

# Vagabonds Abroad: Jan & Cora Gordon

By Duncan JD Smith

## A Cultural Phenomenon

It is difficult to imagine now, but during the 1920s the British couple Jan and Cora Gordon were something of a cultural phenomenon. Unique in the general likeness of their artistic temperaments and abilities, they not only wrote travel books together, but also painted, performed, acted, broadcast, and lectured together, across Europe and America.



As a determined twenty-three-year-old, Derbyshire-born Cora Josephine 'Jo' Turner (1879-1950) compelled her disciplinarian father, a GP and workhouse manager keen she become his unpaid housekeeper, to allow her to study art; she did this by threatening to take up the stage instead. Believing that to be even more iniquitous he allowed her to enter the Slade College of Art. In the meantime she had already become an accomplished pianist and violinist leading her to take her Royal Academy of Music teaching degree. Returning once more to painting she then freed herself of her father's bullying yoke by travelling to Paris, in order to study and

later exhibit her work. It was there in around 1907 that she met the like-minded Godfrey Jervis 'Jan' Gordon (1882-1944). A parson's son he had spent time in the Malay States as a mining engineer but it really wasn't him. At heart a keen artist (and a keen amateur banjo player to boot!) he returned to London and studied at the Kensington School of Art, from where in 1906 he too made for Paris, in the wake of an unhappy romance.

Perfectly matched, Jan and Cora were married in 1909 and lived on Rue Bagneaux (today Rue Jean Ferrandi), off the busy Rue du Cherche-Midi, in the heart of the artists' district of Montparnasse; they would live here on and off until 1932. Both accomplished artists in a variety of media (watercolour, tempera, even fountain pen) they became well connected with fellow members of the modern art movement.

## Early Wanderings

In February 1915 the Gordons volunteered for hospital service in the Balkans with the Red Cross. Intending to stay for just three months they eventually remained for a year, administering help to wounded soldiers of the retreating Serbian Army. Their experiences, which included an unorthodox trip conveying hospital stores into Montenegro, provided the raw material for their first book, *The Luck of Thirteen: Wanderings and Flight Through Montenegro and Serbia* (1916), written in just three weeks on their return to London, mainly to generate some much-needed income. In actual fact it heralded the start of a career that would run parallel to their careers as artists. The book's title refers to the thirteen lucky members of a party led to safety by Jan when Austro-Hungarian forces overran their base at Vrnitse. At the same time Jan also produced a biography called *A Balkan Freebooter: Being the True Exploits of the Serbian Outlaw and Comitaj Petko Moritch*, about their Serbian guide, the colourful and patriotic Nikola Pavlovitch.

Back in England and with the war still raging Jan's technical and artistic skills were put to work making aircraft components for Rolls Royce in Derby, and then designing naval camouflage at the Royal Academy. He also became official war artist for the Navy's Medical Section and some of his canvasses of naval medical work are still held by the Imperial War Museum and the Burroughs Wellcome Institute. In his spare time Jan also managed to fit in a few magazine articles for the likes of *Country Life*.

### A Pair of Vagabonds

Once the war was over the Gordons returned to Paris – and the lure of foreign travel. They would spend the 1920s and the first half of the 30s traversing Europe on foot, by bicycle, and on motorbike, writing and illustrating a dozen books of travel



together as they went. Their first port of call was Spain, to indulge Jan's new-found interest in Spanish guitar, where they are still fondly remembered for their two volumes of plain-speaking observations of daily village life, *Poor Folk in Spain* (1922) (the title refers to the Gordons themselves!) and *Misadventures with a Donkey in Spain* (1925). The latter saw them travelling across southern Spain with a donkey and cart, much in the fashion of Robert Louis Stevenson's classic, *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. Also in Spain in the early 20s were the enigmatic Count

and Countess Malmignati, whose book *As Beggars, Tramp Through Spain* (1927) contained an introduction by Jan.

