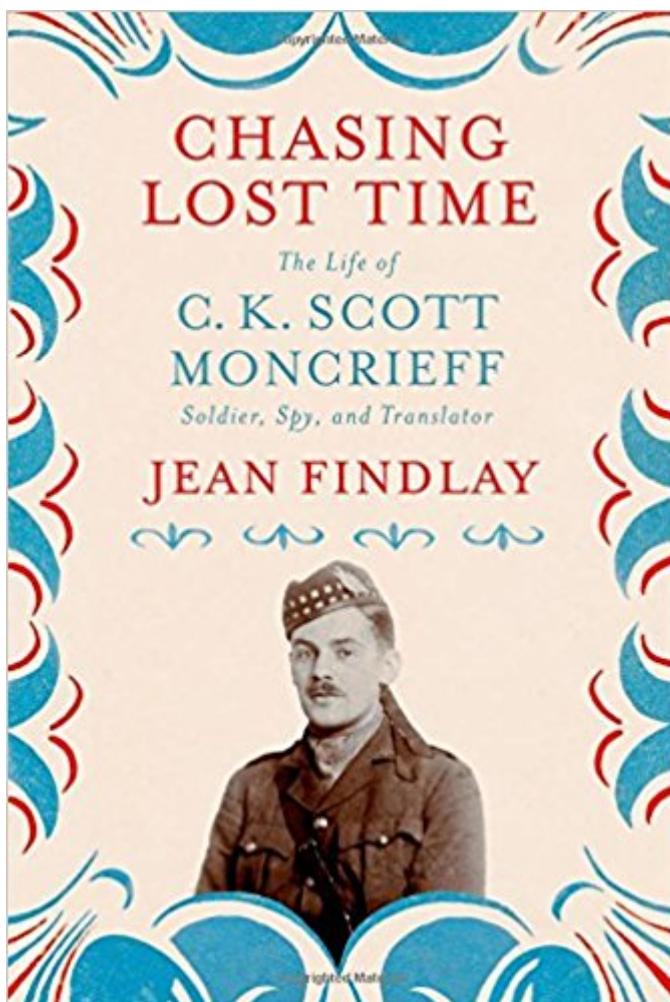


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# Chasing Lost Time: The Life Of C. K. Scott Moncrieff: Soldier, Spy, And Translator



## 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 LÃ©onie 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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A first-rate, playful, moving biography.” The Times (London)  
Jean Findlay . . . has given us at last a full portrait of this admirable man who, for most of us, has until now been only a shadowy figure. Walter Kaiser, The New York Review of Books

Jean Findlay was born in Edinburgh and studied law and French at Edinburgh University, then theater in Krakow with Tadeusz Kantor. She ran a theater company, writing and producing plays in Berlin, Bonn, Dublin, Rotterdam, and the Pompidou Centre in Paris. She has written for The Scotsman, The Independent, The Guardian, and Time Out, and she lives in Edinburgh with her husband and three children. She is the great-great-niece of C. K. Scott Moncrieff.

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 Heloise, 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. He championed Proust's work after his death in 1922 by persuading twenty literary figures of the day to contribute to the 1923 "Marcel Proust: An English Tribute" that kept Proust's burgeoning reputation alive and growing. For all the criticism (some of it fair, some just carping) of Scott Moncrieff's translation of "À la recherche du temps perdu", Scott Moncrieff's efforts speedily introduced Proust to English readers in the British Isles and North America. He persisted despite risks from the censors and despite the serious textual problems

(especially, but not only, in the posthumous titles) of the initial Gallimard French edition of "Recherche" (later called the "abominable" edition by Samuel Beckett). Scott Moncrieff worked swiftly, lest Proust's premature death dampen the growing interest in his novel. In less than a decade, Scott Moncrieff translated and published all of "Recherche," save only the final title "Le Temps retrouvé": Only Scott Moncrieff's early death cut short his plan to complete the translation. It is an indication of the continued value and influence of Scott Moncrieff's Proust translation that Yale University Press and preeminent Proust scholar William Carter have embarked on a project, over the next few years, to revise and annotate Scott Moncrieff's translation of Proust's novel in light of the authority of the late-1980s Pléiade edition of "Recherche" -- an editorial resource unavailable to Scott Moncrieff as successive titles of "Recherche" came out following World War I. The first title in the Yale-Carter project, "Swann's Way," was issued in November 2013 to mark the anniversary of the publication of "Du côté de chez Swann"

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 book does discuss (though this info is available elsewhere too) Marcel's interesting note to CKSM about the title "Swann's Way" (we will leave aside the choice of "Remembrance..." which everyone understood (most English people who read Proust early had enough French to know without a

doubt the title had been loosely translated, with no effort to just transliterate the phrase) was not literal but suggestive, and which I defend on the grounds that "In Search of Lost Time" is not idiomatic English and sounds, frankly, silly (in English); we don't "search" for "lost time". How would one "search" for "lost time"? (And in French, "recherche" is not exactly a "search"). "Thinking About [One's] [The] [Lost] Past" is perhaps the closest close-to-literal way to think about the title in English, but the Shakespearean phrase used by CKSM is close enough. One thing Proust isn't is silly, and CKSM was in my view correct in not using a risible title. To return to Proust's note on "Swann's Way" -- if I am reading Proust's note properly, he seems to think that in English (again, a language Marcel did NOT understand at all well) readers would have thought the title meant something like "Swann's Way of Life" rather than (as he intended) something like "The Way to Swann's Place". I tend to think the "willed ambiguity" of "Swann's Way" works beautifully -- suggesting to me (if not to a non-English speaker, i.e., Proust himself) -- mostly a geographical reference to Swann, but with an undercurrent also of "Swann's Way of Life." The material here about how "Sodom et Gomorrhe" became "Cities of the Plain" is also interesting. We can all agree that "Within a Budding Grove" is not the happiest choice of CKSM (and his publisher), but the contemporary correspondance indicating that a "jeune fille en fleur" was understood at the time to refer to a girl reaching the age of menarche perhaps puts the pudeur of the publisher in perspective.

As a passionate reader of Proust, I anticipated the translator's biography for several months; my long wait was not to be a disappointment. I found it impossible to put the book down once it arrived. Were it not for the exigencies of life, I would surely have finished it on one sitting. The work is beautifully written, at times poignant, charming, amusing and very entertaining. The research is superb and it is never dull at any point, from a charming childhood, to harrowing times in the trenches of the Great War and on to several love affairs in Italy. To all of my fellow readers of the C.K. Scott Moncrieff translation of Proust's great work (which, many of his contemporaries claimed was a work of genius in and of itself): this lovely biography is for you.

An astonishing man - and a good man! Having grown up pooh-poohing CKSM's translation of Proust (without having read it), I am awestruck by how much of great value he packed into his brief life. His accomplishments as a translator would be enough to assure him a high place in literary history, but there was so much more, so many parts to his life that ordinarily would not fit together in a single lifetime, much less one that ended at the age of 41. I said he was a good man, but he would have preferred to be known as an honorable man. Of the three lives that he seemed to live

simultaneously two perhaps are not usually associated with honor but somehow he invested them with the qualities of kindness and discretion for which he was known as a public man. I will read his Proust, his Stendahl and especially his Pirandello with a keen appreciation for the human qualities he found in them and brought to them.

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