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Biography

In the Shadow of Greatness: Extraordinary Women Who Served the Genius of Another
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Movie stars hire publicity agents and managers, but surely geniuses don't. Yet Albert Einstein had one, in function if not in title. Helen Dukas helped shape Einstein's image as the saintly old man we remember today.

This massive study describes five women who were, in effect, the interface between intellectual giants and the outside world. Their accomplishments went far beyond playing handmaiden. Some helped shape the genius's actual work. Some also managed literary or artistic achievements of their own.

Dukas's relationship with Einstein was professional, not intimate. As a secretary, she protected his papers and data from the Nazis. In America, she kept track of trivia he couldn't be bothered with-doing the things that "allow[ed] him to live the life of an absentminded professor." Unlike Einstein's wife, Helen ignored eccentricities like his refusal to wear socks, but she did alert him to important matters that needed his attention.

Isabella Arundell found the adventure she sought when she married explorer Sir Richard Burton. Living first in Tenerife near Africa, then in Damascus, and finally in Trieste, she gathered material for the biographical works she wrote. In England, she dealt with Richard's publishers and built up his public image.

Maria Nhys had to worry about her husband Aldous Huxley's health and vision, while he scrabbled to make a living with his writing. Finding a house in the light-suffused Mohave Desert helped him enormously, and brought them in touch with the psi elements found in Huxley's later works.

Vera Slonim acted as editor and ghostwriter on Vladimir Nabokov's mundane writing assignments, freeing him to concentrate on the brilliant prose that won him fame.

In contrast to these women, FranÃ§oise Gilot did not guard Picasso's work or time, nor did she influence how he came across to the world. This genius played mind-games with

everyone, and he already had a majordomo, Jaime Sabartes, who “held his secrets” and protected his space. The Picasso-Gilot relationship, although it produced two children, was more one of mentor to student, and ultimately Gilot left.

The author, a former Fulbright scholar who has taught in Algeria, Yugoslavia, and California, has meticulously footnoted his book. Its complex back-and-forth timelines are sometimes confusing, and the Nabokov section has an inexplicable gap near its end. Still, this book will prove a treasure trove to social history and biography buffs, and a valuable resource to libraries that lack material on these shadow women.

Emily Alward