*Poor Folk in Spain* would be re-printed in 1931 as *Two Vagabonds in Spain*, since by that time the Gordons had produced four more travelogues under the convenient and catchy *Two Vagabonds* banner. Of the four destinations concerned – *Languedoc* (1925), *The Balkans* (1925), *Sweden and Lapland* (1926), and *Albania* (1927) (the latter undertaken on horseback)– it would be *Two Vagabonds in Languedoc* that proved their most critically acclaimed work (dumbed down somewhat to *Two Vagabonds in a French Village* for the American market). A charming and evocative sketch of four months spent in Najac, a village on the border of the Departments of Tarn and Aveyron, which the Gordons chanced upon during a walking tour of provincial France, it was re-published by Bene Factum in 2007 thanks to the herculean efforts of the Gordons' biographer, Ken Bryant. (Incidentally, the success of the *Two Vagabonds* titles saw Penguin Books re-publish *The Luck of Thirteen* as *Two Vagabonds in Serbia and Montenegro* in their cerise 'Travel & Adventure' series in 1939.)



During this time the Gordon's developed their own comfortable and very successful *modus operandi* of travelling during the summer months and enjoying their shared gregariousness once back in Paris. As the sleeve notes of *Two Vagabonds in Serbia and Montenegro* boasted, the Gordons were able to "gossip and order food and lodgings in eight languages". Their adopted home also provided the background for Jan's clever character study *On a Paris Roundabout* (1927), based partially on the trial of the serial killer Henri Désiré Landru.

### With Paintbrush and Pen

Jan's own considerable success as an artist and his interest in the subject produced four related books, two serious (*Modern French Painters* (1923) and *A Stepladder to Painting* (1934)) and two not so (*Some Craftie Arts* (1930) and *Art Ain't All Paint* (1944)). He wrote extensively on art elsewhere too (for example *Mother and Child*, being a monologue to accompany the drawings of Bernard Meninsky) and was a great one for artistic experimentation. Notable in this respect was his advocacy of the now redundant Ostwald Colour System, an early 20<sup>th</sup> century means of representing a sequence of hues graphically; together with its creator, the Latvian-German Friedrich Wilhelm Ostwald, he edited *An Elementary Introduction to the Ostwald Colour System* in 1938.



The art world also provided the backdrop for two of Jan's eight novels, namely *A Girl in the Art Class* (1927) (the main protagonist inspired by Cora) and *Murder Most Artistic* (1937) (published in America as *Mystery of the Painted Nude*). *Murder Most Artistic* is interesting in that it was one of a series of three detective novels Jan penned under the *nom de plume* of William Gore (the other two were *There's Death in the Churchyard* (1934) and *Death in the Wheelbarrow* (1935)). As well as numerous magazine articles and short stories, Jan Gordon's other novels were *Buddock Against London* (1925), *Piping George* (1930), and *Bean's Spilt in Spain* (1931).

### From Two Wheels to Three

In 1927 the Gordons set off on their travels once again, this time on a two-year grand tour of America. Two books resulted, namely *On Wandering Wheels: Through Roadside Camps from Maine to Georgia in an Old Sedan Car* (1929) covering the east coast section, and *Stardust in Hollywood* (1930) covering the west. Unfortunately, in 1928 Jan suffered a heart attack in Los Angeles, forcing them to halt for a while as he recovered. Neither strangers to the stage they took on small roles in Hollywood films instead, falling back on Jan's theatre experience in Paris, as well as lessons learned from an American concert tour playing Spanish folk music, with Cora on the laud (Spanish lute) and Jan on guitar. The Gordons were also broadcast on American radio, and on early BBC television, and they were a popular double act on the lecture circuit.

