

A
CURIOUS
FRIENDSHIP

THE STORY OF A BLUESTOCKING
AND A BRIGHT YOUNG THING

ANNA THOMASSON



Anna Thomasson



A Curious Friendship

*The Story of a Bluestocking and
a Bright Young Thing*



PAN BOOKS

*For my mother,
Annette Thomasson*

‘What do we any of us live for but our illusions and what can we ask of others but that they should allow us to keep them?’

Somerset Maugham, *The Sacred Flame*, Act

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Introduction



Several years ago I went to Plas Newydd on Anglesey, an elegant, neo-Gothic mansion on the banks of the Menai Strait and home to the Marquess of Anglesey. There I had seen the mural painted by Rex Whistler, begun in 1936 and now considered his masterpiece. The windows of the dining room look out beyond the sloping lawns and the stretch of grey water to the looming, cloudcapped peaks of Snowdonia. On the facing wall, the mural is a fantastical reflection of the view from the windows; the Welsh landscape is transformed into an enchanted, Arcadian panorama, with the crispness of Canaletto and the warm, dreamy light of Claude. Later I would learn that it was typical of Rex to turn his back on reality and reinvent it. I was intrigued by this man whose self-portrait stands discreetly at the corner of the mural, a solitary and rather forlorn figure dressed as a gardener with a broom in his hand and rose petals scattered at his feet.

Amongst the cabinets of letters, possessions and drawings in the permanent exhibition dedicated to Rex at Plas Newydd, one item in particular caught my eye: a love note written to a girlfriend in 1937 beseeching her to delay her departure to London. Around the note is a beautiful cartouche topped by a heart and crown. It is playful, fanciful, almost childish: a frivolous billet-doux. And it seemed to me like a relic of an earlier, more elegant age. In Rex there was none of the vigour, the confrontation and the agenda I had come to expect of 1930s art, of a 1930s artist; instead his billowing rococo clouds suggest a gentler outlook – one imbued with humour, whimsy and romance.

I began to research Rex's life. But in the process of trying to discover him someone else kept appearing in biographies, letters and footnotes. And in photographs too, there she was amongst the Bright Young People: Edith Olivier, a small, smart woman with shingled black hair, a large nose in a strong face, a cigarette in her hand and enormous gold earrings. She seemed dynamic, older than the others, but often at the centre of the group, laughing and holding court.

Rex first met Edith in 1925, when both were guests of their mutual friend, the mercurial young aristocrat Stephen Tennant, at a villa on the Italian Riviera. They were at such different stages of life continuing along on very different trajectories, but the friendship that developed between them would be the most important of their lives. I see their meeting as a collision; it changed them irrevocably. Rex was then nineteen and a rising star at the Slade School of Art. Edith was fifty-two, an Oxford-educated spinster and the daughter of a Wiltshire rector to whom she had dedicated most of her adult life. It seemed to me such an unlikely friendship: a Victorian bluestocking and a bright young thing.

Edith was the most diligent of diarists and as I explored her archive, reading through the many journals she had kept, along with bundles of her private letters, the traces of her life, year by year, began to emerge from the pages. She was a passionate conversationalist, and at times, reading her diaries felt to me rather like we were having an intimate discussion, or that I was eavesdropping into her conversations with friends. They are idiosyncratic and tangential and filled with vehement underlining and wonderfully archaic spellings ('shew' for 'show'), and I have retained both her and Rex's original spelling and punctuation. Edith's diaries are written in a voice that is at once Victorian

and modern, and at all times profoundly personal. As I desperately tried to decipher her impossible handwriting, I felt as though I got to know her.

Though she had dedicated much of her life to her father and to the local community, I discovered that there was nothing meek or humdrum about Edith. Fiercely intelligent, she had studied at Oxford, where she befriended Lewis Carroll. She had supernatural visions and a profound, preternatural sensitivity to place, particularly the Wiltshire landscape, which she loved more than any other and whose elemental energies she claimed to feel. In the First World War she was instrumental in establishing the Women's Land Army and was later given an MBE for her work. A highly practical and rather eccentric spinster, Edith was terrifying to the provincial world that knew her. After her father's death she would move with her beloved sister to a house in a quiet corner of the Wilton estate surrounded by woods that had inspired Sidney's *Arcadia*. And so her life could have continued, amongst county families, rural and relatively peaceful. But then her sister died, along with the future that Edith had planned.

