Most women sense a diminution of self when they marry. "The wife of" is a title which can bring pleasure and a sense of pride, but one’s individuality is, nevertheless, conditioned. The problem is compounded when the woman is the wife of a famous public figure, and may become unbearable should she become a widow, witness Jackie Kennedy.

Joan Jara was the wife of an extraordinary public figure. Victor Jara, the central character of this book, was a peasant, seminarian, communist, actor, director, musician and composer. He is identified as the artistic voice of the values embodied in the popular movement in Chile throughout the 1960s and ‘70s. The manner of his death is well-known. Hated by the military junta for using art in the service of the Popular Unity government, he died in the first days of the military coup which ended that brave attempt at social justice. Along with thousands of others, he was taken to one of Chile's stadiums. Recognised, he was tortured and beaten. His guitar-playing hands were smashed. His bullet ridden body ended up in a morgue packed full of men and women whose only “crime” was to give their support for an elected government with socialist aims.

As Victor’s widow, Joan Jara has occupied a special place in the movement which has kept alive the world-wide support for the democratic forces inside Chile. She has brought up their daughters, travelled the world to speak of the crimes of the junta, popularised Victor’s songs far beyond their natural constituency in Latin America, raised money, made films, and has produced, after three years’ work, this beautiful and simple account of their lives together. For much of the last ten years, she has been a “professional” widow, acting in a public sense for Victor and for Chile. One senses that this has not been easy. The book is both an account of terrible times and an effort to reclaim life so that the tragedy of death is not the dominant factor. Whether you know the story or not, you will be moved, excited, distressed. I found myself hoping that somehow what happened would not happen. As the tragedy unfolded I learnt much of Chile in the years of the Popular Unity and, against the odds, felt optimistic.

Victor is not a political tract, it is a love story of a remarkable kind. Although the author is self-effacing, the chapter on her childhood is wonderfully evocative of an English girl in wartime London. Obsessed with ballet and influenced by the humanist-labour-feminist traditions of her middle-aged parents, she becomes a dancer, travels in war-damaged Europe, meets her first husband, and makes her home in Chile. When her first marriage failed soon after the birth of her first daughter, she took up with Victor, one of her students. They soon established a family and Joan gave birth to a second daughter.

In case one has the impression that this is a “Mills and Boone” romance (with politics), one should note the flashes of honesty describing a partnership where he is younger, while she is a “gringo” and, therefore, not fully confident of acceptance in Victor’s circles. At this time she is essentially unpolitical while he is committed to both politics and art. Their marriage is not idealised — her temper sees to that — but they are civilised people who manage, among other things, to establish a friendship with her first husband and a splendid...
She was Victor's wife but she was also Joan Turner, dancer, choreographer, teacher. Since the story is essentially Victor's, Joan Jara recreates his childhood — the harsh life of a peasant in the south of Chile and the day-to-day existence in the shanty towns of Santiago. The reader can follow the experiences and influences which led to the evolution of Victor Jara as a politically conscious artist.

These early chapters are movingly and beautifully written while those of the three short years of the Popular Unity are a great social document. The middle section — the middle years — are more episodic, less profound and sometimes unsatisfactory for that which is left out rather than for what is there.

We learn that Victor was criticised for writing a song to honour Che Guevara, but not how he responded. We experience his profound delight in Cuba, and his positive, perhaps naive, enthusiasm for the Soviet Union and we do not learn whether he had any opinion of the traumatic events in the communist movement when the Soviet Union and several other Warsaw Pact countries invaded Czechoslovakia. These are not idle questions, since one of the disuniting factors in the Popular Unity was about different notions of how democracy should be practised, and how social change could be achieved.

Joan Jara conveys a wonderful sense of liberation in the period leading up to, and at, the election of Allende as President of Chile. Through her eyes, a reader may participate in the mass enthusiasm, the incredible demonstrations, the creativity unleashed in millions of ordinary people. Joan, as much as Victor, participates in work which truly sets out to use art to serve the people. She dances and teaches in established schools but also with people in the shanty towns, in the factories and in the countryside. She helps design and produce great manifestations of mass participatory culture, sometimes in those stadiums which, later, became death camps. And while Joan and Victor were artists, they were also citizens taking their turn to organise food distribution in their neighbourhood as rightwing opponents of the government stepped up efforts to destabilise society. Joan's political education develops by leaps and bounds. The many changes in society, the disunity in the left, the growing awareness in those last weeks before the coup that they were already living illegally, are lived through Joan's experiences. Some may quibble with her version of events, but she tells it as she saw it and with a passion that cannot be ignored. Hers is one of the very few accounts of those momentous times when realisation grew that you would be damned if you did and equally damned if you did not.

It took many years to fully reconstruct the last days of Victor's life — some of that reconstruction was made through people who took great risks to contact Joan. British Embassy officials, friendly embassies and Joan — reverting to British ways and dressed in Marks and Spencer clothes — managed to remove from the junta Victor's music, some films and photographic records, and his children. Then began the years which culminate in this book.

The title and content underline that, in a new Chile, Victor's songs, his art and his politics will continue. Already, they are a part of the rising and ongoing struggle. A new generation sings his songs as people take to the streets against the junta, and protests take many forms. One is that unknown people ensure that his grave is constantly covered with flowers.

For Joan Jara, this book marks the emergence of a new talent. The dancer, teacher and passionate publicist has become Joan Jara the writer. Her book will warm spirits with its affirmation of love, its story of a family where the personal is political, its tribute to a people in struggle. It will anger every democrat against vested interests, CIA interventions and military power. It offers hope and optimism that Joan Jara's tragedy and the many other tragedies produced as a result of Pinochet's military rule will be put into perspective. People will reclaim the good and the beautiful in their lives. They will go on struggling and they will go on singing.

Mavis Robertson is the editorial coordinator of the ALR collective.