With Jan's health in mind the Gordons now opted for a slightly more leisurely mode of transport and purchased a Sunbeam motorbike and sidecar for a tour described in



*Three Lands on Three Wheels: Impressions in France, England and Ireland* (1932). Having given up their Parisian abode they returned to London and took a flat in Clanricarde Gardens in Notting Hill. Jan continued as art critic of *The Observer*, which he had done intermittently since the 1920s, and became a member of the Royal Society of British Artists. Once again they enjoyed socialising, garnering praise for their writings from the likes of crime novelists Dorothy L.

Sayers and Peter Cheyney. It was allegedly at one of their Notting Hill cocktail parties that Jan accepted a challenge from Cheyney to swap his usual travel writing genre for that of the 1930s crime novel, resulting in the three titles he wrote as William Gore.

Before Jan's death in 1944 the Gordons managed to produce two final travelogues, being *Portuguese Somersault: Reminiscences of Two Journeys in Portugal* (1934) (which had taken place earlier, in 1926 and 1933), and *The London Roundabout* (1934) (published in America as *We Explore London*), described as "a roundabout trip of London, where one may catch glimpses of the four quarters of London, glimpses hurried and unsatisfying, yet containing something of that peculiar wholeness that makes up London." Cora eventually followed Jan to the grave in 1950, their vagabond ashes being scattered at Golders Green Crematorium.

**Photos courtesy of [www.janandcoragordon.co.uk](http://www.janandcoragordon.co.uk) and [www.pbase.com/hajar/art\\_of\\_jan\\_and\\_cora\\_gordon](http://www.pbase.com/hajar/art_of_jan_and_cora_gordon)**

Travel Books by Jan and Cora Gordon:

*The Luck of Thirteen: Wanderings and Flight Through Montenegro and Serbia* (1916) (re-published as *Two Vagabonds in Serbia and Montenegro* by Penguin Books (1939))  
*A Balkan Freebooter: Being the True Exploits of the Serbian Outlaw and Comitaj Petko Moritch* (1916) (a sequel to *Lucky Thirteen* and written by Jan Gordon only)  
*Poor Folk in Spain* (1922) (re-published as *Two Vagabonds in Spain* (1931))  
*Misadventures with a Donkey in Spain* (1924) (a sequel to *Poor Folk in Spain*)  
*Two Vagabonds in Languedoc* (1925) (published in America as *Two Vagabonds in a French Village*)  
*Two Vagabonds in the Balkans* (1925)  
*Two Vagabonds in Sweden and Lapland* (1926)  
*Two Vagabonds in Albania* (1927)  
*On a Paris Roundabout* (1927) (written by Jan Gordon only)  
*As Beggars, Tramp Through Spain* (1927) by Count and Countess Malmignati (introduction only by Jan Gordon)  
*On Wandering Wheels: Through Roadside Camps from Maine to Georgia in an Old Sedan Car* (1929)  
*Stardust in Hollywood* (1930)  
*Three Lands on Three Wheels: Impressions in France, England and Ireland* (1932)  
*Portuguese Somersault: Reminiscences of Two Journeys in Portugal* (1934)  
*The London Roundabout* (1934) (published in America as *We Explore London*)

Novels by Jan Gordon:

*Buddock Against London* (1925)  
*A Girl in the Art Class* (1927)  
*Piping George* (1930)  
*Beans Spilt in Spain* (1931)  
*There's Death in the Churchyard* (1934) (written as William Gore)  
*Death in the Wheelbarrow* (1935) (written as William Gore)  
*Murder Most Artistic* (1937) (written as William Gore, and published in America as *Mystery of the Painted Nude*)

Art Books by Jan Gordon:

*Modern French Painters* (1923)  
*Some Craftie Arts* (1930)  
*A Stepladder to Painting* (1934)  
*Art Ain't All Paint* (1944) (with H. M. Bateman)

Websites about Jan and Cora Gordon

[www.janandcoragordon.co.uk](http://www.janandcoragordon.co.uk)

[www.pbase.com/hajar/art\\_of\\_jan\\_and\\_cora\\_gordon](http://www.pbase.com/hajar/art_of_jan_and_cora_gordon)