When she met Rex Whistler, a different life began. She became a respected writer, publishing the first of a number of novels in 1927, *The Love-Child*, which tells the story of a lonely spinster who invents an imaginary child to be her companion. She would become a celebrity, feted in *Vogue*, quoted in *The Times*, the late-blooming centre of her circle of famous and talented younger friends for whom her home, the Daye House, became a retreat. And in Edith's archive they were there to discover too, a host of friends from her earlier life and from her new one: society women like Diana Cooper, Diana Mitford and Ottoline Morrell; politicians such as Winston Churchill and Violet Bonham Carter; the writers Evelyn Waugh and Vita Sackville-West; the poets Henry Newbolt and Elinor Wylie; the writers and patrons Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell Sitwell; the actors Laurence Olivier (Edith's cousin) and his wife Vivien Leigh, and many more.

But of those friends, it was her close circle of younger men that fascinated me most, and the way their lives gradually interwove with Edith's own in the course of her diaries and letters. As I opened the envelopes, read their letters, looked at their choices of paper and ink, and their handwriting, those friends came alive for me too: Stephen Tennant, amusing, self-obsessed, his florid handwriting scrawled in kaleidoscopic inks on pastel-coloured paper; Siegfried Sassoon, warm, concise, a neat hand on neat paper; and Cecil Beaton, witty and name-dropping, his headed notepaper procured from grand houses and Hollywood hotels.

And then there were Rex's letters. For Edith and his other friends, these were prized possessions, still treasured by the families who inherited them. Not so much for what he wrote – which was invariably charming and self-deprecating – but for the delightful illustrations that wound like vines around the paper and out onto the envelope. Rex would later admit to Edith that he illustrated his letters as a delaying tactic while he tried to think of something to write, usually because it involved an awkward apology for forgetting a dinner party or declining an invitation for a weekend in the country. Better still was a rebus letter drawn for his friends' children and entirely composed of pictures that represented words.

Edith and the Daye House were a world away from Rex's own family and the small, suburban house where he had grown up. Edith lived an enchanted life, the river flowing past her cottage, and, beyond the woods, Wilton House with its graceful parkland, its old masters and aristocratic occupants. The magic of it all allowed Rex to escape from a childhood blighted by the death of his elder brother and by his unhappiness at boarding school, not to mention the expectations of his dearly loved and doting mother. On countless sightseeing expeditions Edith took Rex to all the places that she loved; she introduced him to society; she would guide him, inspire him and help to reinvent him, as in turn, Rex would help to reinvent her. At the very heart of their friendship was a profoundly romantic sensibility which they shared. It was what had drawn them together in the beginning with a sense of recognition

and affinity, it was what they loved and nurtured in each other over the years that followed, and it was the source of Rex's art and Edith's writing.

And so I began to unravel Rex's seemingly charmed, but in fact rather troubled and ultimately tragic life. I came to understand why his art was so distinctively old-fashioned and why, at Plas Newydd, he had painted himself as a lowly gardener with a broom rather than a paintbrush in his hand. I also discovered why the love note that Rex had written to his girlfriend in 1937 was so symbolic, and so poignant.

The setting for this story shifts between London and Edith's beloved Wiltshire, a county humming with history and myth, rolling downland and chalk river valleys, graceful stately homes, combes, ancient forest and parkland. It is a tale both of this ancient landscape and of the time between the two world wars, an era that today seems fleeting, lost, charged with the knowledge of what happened before and what happened after. But in the 1920s, when this story begins, and to Rex's generation at least, it seemed that the world was changing for the better; a sense of optimism and liberation sprang from the ruins of the First World War. It was at this time that Edith and Rex met and their lives began to blossom, and, though so much of their friendship was a retreat from reality into the shared, romantic world of their imaginations, they were also very much a part of the artistic and aristocratic world, a world captured in the novels of Evelyn Waugh and Nancy Mitford.

Their story weaves through the 1920s, a time of extremes, the era of the Depression and the General Strike, but also of the Bright Young People with their endless whirl of parties, and the swarm of scandal and gossip that engulfed them. And in later years hedonism made way for sophistication, and seriousness, as another war began to loom. When the Second World War finally broke out at the end of the decade it marked another shift in the course of Edith and Rex's lives. For both of them it was a call to action, but it would divide them forever.

