

Eve Arnold 1912 – 2012 An appreciation.

It is 1950 and The United States of America are somewhat less than united. Segregation between Black and White is still the norm and the Senator for Wisconsin makes a speech in which he claims to have the names of spies and communists employed by the State Department. In Harlem a petite, 38 year old Jewish housewife of Russian extraction takes her Rolleiflex to a fashion show in Black Harlem. A renowned (within her family circle) baker of cakes and biscuits, the mother of a young son (Francis), she runs a home in Long Island but working for a photographic processor and printer has given her the urge to take her own photographs. Now, backstage at the *Fashion in Harlem* show, she captures on film the exotic and shimmering Charlotte Stribling, better known to her many fans as "Fabulous". The Black model looks surprised to be photographed, especially as the situation is so "unflattering". Behind "Fabulous" stands a New York policeman resting his right foot on a water pipe!

All in all, the petite housewife from Long Island shoots 22 "official" rolls of 120 film on 5 assignments in 1950. Eve Arnold has arrived! In 1951 she exposes 32 rolls of 120 on a photo essay about Migrant Labour. A further 23 rolls are shot on a Christmas Story. For the film company, 20th Century, she photographs José Ferrer and Gloria Swanson, her first contact with cinema stars of the day. The diminutive Arnold will come to be one of the favoured photographers of the glitterati. In the 1960s, the film director John Huston commissioned Norman Parkinson to photograph his teenage daughter. Anjelica Huston arrived for the session caked in makeup and her father's immediate reaction was to send for Eve Arnold who calmly and diplomatically sorts the matter out to everyone's satisfaction. Robert Capa assessed her style as being somewhere between Marlene Dietrich's legs and the hard lives of dispossessed migrant workers.



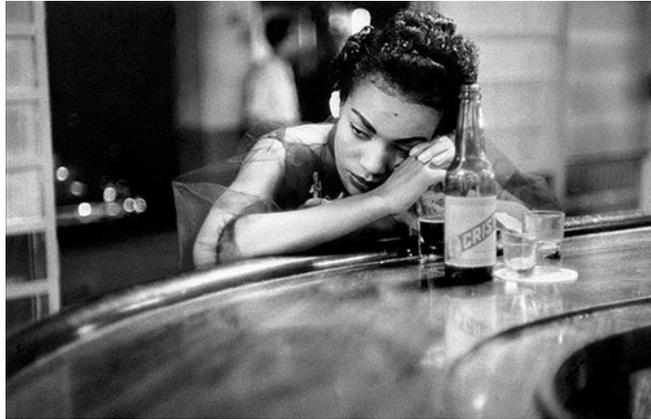
Yet, celebrities were but a small part of her portfolio. In a recent obituary someone claimed that it was only her work with Marilyn Monroe that had given Arnold a sort of vicarious glamour and ephemeral fame. Arnold, herself, might have laughed at this. Her sense of humour was self-deprecating and gentle yet her adherence to truth absolute. During the premier of Spike Lee's film biography of Malcolm X,

Arnold's photographs of him were used to dress the cinema. Several Black Muslims sought out Arnold and told her how grateful they were that she'd "...made Malcolm look cool!" That, she said, was easy as he was the personification of "Cool". What annoyed her though was the refusal of the Black Muslims to acknowledge that they had made common cause with George Lincoln Rockwell and the American Nazi Party in 1961. It never happened, they claimed. The evidence was there in her photographs and no amount of intimidation would make her compromise.

How much Eve Arnold faced danger would be hard to say. She was verbally and physically intimidation many times. Working on the Malcolm X assignment she was reliant upon whichever way the *wind* blew and was frequently threatened over the telephone by White Supremacists. She faced the same sort of problems when on assignment to photograph the Klu Klux Klan. Deftly weaving her way between the various factions she captured the essence of the movement whilst the Grand Imperial Wizard ranted against various groups in society including women and Jews.

In 1954 Eve Arnold photographed mental patients in a Haitian asylum where tranquilisers from a US company were being tested. The previous year she had joined Magnum along with the Co-operative's other first woman photographer: Inge Morath. Neither claimed the honour of being first instead insisting they had both joined at the same time. While the tall and stately Morath may have epitomised international glamour Eve Arnold soon became the "mother figure" amongst the growing number of idealistic and, at times, egocentric male photographers.

It was through the good offices of the other Magnum photographers that she claims to have learned her trade. Surrounded by such skilled practitioners as Bert Glinn and Elliot Erwitt, Marc Riboud and Dennis Stock it was, she later said, impossible not to learn. Her working principle was always to learn while doing and to constantly do and so learn.



