing in social and political influences to bear on the story. Religious mysticism, psychiatric study and fascism, all relatively new, had their impact. It's shocking to read how in love with Mussolini western media and politicians were. The science of psychiatry wasn't much better with Gibson. The poor woman spent the last 25 years of her life cooped up in an asylum outside London. She tried to keep in touch with outside life by writing numerous letters but none were delivered by hospital staff.

Becky says

UUG I had a review written and then Goodreads went down and didn't post it. What a pain.

Anyway. When people ask me what I read I usually say something like, "I'll read anything." I have no grudges with any particular genre, and I've read bits and pieces of just about everything. But the truth is that I don't read outside of YA/Children's lit very often. So when I read something like this I'm given pause while I'm like... can't tell if badly written... or just unfamiliar genre style...

There were a couple of tense shifts, and the narrative tone changed quite a bit. It was pretty clear that the author is really invested in this subject, and sometimes the narrator became a little protective of Violet. Sometimes the narrator was also really, really funny.

I found Saunders relied a lot on the information of sources that were only tangentially related, like the Fitzgeralds and the Joyces. I liked when she drew the parallels, but sometimes a.) she went on a long tangent and there was too much information and b.) sometimes she tried to relate it too closely and it wasn't always helpful.

Small problems aside, I really enjoyed this book. There were some parts that were so ridiculous, like when part of Violet's insanity defense was that you'd have to be insane to want to kill Mussolini (her lawyer was a freaking genius, btw). If you tried to write that in fiction, no one would buy it. Real life, man.

Parts of it were really, really horrifying. When it started talking about some of the cures for "madness" in women... it was nothing short of torture. I had no idea things like that were still happening even up to WWII. Some of the beliefs about women, and the way they were treated... it makes me feel ill. Some things you can't un-know. But I also wouldn't want to un-know them; these things are important, our history is important. So if only for that reason, it's an important book.

Penny says

Francis Stonor Saunders reminds me of the White Queen, as "trying to believe at least six impossible things before breakfast" is a modest feat in comparison to getting at least three interesting things that I hitherto didn't know into each paragraph!

I just wish I could retain all the information that I get from each page, all relevant, if not necessarily just around the subject of the book, leading you on to make connections with something similar in the past or future that links to the subject under discussion. I am in awe.

Whilst this book is not yet as well thumbed and annotated as my copy of her book about the Diabolical Englishman John Hawkwood I am sure that it will be a useful source of reference on Mussolini, the Rise of Fascism, Murder, Madness, Italian Law & Justice and much besides for years to come.

Hanne Armstrong says

I read this author's "Hawkwood: Diabolical Englishman" (an account of 14th century condottiere John Hawkwood) with great pleasure some years ago, so when I saw this book, bought it immediately.

Partly, of course, because I had no idea that a woman had shot Mussolini

I wasn't disappointed.

Stonor Saunders enters the world of between-war Europe as easily as she does that of the 1300's.

Her book speaks not only for and about Violet Gibson, the Anglo-Irish aristocrat who attempted to assassinate Mussolini, but for and about the period generally, and particularly what it was to be an upper class woman at that time.

Mussolini, lunatic asylums, social attitudes, are all presented insightfully and readably.

Sometimes, though, I do feel that extraneous references are dragged in, but for the most part, this is a well-written, lively, book, well worth reading.

Bill says

pretty good book about the british woman who in 1926 tried to assassinate mussolini. unfortunately for everyone(except mussolini)she missed only grazing his nose and the gun jammed when she tried to fire again. i must admit i wasn't even aware that this event had happended.

for a history book, it's very well written and very easy to read. trying to make a book of over 300 pages on this topic means the author has had to pad the book with details of other family members, other non-related events in mussolini's life etc. but that's ok...it's all very interesting.

the woman (violet gibson) spent most of the rest of her life in an insane asylum, when she probably should have been given a medal. still, mussolini came to a bad end eventually, as was well deserved.

Louise says

Here is an interesting piece of history. I didn't know of Violet Gibson, nor of her attempt to kill Mussolini. I picked up this book because I wanted to read about Italy around the time that my grandparents left it.

The book had some of cultural milieu I was looking for. I learned about Italian law and justice at the time, the women's prisons run by nuns, the treatment of the mentally ill and the general tenor of Mussolini's adoring crowds. In the chapter "Stigmata" there is a section on the Fascist view of women. There is also interesting material English-Irish politics in the post-Victorian era.

Besides this and the slice of history it covers, the book provokes a lot of thought. There is the disparity in treatment of Mussolini's would be assassins; how the Fascists used the assassination attempts as an excuse to solidify dictatorial control; the changing views on Mussolini by such powerful figures as the Chamberlain brothers and Winston Churchill; the post-war treatment of Ezra Pound vs that of Violet Gibson; how mental institutions can create conditions that induce or increase the probability of derangement symptoms, etc. As an alternative history, had Violet Gibson done this 15 years hence, would she have been a heroine?

While this is not an essential read for historians, it will certainly hold your interest.

Stephen McCarthy says

This is a fascinating book. It captures the uncertain political landscape and turbulent social changes of the years between the World Wars. The book exposes the hypocrisy and self serving nature of politicians on all sides, not just Mussolini.

