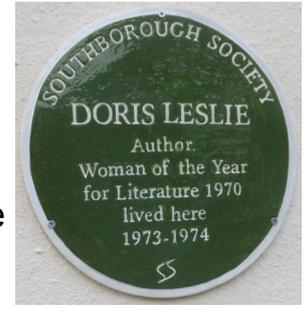


## Doris Leslie — Author

By Leonard R. N. Ashley

Location of plaque - 9 Argyle Road, Southborough.



**Doris Leslie** [other married name Doris Fergusson Hannay, Lady Fergusson Hannay] (1891–1982), novelist, was born at 66 Westbourne Grove, early life. She said she was educated privately in London and Brussels, and London, on 9 March 1891 of Jewish descent. Her parents were

Samuel Oppenheim, a tobacconist, and his wife, Sarah Elkan. Doris was evasive about her then after she showed a gift for drawing her father sent her to a school of art in London. It is certain that at fifteen she decided to become an actress against her father's wishes, and won a scholarship to the drama section of the Guildhall School of Music. Her stage début was as Viola in *Twelfth Night* at the Old Vic. She also appeared with the Birmingham repertory theatre.

While still in her teens she married John Leslie, another actor. He died shortly after the marriage; she kept his name for the rest of her life. Her second marriage was to R. Vincent Cookes, but she did not publicly acknowledge this marriage for 'religious reasons' (Ashley).

After her first husband's death Doris Leslie lost interest in acting and resumed her art studies, this time in Florence. She kept regular diaries while in Italy and realized that writing was her vocation. On her return to England she wrote her first novel, *The Starling* (1927), set in Florence. Its success

committed her to writing, although she later dismissed her four subsequent novels, *Fools in Mortar* (1928), *The Echoing Green* (1929), *Terminus* (1931), and *Puppets' Parade* (1931), as trivial. But *Full Flavour* (1934), a fictional account of the long life of a woman who makes a success of her father's business, in the then popular dynasty chronicle genre, established her reputation. It was quickly translated into five languages and adapted for the stage. It was dedicated to her mother, who did not live to see it published. In 1936 Doris Leslie published *Fair Company*, another 'leisurely' tale, this time spanning four generations of an English family from the Regency up to the 1930s.



Some of the many characters in *Full Flavour* and *Fair Company* reappear in the crowded pages of the Victorian-to-First World War chronicle of *Concord in Jeopardy* (1938), but Leslie's loose style and uninspired plotting were beginning to make readers unhappy with just well crafted historical backgrounds. Moreover she unsuccessfully attempted to psychologize Concord and make him a symbol.

*Another Cynthia: the adventures of Cynthia Lady Ffulkes (1780–1850)*

*reconstructed from hitherto unpublished memoirs* (1939), a tale of a Moll Flanders figure who snares titled lovers, was more 'lively'. This was a word often used by critics to describe Leslie's work, although the diary format she used in fact renders action as more reported than experienced. On 21 November 1936 she married Walter Fergusson Leisrinck Hannay (1904–1961), a London physician who was knighted in 1951. There were no children of the marriage.

During the Second World War Leslie was slightly wounded while serving in civil defence as an air raid warden. The battle of Britain featured in *House in the Dust* (1942), in which a bombed house triggers the memories of her central character, Jennifer. However, the twentieth-century anachronisms, in what was largely a tale of Victorian childhood, irritated the critics. Also in the 1940s came a series of 'fictional biographies', first of Chopin in *Polonaise* (1943), and then of Lady Arabella Stuart in *A Wreath for Arabella* (1948). These were not scholarly works of biography but vivid and colourful portraits designed to entertain. She also produced novels such as *Folly's End* (1944) and *The Peverills* (1946). In the 1950s Leslie published *The Great Corinthian* (1952), an entertaining biography of the prince regent, and novels which included *Peridot flight: a novel reconstructed from the memoirs of Peridot, Lady Mulvarnie, 1872–1955* (1956). Hutchinson reprinted *Another Cynthia*, *Folly's End*, and *The Peverills* in 1956 as *Tales of Grace and Favour*.

After Sir Walter's death in 1961 Doris Leslie converted to Roman Catholicism, moved to Devon, and began to breed and show English bulldogs. She became a real celebrity when BBC television broadcast her *Peridot* series. Over her lifetime she wrote more than sixteen popular novels and seventeen biographies, and while they were not critically, particularly as historical fiction came under fire in the 1960s, her books were widely enjoyed in Britain and America. Her biographies, which later included works on François Villon (1962), Elizabeth Chudleigh (1974), and Richard the Lionheart (1977), were often as finely wrought as her best historical novels.

She lived at Flat 1, 9 Argyle Road, Southborough, between 1973 and 1974.

The Southborough Society's Commemorative plaque on the former home of Doris Leslie was unveiled in July 2013 by the current occupant, Fiona Brown.