BEFORE



Edith



In her talk, she danced over the world. Jane had hardly ever left home, but every book she read, every traveller's tale she heard, caught her imagination, and filled her with PLANS.

Edith Olivier, *As Far as Jane's Grandmother*

She had always been good. A dutiful daughter and loving sister; staunchly conservative, devoutly religious and a committed towns-woman; Edith was a pillar of society, just like her father. The Reverend Dacres Olivier was imbued with an unrealistic strength of character. Rather too formidable for real life, he was the kind of man that only appears in Victorian novels: swift of step, clear of judgement and resolutely composed. As rector of Wilton, the ancient capital of Wiltshire, and private chaplain to the Earl of Pembroke who lived at Wilton House, he had achieved a certain position in society, and of this he was proud. Dacres in turn had inherited his sense of duty from his father, Henry, who had lived further north at Potterne and been High Sheriff of Wiltshire in 1843. The Olivier family was of Huguenot descent and originally from Nay, near Lourdes, in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Edith's branch of the family anglicized the pronunciation of their surname so that it was pronounced 'Olivi-a' rather than 'Olivi-ay', like the family of her second cousin, the actor Laurence Olivier. To Edith's branch that was considered an unnecessary affectation, and not at all English.

Dacres's faith was not abstract and mystical; it provided him with the exacting code by which to live his life, and this pervaded all things: 'He was like a force of nature, moulding one's life, and yet never a part of it. He was too important to be that. The immense force and impetus of his personality came largely from the fact that for years he had disciplined himself to live by unalterable rules which extended to his every action from the least to the greatest.'¹ And so for his wife Emma, his children and the servants who looked after them, life at the Rectory was a regimented affair as he universally enforced restraint and self-discipline, instilling the house with an ecclesiastical atmosphere of duty and decorum. 'Nothing must be spoken of, of which he did not approve', Edith would later write.² But Dacres allowed himself one indulgence. He was devoted to the roses that grew beside the walls of the long Rectory garden. So sacred were these roses that his daughters were forbidden to arrange them in artful bunches or to pick them at any other time than early in the morning, before it got too hot. Instead they were under strict instruction to place only single stems in slender specimen vases that he provided, so that he could contemplate their individual beauty.

But beneath the rigid exterior was quite a different man. Over the years he had gradually eschewed the usual pleasures of youth – travel, hunting, music – to dedicate his life to the Church.

My father used to tell us that when he left Oxford, he decided that he disliked his handwriting, which was ugly, irregular, and illegible. He therefore changed it, making it firm, clear, and very balanced. So it remained. This too was himself.

There were in my father two people – the natural man, and the man formed by reason, judgment,

and a religion based on the Church Catechism, and centred round the duty towards God, and the duty towards my neighbour. He did not ask from the faith which he so firmly kept, any mystical consolations: he demanded a definite line of conduct. Probably the fundamental traits in a character are never wholly obliterated, but by the time I knew my father, the Old Adam in him had become as completely sublimated as was his handwriting. He had adapted himself to the mould which he had made.³

With his foibles and eccentricities it would be easy to cast Dacres Olivier as a tyrannical paterfamilias: adamant, a pinched and parsimonious Casaubon-like character, his face carved like 'a cameo'.⁴ But Edith admitted that living with her father 'was great fun when he allowed it to be so'. For the rest of her life, long after his had ended, she would record 'Papa's birthday' every year in her diary. Though she had found her father autocratic and intimidating at times, and though he had tried to dictate the course of her life, she adored him. She was very much her father's daughter.

Edith Maud Olivier was born in the evening of the last day of 1872, the eighth of Dacres and Emma's ten children and their second daughter. Mildred, known as Millie, was born three years later and became Edith's closest friend. As a child, Edith was rather mousy-looking, with dark eyes and a pensive expression concealing her startlingly bright mind. Industrious as well as clever, she revealed an early passion for reading, steadily working her way through the books in her father's library. However, while her brothers in turn – Boysey, Henry, Alfred, Frank, Sidney, Reginald and Harold – left home for public schools and later, careers in politics, finance, the army, the navy and the Colonial Service, Edith was not so fortunate. Dacres was a country parson with a large house and a large family but only a small living, and though personally of ascetic tastes, he considered it appropriate for a man in his position to live with his family on a grand scale. But economies had to be made and one of them was his daughters' education. It was left to their mother Emma to teach them and only later, when Edith was fourteen, did they acquire a governess.