It gives insight into the collapse or at least waning of the power of privilege and aristocracy as Irish society moved from Empire to Commonwealth and the emergence of the Irish Republic. It also sheds light on the mental health care system before and after the creation of the NHS.

But as well as all that, the book captivates with the truly human story of a woman with obvious, but ill defined, problems who chose a higher path, albeit delusional but ultimately if she had succeeded would have changed history. A woman whom everyone tried to forget has been tastefully and masterfully immortalised. I would recommend this book to anyone seeking something out of the ordinary.

Christine says

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1. On Wednesday 7th April 1926, in front of a crowd of cheering Fascist supporters, Benito Mussolini is shot at close quarters. The bullet nicks the bridge of his nose and the bleeding is profuse. Who shot him and why did they do it?
 2. Violet Gibson was the daughter of an Anglo-Irish peer. Her circumstances were comfortable financially, but her quest for spiritual comfort was troubled. What led her to raise a pistol at the Fascist dictator Mussolini?
 3. Mussolin
-

Bettie? says

Sinead Cusack reads from Frances Stonor Saunders' account of the troubled life of Violet Gibson, the daughter of an Anglo-Irish lord, who attempted to assassinate Mussolini in Rome in 1926. On Wednesday 7th April 1926, in front of a crowd of cheering Fascist supporters, Benito Mussolini is shot at close quarters. The bullet nicks the bridge of his nose and the bleeding is profuse. Who shot him and why did they do it?

Abridged by Jill Waters

Was she mad or was she pretending to be mad to execute her theosophically rooted political agenda? And

dontcha think it's a shame that the second bullet misfired? 2.5 stars

Laura says

From BBC Radio 4 - Book of the Week:

Sinead Cusack reads from Frances Stonor Saunders' account of the troubled life of Violet Gibson, the daughter of an Anglo-Irish lord who attempted to assassinate Mussolini in Rome in 1926.

Jane says

Good account of a blip in history I had never heard anything about. In 1926 Violet Gibson gets close enough to take a shot at Mussolini and got a part of his nose. If her gun had not jammed history would have been markedly changed. Good effort to put the reader in the context of the times. A number of famous people are included - again as an effort to give the reader that feel for the times. I thought it was a little long. Covers the backgrounds of both major characters (she a lady of Irish upper class and he a youth from poor background). Shows Mussolini's lack of real commitment to any real political view simply wanted power. And it is never known whether Violet Gibson - in the throes of religious fervor - tries to assassinate Il Duce or was she part of a conspiracy. Either way she spent the rest of her long life in an asylum.

S'hi says

For all the men who have statues erected in their name, yet have failed to achieve the missions they set out on, it is doubly remarkable that a woman such as Violet Gibson has faded from public consciousness. That she is remembered at all must come down to her family's class, or the likelihood of records remaining would be greatly diminished. But it is also because of this family background that Violet's story is so problematical. Stonor Saunders uses the sources of others of the same generation to fill out Gibson's story. At first this seems a little confusing for those not part of or familiar with that circle. But as the work progresses the relevance of these other sources becomes clearer.

Gibson's life spanned a very volatile period in history, when practices were becoming established in such a way that smacked of tradition and yet had nowhere near outlasted previously established traditions around family, work and other social relations. The practice of colonialism had its backlash of dissenting voices from the colonies. Religion was still a major influence but which one and what to make of the newer spiritual enquiries burgeoning across the continent. Even the seemingly privileged position as a daughter of the first Irish Lord Chancellor, Lord Ashbourne, was not as stabilising a position in the world as one might have thought.

The choice to render this biography in a religious context, by the parts having the biblical names Revelation, Acts and Lamentations, rather challenges the same basis within Violet Gibson herself as a religious seeker or convert to Catholicism. An Irish woman converting to Catholicism? The image in itself breaks any stereotypical thinking we may bring as an audience to this tale.

The clash of ideas and viewpoints within the writing actually provide the social scape of the times rather effectively. It is difficult to be sure of one's own bearings among so many ideas and influences and questions - everyone seems to have their own half-answers and probing questions.

To maintain a kind of parallel between the lives of Mussolini and Violet Gibson throughout the book is quite an accomplishment for the writer. While Mussolini would have reached a point where Gibson was no longer

relevant to him, he certainly remained of significance to her. The title of the book reiterates this as if it is the only reason to be remember her is in relation to him.

Yet part of Violet Gibson's story remains the similarity to so many other women – even as a single woman her entire life – as being seen or defined by her relationship to a man. This must be what makes her own particular story so memorable: that her attempt to finish a man that she did not want any further relationship with should hold such sway throughout the most significant part of her life, and taint her memory in the minds of others!

Even the wording of that sentence makes it seem as if it is only the relationship between a man and a woman. That is what we still tend to think eighty years after her great act of bravery. And yet it is actually the political stage she stepped up to that is the signifier of her bravery, and the defiance of her father and others in her own social circle that must make us question whether all acts of bravery are also forms of insanity as hers became defined.