By 1954 Eve Arnold started using a 35 mm camera for most of her work; both a Leica and a Pentax. It was in that year that her assignment on the Haitian asylum was followed by an essay on the prostitutes of pre-Castro Cuba. From this series of 72x35mm and 460x120 images one stands out for its composition but more importantly its humanity and pathos: a young prostitute slumped across a bar in Havana with the empty beer bottle just out of reach. The desperation and feeling of despair is there on her face.

1954 was also the year she photographed Senator Joe McCarthy, the Senator for Wisconsin. The apportioning of assignments by the Magnum hierarchy says much for their understanding of the qualities of their photographers. Whilst Eve Arnold's tact, diplomacy and outright courage along with her ability to reach the heart of a subject, her affinity with people no matter what their background led to her being assigned some of the more unpleasant jobs short of front-line war photography. Arnold was also given many of the domestic and tender assignments; Jackie Kennedy welcomed her to the White House to photograph the Kennedy children.

More and more Eve Arnold came to Britain and worked on assignments here. She began working for *The Sunday Times Magazine* capturing the essence of British life from the formal women members of an archery club to Margot Fonteyn and her new Russian partner Rudolf Nureyev, Photo-essays on Cheltenham Ladies College and Wycombe Abbey Girls' School (where she used a mixture of colour and Tri-X), politicians such as the Conservative Minister Reginald Maudling) and the Church of England for which assignment she used 82 rolls of 35 mm colour film). Many of her portraits were still on Tri-X such as the 1964 shoot for *Vogue* of the actor Alan Bates. Then it was back to American for a 13 roll shoot on Andy Warhol, 24 rolls on Senator Barry Goldwater and a mere 3 rolls on Robert Kennedy. Sandwiched amongst all this she completed more assignments for the *Sunday Times* on the Royal Society, Fringe Religions in the USA and "Negro Aristocracy".

Aged 80 she took one of her final "public" assignments for *The Sunday Times* photographing John Major in Downing Street in November and December of 1992. The travel and intensity of her long working life had taken its toll. She had started working in an Estate Agents' office during the Second World War leaving in 1943 to work for the photographic printer. She had covered assignments that might have balked the most hardened of souls (the training of Black Civil Rights workers to resist the treatment meted out to them by White Supremacists being just one). She had become the confidant of the famous (Joan Crawford in her later life; Marilyn Monroe; Marlene Dietrich and even Mrs Khrushchev being but a few). There had been times when her quiet, sharp presence had captured the essence of a person or a situation (the telling image of Richard Burton and Elizabeth Taylor while the former was filming *Becket* and there on the table a packet of Burton's favourite sausages Taylor would cook for him for his supper).



A life-long friend, Anjelica Huston, visited her in the London care home she lived in towards the end of her life. Unable to hold a camera Eve Arnold read and read (Russian classics mainly) and continued to observe life as she had always done. Her clear eyes and sharp instincts had not left her only the physical ability to develop the ideas that buzzed around inside her head. Many of Eve Arnold's assignments had become stories in pictures though her skill as a writer was formidable. Her

patience, humour and ability to empathise with her subject allowed her to go where few others either dared or were able. One of the first American photographers to have access to both China and Russia and one of the first photographers allowed into the world of Arab women for her study of "Women behind the veil" she became a benchmark for concerned and investigative photographers. Though never allowed to "go to war" as one of her heroines (Lee Miller) had done, she nevertheless proved herself in ways that Miller never could or did. No matter how important a photographer Miller was she never achieved the range or depth of work of Arnold. If there were to be one photographer regardless of gender whom one should emulate as a exemplar for their rapport with their subject; their dedication to the humanity of the people they met regardless of colour or belief it would be Eve Arnold, the quiet and gentle little housewife from Long Island.

In her own words in an interview for the BBC in 2002:

"You want to go as deeply into them (her subjects) as people as you can. But usually what happens, if you're careful with people and if you respect their privacy, they will offer part of themselves that you can use and that is the big secret. It has to do with the relationship of the photographer to the subject."

John Cogan

Photo credits

- 1: Eve Arnold 1997 Photograph by Jane Bown for the Observer
- 2: Girl in a brothel in the red light district, Havana, Cuba, 1954 © Eve Arnold/Magnum
- 3: Eve Arnold on the set of "Becket" 1963 © Eve Arnold/Magnum