Books

Beauty and Artiste

Lee Miller: A Life, by Carolyn Burke (Knopf, 428 pages, $35).

By
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Like Walt Whitman, Lee Miller contained multitudes. A longtime nude model for her amateur-photographer father, she was as a teen the toast of New York fashion photographers. Settling in Paris, she became the pupil, lover, and partner of surrealist photographer Man Ray. She opened her own studios in Paris and New York before marrying an Egyptian businessman and retiring briefly to the amateur ranks. Traveling the Egyptian desert she made many of her most riveting surrealist images. In World War II, she became, along with Margaret Bourke-White, one of the two credentialed women combat photographers and the only one representing a fashion magazine (Vogue). She accompanied her photographs with prose of distinction and would have had an honorable place as a war correspondent had she never trained a camera on war. In her later years in Sussex, she photographed less and less, but found time to become a sort of surrealist Julia Child and an alcoholic. And, oh yes, she was astonishingly beautiful.

Miller was an artist of merit with a life perhaps more interesting than her art. Carolyn Burke ’71GSAS has given us a richly detailed, excellently written, and critically observed account of this life — one that deserves a superb biography and has gotten it.
Elizabeth Miller (she did not become “Lee” until she was 20) was born in 1907 to an upper-middle-class family in Poughkeepsie. Her father was the CEO of the American branch of a Swedish-based producer of cream separators. The Millers can be precisely located by saying that in a small city they were among the members of the country-club consuming class.

On a visit to Brooklyn, the seven-year-old Elizabeth appears to have been raped by a friend of her hosts. The incident is still obscure, but her 12 years of frequently painful treatment for gonorrhea are amply documented. She was a fractious child and adolescent. Today almost any eccentricity can be laid to rape at seven; years of posing in the altogether for Daddy's stereoscopic camera would ice the cake. Burke treats the latter influence judiciously. She sees the oddness of the thing, but notes without a snigger that there is no evidence of any sexual contact between father and daughter. Theodore Miller may well have been the Lewis Carroll of Poughkeepsie: It does not seem that any of the Reverend Mr. Dodgson's child models suffered from the experience.

Miller's education could be called turbulent. She was thrown out of a number of schools before enrolling in the great open university of New York City. Discovered on the sidewalk by Condé Nast, she became the vogue of Vogue and studied to become an artist.

She appeared in front of the camera just when photographers as well as their models were beginning to attain celebrity. Arriving in Paris in 1929, Miller made a rendezvous not only with Man Ray but with her artistic destiny. She quickly moved behind the camera, in a milieu where the photographer was gaining acceptance as an artist rather than a purveyor of ersatz substituting for "real" art. In their studios, Miller and Ray worked with barely mobile devices recording images on sheet film or glass plates. When they went out to photograph in the streets of Paris, they used the simple folding cameras of the day.

Readers might want to know what cameras she took with her on the journey, though Burke points out that Ray thought "equipment mattered less than the person who pushed the button." Certainly true. But this was the era of the Leica, the first high-precision camera using 35mm film, and the preferred instrument of Miller's friend Henri Cartier-Bresson. Compact and light, yet allowing exhibition-size prints, the Leica transformed the opportunities open to the photographer. Might Miller have used such a camera in addition to the Rolleiflex Burke mentions? (A 1969 photograph shows her holding a Hasselblad.)

Much of Miller's current reputation is as a surrealist photographer. (Her beauty has been preserved in a brilliant nude by Man Ray as La Femme Surréaliste.) Surrealism is, possibly, an acquired taste. In the hands of a Dalí — an incomparable draftsman (admitted Orwell, who detested his work) and not unskilled at self-promotion — it

has endured as a phenomenon.

But the photographic surrealists lived in a frontier province. For painters, realism was a challenge and surrealism one more. Think Dalí's Persistence of Memory: Painting those watches before they began to go limp would have been a challenge in itself. For photographers, by contrast, realism came from simple competence, and surrealism required not only imagination but the development of new techniques. Hence "solarization," in which the tones of a photographic negative or print are partially reversed by exposure to light during development. Although this effect was discovered early and often by the careless, it appears to have been Lee Miller who first found it an artistic tool. Ray's solarized portrait is another of his splendid images of her.

Miller's photography had stepped completely out of the studio by 1934, when she married Aziz Eloui Bey, an Egyptian engineer and official, and moved to Cairo. They roamed the Egyptian desert together, and she produced a number of surrealistic landscapes. In these she began to move away from Ray's assertion that he did not photograph reality but his fantasies. Later, as she stared reality full in the face during war, she completed the move, although she remained ever alert to the surrealistic possibilities of realism.

In 1939 Miller left Egypt (and Eloui, although he did not fully realize it at the time) to join Roland Penrose in London. The War provided many opportunities for her surrealist's eye. Like everyone living in London in 1940, she witnessed combat, as she would later on the continent. One of the most arresting images she captured during the Blitz is of the façade of a Nonconformist chapel. The walls within the structure, outside the frame, have been blown down, and the individual bricks spill out through the door in a perverse cornucopia. They fill the mouth of the horn — in this case a severely neoclassical Doric rectangle — and block the street with an obscene abundance of destruction. The surrealist sensibility may be subject to bouts of frivolity, but this photograph shows it in dead earnest.

When Miller got to the war zone with her improbable Vogue credentials, she teamed up with David E. Scherman of Time-Life. As was often the case, her professional partner became her partner in the contemporary sense. (Burke records a contemplative Miller wishing she had been more generous with her body, but on this score she did not seem to have had much reason for self-reproach.) Although photojournalism does not lend itself easily to direct collaboration, their relationship

was artistically fruitful. It was Scherman who, on the day of Hitler's suicide, took the famous photo of Miller in Hitler's bathtub — a subject embodying the surrealism inherent in war's Götterdämmerung stage.

Surrealism continued to inform her life until its end. After her divorce from Eloui, her 1947 marriage to Penrose kept her near the main channel of surrealism in England until her death in 1977. Her photographic career, largely working for British Vogue, dwindled and ended after the war. She turned to cuisine: Burke includes several of her recipes, such as one for marshmallow-cola ice cream, a dish worthy of Dalí. Miller also turned increasingly to drink.

Carolyn Burke shows us that the largely forgotten Lee Miller is well worth remembering and judging. Her realistic photographs, including the war reportage and the later portraits of her friends and acquaintances — running from Picasso to Cocteau to Charlie Chaplin to Gertrude Lawrence and many in between — are her true legacy, at least for those who regard photographers as something different from painters, even surrealist ones.

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