This is the story of one person at a threshold that others do not recognise for what it is. At a time when the whole world was redefining and reinventing itself, this one woman embodies something of the inner turmoil we all must face to be able to transform ourselves. The greater the enforced isolation, the greater the proof that no person is an island. If they were, no effort would be required to silence and exile them.

This story must raise the philosophical issues of existence for us all. And with it the social, political, and economic factors that play across our lives and even our spirituality to go on beyond the borders of our own existence into the lives of others.

Nick Sweeney says

This was a fantastic look at a range of characters, and also at political trends and movements. It begins with wouldbe assassin Violet Gibson's Anglo-Irish ascendancy background, and the rifts that old and new allegiances caused between members of her family. They seemed like people in search of something, anything - hence one brother's love of all things Irish, including the language and a strange costume highlighted by an orange kilt, which he always wore, despite never living in Ireland; her mother was also drawn to the blatant fakeness of Christian Science. Violet herself outraged all of them by becoming a Catholic. She seemed to have fixed on killing Mussolini for a long time, though it was a wish that was gestating in her, and not a plan, as such. Mussolini's own background is also shown in detail. He was not simply the pompous buffoon portrayed somewhat lazily by commentators. There was much more - and much worse - to him than that. He was also a man in search of something to cling to. His fascism was made up on the spot and was therefore devoid of any solid policy, his friendships were made very unwisely and the disastrous empire-building decisions he took were based on an illusion of his, and his rather backward country's, supposed greatness. You almost feel sorry for the hapless Mussolini as the book goes on; stuck with the dreadful fallout of all those bad friendships and decisions. Not that sorry, though. Violet Gibson came very close to putting the dictator out of the misery to come when she joined a fawning crowd one morning in Rome and took a pot shot at him that struck him on the nose. Mussolini made much of his seeming invincibility, and the fact that he was almost unembarrassable, and within a day he had resumed his duties, including a state visit, with a bandage covering much of his face. What happened to Violet after her arrest takes up the second half of this book, and I don't want to spoil that in a review, so I'll just say that she was very shamefully treated, even after it was decided that it was possibly crazier NOT to shoot Europe's dictators, and long after an Italian partisan group had finished what Violet started, and put an end to Mussolini.

Eva says

I found this book fascinating. I embarked on it because I had never heard of Violet Gibson or read about Mussolini's rise. The author has a drily funny way of talking about the absurdity of fascism that is very satisfying at the moment, even as she acknowledges the horror of it, and treats Gibson with a great deal of sympathy.

What the book doesn't really do is give me more than a glimpse of the Italy that my anti-fascist grandparents grew up in before they fled for the US. I'll have to look further for that.

Pat says

Very occasionally, I come across a book that is so interesting that I read it in one sitting and this is one of these. The subject matter is a virtually forgotten incident which occurred in 1926 and its protagonists are Violet Gibson, an aristocratic British spinster and Benito Mussolini, the fascist leader of Italy. If events that morning had gone just a little differently, the whole course of twentieth century history might have been very different.

On that long ago Wednesday Violet Gibson had set out from the convent where she was staying in Rome carrying a pistol, a stone and a scrap of newspaper on which she had written "Palazzo del Littorio", the address of the Fascist Party headquarters where she intended to carry out her deed in the afternoon. But instead she stopped at the Campodoglio where a crowd had gathered because of Mussolini's presence and, seeing him emerge from the Palazzo dei Conservatori, she shot him at point blank range, injuring the tip of his nose. Violet Gibson got as close to her target as Jack Ruby got to Lee Harvey Oswald 37 years later, murder, as the author of this book points out, sometimes being "a very intimate business".

At this point you may well be asking yourselves, as I did, why you have not heard of this incident before and the answer seems to be because it suited both the British and Italian governments to hush it up. It made the newspapers in both countries, of course, and Mussolini's supporters bayed for Violet's blood but both sets of diplomats were only too happy for Violet's family to take her back to Britain and have her quietly shut away. That is what happened and Violet remained in what we would now call a "private mental health facility" for the rest of her life.

Two questions remain about Violet: why did she do it and was she mad? The first has never been definitively answered, as Violet always implied that there were others involved, though no evidence of this was ever found. If she was mad, she was an "intelligent lunatic" who read the papers and analysed political events. She was also born at a time when women of her class were brought up to be ornaments. It is possible, then, that she was looking for a cause and she seems to have thought that she was acting on some sort of divine command.

For years, Violet led investigators and her doctors a dance, at one point asserting,

"What I say can't be believed because I am mad"

and she hardly helped her own cause. Despite her numerous, cogent pleas to the highest in the land, she was never set free or even allowed to reside in a Catholic hospital as she requested and her family became

exasperated and more than a little concerned about costs. At this point the book becomes a kind of chronicle of the way in which the well-off mentally ill were treated in the first half of the twentieth century and it is none the less fascinating for that.

The book, however, is as much Benito Mussolini's story as it is Violet's and its early part poses a third question: was Mussolini mad? I'll leave you to make up your own minds on that one!

Meanwhile, back to our mysterious "heroine": When Violet Gibson died in 1956 no public announcement was made and no friend or relative attended her funeral. She remains, in death as in life, an enigma.