Emma was the daughter of Bishop Robert Eden, of Moray, Ross and Caithness (Anthony Eden was Edith's second cousin). She was Dacres's second wife; his first had died after only a few years of marriage leaving a son, also called Dacres, who did not live at the Rectory and was an adult by the time Edith was born. Edith would portray her mother as a shadowy, serene figure, for-ever wafting into her husband's study to soothe him out of his habitual ill temper.

The education of the girls aside, domestic economies had little tangible effect on life at the Rectory. It was a large, civilized, well-proportioned Georgian house, the kind of house that implies its inhabitants live civilized, well-proportioned lives. It easily contained the family of twelve as well as several servants. The house stood back from the road behind a brick wall, and carriages arrived at the front door through an arch built into the carriage house to the left of the main building. The Rectory facade was brick with yellow pilasters; a round white porch held up by pillars stood welcomingly before the front door. Inside, the light and high-ceilinged hallway spanned the depth of the house. At the far side of the hall, the garden door, which in Edith's memory was always open in summer, looked out onto the terrace, the walled garden and the seemingly infinite lawn that sloped away from the back of the house. The Rectory was linked to the church by a path of clipped and pointed yews to the right of the house. At the bottom of the lawn there was a pond with a waterfall and an island and beyond that the River Nadder where Edith and her siblings swam.

Though Dacres saw little of his children when they were very young, as they grew older he enjoyed having them about him. They were likened by a family friend to the 'Four and Twenty Blackbirds'; whenever Dacres wanted to open the pie, she said, they would always be there, poised to sing. Though her brothers in turn took flight, the girls, like Milton's daughters, remained at home and at Dacres's bidding. And he expected that there they would stay. 'Though he always sat alone in his study, he

liked us within call', wrote Edith; 'he hated anyone going out to parties. The coming and going worried him. He was truly conservative. As the family party had been yesterday, so he wished it to be to-day, and to-morrow, and so on *ad-infinitum*.'⁶ He wholeheartedly disapproved of careers for his daughters and in marriage only 'archbishops of good family' were considered acceptable suitors.⁷ Though their elder sister Mamie got married (to a young naval officer, Frank Carter, after a paternally imposed engagement of four years), Edith and Mildred stayed at home, within the confines of the Rectory and a social circle of local county families: 'The wheel of our lives then rotated slowly . . . its spokes were the successive events of the days, the weeks, the years. To these spokes we were bound. We rotated with them.'⁸

In 1895 when Edith was twenty-two she planned her escape. Some years earlier in 1889 she had attended a series of Oxford University extension lectures in Salisbury, on the Stuart period. At one of the lectures she had met Cosmo Lang, who would later become Archbishop of Canterbury. He suggested that she should sit for a scholarship to read History at Oxford. Her father's friend Bishop Wordsworth had established a scholarship in memory of his first wife at St Hugh's Hall, one of the women's colleges. Reluctantly Dacres let Edith take the exam on the assumption that she was unlikely to succeed.

Edith won the scholarship. And though she had been delighted by the prospect of the university, with its societies, debates and bicycles, she would find that for a woman a university career meant little beyond an improving diet of attending lectures and writing essays; 'women's colleges had then an untarnished school-girl complexion'.⁹ Despite an ever-increasing female presence, Oxford was still an exclusive bastion of masculinity onto whose illustrious lawns, as Virginia Woolf would find, it was unwise for girls to trespass.

She did, however, enjoy an intriguing friendship. Charles Dodgson, better known as Lewis Carroll, was the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, first published in 1865. He had been introduced to Edith by a college friend, Evelyn Hatch. Evelyn had been one of Dodgson's infant muses and had posed for him in the nude as a Gypsy child. By the time Edith went to Oxford Dodgson was no longer teaching but remained in residence at Christ Church. He enjoyed the company of a select group of female students whom he would invite to dine with him 'tete-a-tete' in his rooms.¹⁰ Edith occasionally found herself the guest at one of his intimate soirées. They always dined on mutton chop and meringues and discussed questions of logic. Occasionally they looked at his photographs. 'Mr Dodgson was very fond of little girls', Edith would later write.¹¹ It seems that he had been rather fond of Miss Olivier too, writing in his diary that he thought her a 'very nice girl' and regretted that they were on 'Miss terms' rather than 'kiss terms'.¹² Edith had grown into a handsome young woman with dark eyes, jet-black hair and her father's strong features. She had a dominant and slightly slanted nose, wonderfully high cheekbones and a heavy brow – with her naturally thick, straight eyebrows giving her a look of fierce determination that more than compensated for her height, being just over five foot.

