

Frankau, Julia ('Frank Danby')

by Helen Andrews

Frankau, Julia ('Frank Danby') (1859–1916), art historian and novelist, was born 30 July 1859 in Dublin, into an English Jewish family, seventh among nine children of Hyman Davis (d. 1871), dentist and later artist/photographer, and his wife Isabella. Her parents arrived in Dublin in 1849 and returned in 1863 to London, where Julia was educated privately by Mme Paul Lafargue, daughter of Karl Marx. She dabbled in journalism, wrote essays for the *Saturday Review*, and edited the *Jewish Weekly* (1889–91). Encouraged by George Moore (qv), a frequent visitor, she published her first novel, *Dr Phillips, a Maida Vale idyll* (1887), under the pseudonym 'Frank Danby'; supposedly based on the life of a well known doctor (possibly Ernest Abraham Hart (1835–98), editor of the *British Medical Journal*), it won her notoriety and went into several editions. Her second novel, *Babe in Bohemia* (1889), was also popular and sales were increased by a review in *Punch*, which claimed that it 'had better have been left unwritten, or, if written, better left unread' (Baron de Book-Worms, 3).

She began to study eighteenth-century engraving and became a collector; since there was no scholarly work on the subject, she wrote under her own name. Her valued *Eighteenth century colour prints: an essay on certain stipple engravers and their work in colour . . . illustrated with fifty-one . . . pictures . . . printed from copper plates* (1900), was followed by *An eighteenth century artist and engraver: John Raphael Smith, his life and works* (1902), and *Eighteenth century artists and engravers: William Ward A.R.A., James Ward R.A., their lives and works* (1904); large, beautifully produced books, they are regarded as her most enduring work.

She then in her own words 'relapsed into novel writing' (*WWW*, under 'Danby, Frank') and produced shrewd, uncompromisingly honest accounts of Jewish middle-class life and of disagreeable people. *Pigs in clover* (1903) – a brilliant caricature of an aesthete – became a best-seller, which was followed by other novels, including *An incompleat Etonian* (1909), *Joseph in jeopardy* (1912), *Full swing* (1914), and *Twilight* (1916); she was also a prolific reviewer. She lived at 11 Clarges St., Mayfair, London, in a house that had reputedly once belonged to Nelson's lover, Lady Hamilton, and wrote *The story of Emma, Lady Hamilton* (1911).

A spirited woman with boundless energy, describing herself as 'half Celt and wholly impulsive' (Gilbert Frankau, 137), she was an inveterate card-player, founded, financed, and ran the Cleveland, a West End bridge club, and was co-founder of the Independent Theatre. An accomplished horsewoman, a keen cyclist, and a skilled needlewoman, she was also a lavish hostess. Her brother James Davis (1848?–1907), known professionally as Owen Hall, was a solicitor before becoming a journalist and author of many popular musical comedies including 'A gaiety girl', first

performed in 1893. In 1880 he unsuccessfully contested Dundalk as a conservative candidate; he died 9 April 1907 in Harrogate, Yorkshire. Her sister, Mrs Eliza Aria, journalist and author, contributed a weekly column, 'Mrs A.'s diary', to *Truth* and wrote *My sentimental self* (1922), which she dedicated to the memory of her much loved sister Julia. Julia died of tuberculosis 17 March 1916 in London, and was buried in Hampstead cemetery, London.

She married (1883) Arthur Frankau (d. 1904), a wealthy wholesale cigar merchant, partner in the firm J. Frankau & Co. The eldest of their three sons, Gilbert Frankau (1884–1952), poet and novelist, wrote a preface for *Mothers and children: hitherto unpublished stories by the late 'Frank Danby'* (1918). Brought up in the anglican church – his father having refused to have his sons circumcised – he was 16 before he learned of his Jewish background. He converted to catholicism months before his death; in her will, Julia had stipulated that any of her offspring who married a catholic should be disinherited. Of their other two sons, Jack Frankau died (1917) in the first world war, and Ronan Frankau published poems and stories for children. Their daughter Joan (1896–1986) married (1920) H. S. Bennett, FBA, and was a lecturer in English (1936–64) at Cambridge University and author of several scholarly works.

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*Thom*, 1859, 1150; Baron de Book-Worms, 'Our booking office', *Punch*, xcvii (July–Dec. 1889), 3; Julia Frankau, *Eighteenth century colour prints* (1900), xi–xvii; *Times*, 18 Mar. 1916; *IBL*, vii, no. 9–10 (Apr.–May 1916), 167; *WWW* (under 'Danby, Frank'); E. Aria, *My sentimental self* (1922) (portr.); Gilbert Frankau, *Self-portrait* [1940], 16–17, 23–4, 37, 137; Louis Hyman, *The Jews of Ireland from earliest times to the year 1910* (1972); *WWW* (under 'Bennett, Joan' (d. 1986)); Frank Danby, *Dr. Phillips, a Maida Vale idyll*, (reprint, with preface by Stephen Lock, 1989), v–xii; Margot Strickland, 'Woman behind the man', *Jewish Chronicle*, 23 Feb. 1996, supplement [i] (photo)