

# Window on history

*Janine di Giovanni*

*Looking for Trouble*, by Virginia Cowles (Faber Finds, pp478, £16.20)

I have often wondered why Virginia Cowles, a fearless and beautiful writer who specialised in reporting heroically from war zones, was often overlooked in the annals of reportage. Unlike her fellow American Martha Gellhorn (who was also fearless and glamorous, but who went on to marry Ernest Hemingway, thus making her somewhat more of a legend) Cowles's extensive writing appears to be known only to those who seek it out.

Which is why Faber's re-issue of her 1941 collection of pieces/autobiography is so absolutely riveting. Cowles left war reporting to marry the politician and former ITN editor-in-chief Aidan Crawley (she was the mother of the writer and Conservative parliamentary candidate Harriet Crawley) and become a biographer and historian. These pieces, which start with the Spanish Civil War and continue through the worse days of World War 2 before moving into post-war England, are moments of great journalism. Or, in the words of Phillip Knightley, "the first draft of history".

Born in Brattleboro, Vermont, in 1910 to a doctor and his wife, Cowles came of age in dangerous times. She lived through the horror of two world

wars, and she was old enough in 1937 to go to Spain, as a 27-year old journalist for Hearst newspapers, to report alongside the greats: Hemingway, Gellhorn and Orwell. "My room, on the fifth floor of the Hotel Florida, stamped me as an amateur," she wrote in *High Explosives* about her arrival as a naïve reporter in Spain.

"Knowledgeable people lived as close to the ground floor as possible as a precaution against aerial bombs."

And so she starts on her travels through war-torn Spain, where, like Gellhorn, she specialised in the human cost of war: "We arrived in Guernica to find it a lonely chaos of timber and brick, like an ancient civilization in process of being excavated. There were only three or four people in the streets. One old man was standing inside an apartment house that had four sides to it but an interior that was a sea of bricks. It was his job to clear away the debris that seemed a life's work..."

The difference between her and Gellhorn was that Cowles reported from both sides – Republican (whom most of the journalists were cheering on) and Nationalists. Gellhorn once famously remarked, "All that objectivity shit", believing (and I am

on Gellhorn's side here, having lived through the Bosnian war) that sometimes the aggressors were not nearly as interesting or needed as much of a voice as the victims.

After Spain, Cowles, older and a more seasoned reporter, threw herself into World War 2. "An hour after we reached Helsinki," she writes in *The Sky That Tumbled Down*, "the sirens were moaning again... I was so tired I crawled into bed and went to sleep." But the next day she climbed to the rooftop of her hotel and watched the city "crawl into a shell" and the bombing begins. She went on to report the Italian campaign, the liberation of Paris and the Allied invasion of Germany. Her reporting – while perhaps not as flawlessly beautiful as Gellhorn's, who was more of a stylistic writer – is full of detail, compassion and honesty. Which is really all one can ask from a reporter trying to describe the destruction of war.

"It is a struggle to keep justice and mercy on earth, and to preserve the very dignity of man," she wrote in 1941, having probably seen too much

misery already. After the war, unlike Gellhorn or that other great woman photojournalist, Lee Miller (another American and a former muse of Man Ray), whose lives were increasingly sad, Cowles was determined not to let the images she had witnessed haunt her. She married Crawley, had children, and made her life in England. She wrote biographies of Churchill and others, and had extraordinary contacts, from politicians to historians. She also continued to mesmerise men. Nigel Nicolson wrote of her: "She was the most beautiful woman I laid eyes on", and John Julius Norwich, who met her when he was 16 and she was 36, also fell under her spell.

Cowles was not the best writer to come out of the wars of the early 20th century. Martha Gellhorn, who writes out of pure passion and conviction to be on the side of the good, far surpasses her. But Cowles was feisty and talented and brave. And her words are an insight, a window into history and into a time when journalism was truly at its golden age.

*Fantine di Giovanni has reported nearly every violent conflict since the late 1980s. Her next book, Ghosts by Daylight, a memoir of life as a war reporter, will be published by Bloomsbury next year. She lives in Paris with her son.*