



# A Very Private Celebrity: The Nine Lives of John Freeman

*Hugh Purcell*

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## **A Very Private Celebrity: The Nine Lives of John Freeman** Hugh Purcell

John Freeman was one of Britain's most extraordinary public figures for over half a century; an achiever and thrower-away of high office after high office; a celebrity who sought anonymity. In the 1940s he was a war hero, then an MP who reduced Churchill to tears. In the 1950s he was tipped as a future Labour leader but resigned from politics and became the most famous television interviewer of his era. The paradox of Freeman, the private celebrity, was symbolised by the series that made him famous: Face to Face. While he remorselessly interrogated the stars of his age, Freeman himself sat with his back to the camera, cigarette smoke curling up between his fingers. He was the grand inquisitor, exposing the person behind the public figure, but never his own. Then followed an extraordinary range of careers: he resigned from the BBC to become editor of the New Statesman. Four years later he resigned again and became High Commissioner to India, then ambassador to Washington, where he famously befriended Kissinger and Nixon. Later he became chairman of London Weekend TV and then of ITN. In 1984 he moved to California as a humble visiting lecturer until his retirement. Finally, he became bowls champion of Southern England, aged 78. Here was a man who believed in changing his life, and his wife, every ten years. His lovers included the writer Edna O'Brien, the politician Barbara Castle, and the actors Eva Bartok and Rosemary Crutchley. Why did he want to forget what most old men would be proud to remember? Why did he try to erase himself from history? For ten years, Hugh Purcell has been tracking John Freeman, trying to get face to face with this enigma. Now that he has died, the true story of this extraordinary man may be told.



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