Edith developed a great respect for the principal of the college, Charlotte Anne Moberly, known as Annie, a distant relation of her mother and a rigorously exacting but exciting influence on her students. Moberly was both deeply religious and an impassioned pioneer of women's education; she showed Edith the academic career path that she could take if she chose to. For an educated woman of Edith's background, a bluestocking independence was one of the only options if she wanted to escape the family home. But Dacres would not have allowed it, and perhaps it was never even discussed. The other option would have been to find a husband, one which her father might approve of. Only once did she make a gesture in that direction. One weekend in term-time she brought home a young don to meet her family, but Dacres made him seem so inadequate that Edith put an end to the relationship. She never tried again. As it happened Edith developed asthma in Oxford and left after

only four terms. By 1896 she was back at the Rectory and life continued much as it had done before. Edith appeared to accept her lot. She lived, for the most part, a practical, useful sort of life—‘a home-keeping youth’ – helping her father with his duties in the parish and becoming involved with countless local causes and committees, including teaching the choir at Netherhampton and running a branch of the National Poultry Organization Society.¹³ With her natural confidence and inherited hauteur she proved adept, resourceful and persuasive. Wilton was the ancient heart of Wiltshire and proudly maintained political independence from the much larger city of Salisbury only a few miles to the east. It was a Middlemarch kind of town, and in Edith’s youth it was steeped in tradition. She would remember with delight its fairs, pageants and unusually high number of processions. She had been named after Wilton’s patron saint¹ and like her father she felt a responsibility, almost a noblesse oblige, to serve the town.

When their mother died in 1908 Mildred and Edith took over the running of the Rectory and the care of their increasingly irascible father. By then the sisters knew they would never marry. Mildred had had only one love affair, ‘one radiant summer of perfect mental companionship and whimsical tenderness, and then it all went wrong’.¹⁴ She remained dependent on her bolder sister, with whom she had made a pact that they would never leave each other, rather like Jane Austen and her sister Cassandra. In childhood, when Edith dreamt of adventures on the high seas, Mildred would weep for hours, fearing that she would be abandoned. Their friend Pamela Tennant recalled that Mildred ‘would agonize if this beloved sister was out even walking down the village street, beyond her sight’.¹⁵ Another friend would later write that ‘the two sisters were inseparable, and their little dark heads could be seen under the same evening cloak when there were wanderings after dinner in the Park’.¹⁶ Edith and Mildred were bound to each other, and happily so.

In 1912 Dacres retired as Rector of Wilton and became a canon at Salisbury Cathedral, moving with his family to a house in the Cathedral Close, the inspiration for Trollope’s *Barsetshire* novels, to live amongst ‘scholarly canons and gentle old maids’.¹⁷ In leaving Wilton Edith felt that she had lost her soul.

Two years later the threat of war hovered over the country but within the cloistered walls of the Close, the Balkans seemed too distant to contemplate. Soon after war was declared troops and army lorries began to pour into the city from Salisbury Plain, shattering its preciously maintained tranquillity and ushering the war into their lives. Within a month came news that Edith’s youngest brother Harold had been killed fighting on the Aisne, leaving behind a wife and two small children. Edith later wrote with impassioned bitterness about the ‘uprush of idealism and ignorance’ with which the war began and how this faded away as the harsh realities slowly filtered back from the front.¹⁸ Her friend, the poet Sir Henry Newbolt, wrote to her: ‘This war is going to change the world for us all. Nothing will ever be the same again.’¹⁹

