



# Marc Glendenning

## A dandy in the Soho underworld

**O**N THURSDAY December 4 at 6.30pm a group will assemble at The French House in London's Soho and raise a glass in memory of one-time *Tribune* contributor, Julian Maclaren-Ross. We will then proceed an hour later to his spiritual home (pun intended), The Wheatsheaf, to hear Paul Willets, the author of *Fear and Loathing in Fitzrovia*, the bizarre life of writer, actor, Soho dandy Julian Maclaren-Ross. Why is he worth celebrating? Why are we so determined to keep his memory alive and spread awareness of him?

It is true that JMR cannot be said to have been one of Britain's literary greats. As his biographer puts it: "Like F. Scott Fitzgerald before him, he was a mediocre caretaker of his own immense talent."

He could and should have been a literary contender. Sadly, nothing he wrote remains in print. *Memoirs of the Forties* would certainly find a market today from the not-inconsiderable number of people fascinated to read a first-hand account of the texture of Soho existence during the Second World War and its immediate aftermath.

His numerous short stories provide a witty and insightful window to aspects of British life from the 1920s through to the early 1960s. His best work was based on his personal experiences, whether documenting life as a salesman of vacuum cleaners in south coast towns during the 1930s depression, life in the army (including a spell in a military mental home) or the trials and tribulations of maintaining his hard-drinking, drug-consuming and financially-precarious bohemian lifestyle.

*Some Time I Shall Sleep Out* is a classic of the JMR genre describing the art of sleeping rough at Euston Station. His favourite hang-out when times were tough was the Turkish baths at the Imperial Hotel on Russell Square where, in exchange for a small bribe, the attendant would let him spend the night.

Maclaren-Ross should principally be celebrated because he evokes the heyday of Soho/Fitzrovia. It should be remembered because it combined being louche with a style and a cultural substance that is almost entirely absent these days. JMR added colour to the monochrome streets with his flamboyant and trademark uniform: white suit with

fresh carnation, silk shirt with tie or cravat, cigarette holder, camel-hair coat, American aviator-style mirror shades and malacca cane (which often came in handy for defending himself against drunks who attacked him in the mistaken belief that his dandy-like appearance must mean he was "queer").

JMR was at the heart of a literary and artistic set that represented real creative depth as well as eccentricity in a period of austerity and moral conformity. His regular drinking companions in the pubs he frequented included Dylan Thomas, Graham Greene, the young Peter Vansittart, painters such as John Minton, Nina Hamnett, the hard-living and hard-fighting Coquhoun and MacBride, the poet and Right-wing pamphleteer "Count Potocki" (a Kiwi who wore long robes, strange pendants and his hair in a bun), among many others. Another of the regulars in *The Wheatsheaf*, was the prostitute "Sister Ann", a steely woman who had the demeanour of a head librarian.

**H**OWEVER, JMR's sexual passion was reserved for the publisher Sonia Orwell, George's widow. Like many men, he became infatuated with her. He did not take her rejection well and would often appear underneath the window of her flat in Percy Street shouting abuse and accusing her of being part of a female conspiracy to prevent him from achieving literary greatness.

JMR's era was mercifully free of the obsession with diet, anti-smoking campaigns, "working-out", pubs with sofas and juice bars. It is perhaps a good thing that he died suddenly of a heart attack in 1965 – possibly the consequence of 30 years of solid and commendable personal abuse – long before their advent.

Towards the end of the 1950s, JMR became horrified with changes that were becoming apparent in the landscape of Soho – particularly the invasion of the beatniks and the industrialisation of the sex industry. Goodness knows how he would have reacted to the Soho's colonisation by young advertising executives with pony tails and mobile phones.

No doubt, were he to be reincarnated, one of them would feel the full weight of his cane.