At first Edith’s daily life continued as before; she remained busy with her duties in Wilton and enjoyed the novelty of making domestic economies. But a few years later, as the war rattled on far beyond its first Christmas and more and more men left to fight, Edith, as a member of the Wiltshire County Agricultural Committee, recognized that there would soon be a serious deficit in the number of farm workers. This, she thought, was an opportunity for women to show their capabilities. She met for tea with her cousin Sydney Olivier, the Fabian and, conveniently for Edith, President of the Board of Agriculture. He was commandeered to help implement her plans. Setting up the organization was the easy part. Convincing sceptical farmers, who loathed the idea of a ‘Regiment of Women’ working on their farms, would prove a harder task.²⁰ She became involved in recruiting volunteers and organizing their training on local estates and had soon built up a register of about 4,000 girls. Despite the farmers’ reservations, her scheme proved successful and it soon became apparent that it would

have to evolve into something bigger and more official. In 1916 Edith went to a meeting at the House of Commons to discuss the creation of a new national organization and she became a superintendent of its Wiltshire branch. And so the Women's Land Army was born. By late 1917 there were over 260,000 women working as farm labourers. Two years after the war ended Edith was awarded an MB for her work.

Edith's role with the Land Army meant that she had to learn to drive. She acquired a little two-seater and was endlessly dashing about the Wiltshire countryside, from farm to farm, in her stiff khaki uniform. She loved to drive fast and had inherited a passion for sightseeing from her father. As a child she had gone for drives on Salisbury Plain with Lady Pembroke in her phaeton, and with her father she would set out on expeditions, her stiff straw boater flat on her head, as Victorian girls often wore them. Edith's attire would change over the years but her love of sightseeing remained a constant. And whereas Dacres's routes were always carefully planned, Edith liked to explore.

Secretly, as a child, she had devoured her brothers' adventure books and wished that she was a boy so that she could run away to sea. At night with Mildred she play-acted and told tales of worlds far beyond the Rectory walls. All her life Edith longed to be an actress but her father would not hear of one of his daughters going on the stage, a career he considered 'grotesque' for a woman.²¹ 'My father thought a professional actress was as improper as a Restoration Play', she would write.²² Dacres's mother Mary, so family legend told, had been friends with Mrs Siddons, the celebrated tragedienne. Siddons had tried to persuade Mary to go on the stage, so gifted an actress had she been. But Mary was 'the strictest of Puritans' and it was not to be countenanced.²³ Edith's brother Alfred horrified Dacres by abandoning the Colonial Service to become an actor and she dared not follow suit. So Edith lived the theatrical life vicariously, through the reviews of Mr Walkley, *The Times* theatre critic, who came to represent all that Edith was denied by her father and the 'one link with the world of [her] dreams'. Her acting was confined to charades at home and the town play, but the instinct never left her.

Beside the Rectory on West Street in Wilton stands the parish church of St Mary and St Nicholas. It was built in 1844 by Lord Herbert of Lea and his mother Catherine, known as 'the Russian Countess' of Pembroke. She was the daughter of Count Semyon Vorontsov, Russian Ambassador to the Court of St James's. Catherine had a fashionable fancy for Italian architecture and so the church was designed in the style of a Romanesque basilica, more suited to casting a lofty shadow over a Florentine piazza than over a leafy English graveyard. The interior is a shrine to caprice with black marble columns from the Temple of Venus at Porto Venere, windows made of glass looted by Napoleon's army and twisted, mosaic-studded columns from Horace Walpole's chapel at Strawberry Hill. The whole effect is fanciful and foreign. Even the orientation of the church is irregular; it lies on a south-west-north-east axis rather than the traditional east-west. Here Edith had been baptized by her father. Beside the church, as if countering the frivolity of its neighbour, stands the gracious, deep-red brick Georgian Rectory where Edith was born: square, solid and restrained. But between the two buildings there is an unexpected and strangely English harmony. And just as the flamboyantly romantic and the archly conservative sit side by side on West Street in happy contradiction, so they did in Edith Olivier.

As children, Edith, Mildred and the younger boys created their own realm within the labyrinth of cellars, attics and cupboards of the rambling Rectory. They enjoyed a clandestine independence, with their private jokes and family legends closely binding them like comrades. In the summer they played around the mulberry tree or in the disused duck-house on the island, and in the evenings they would run and dance along the flat roof of the Rectory watching passers-by on the street or their oblivious parents talking in the garden. Often they would slip beyond the lawn and across the river into the meadows and orchards of the Wilton estate so that they could play with Lord Pembroke's nieces and nephews, with whom they had been brought up and would remain close all their lives.

The aristocratically eccentric world of Wilton House fascinated Edith. Lady Pembroke, whimsical and wayward, planted ivy all over the park at Wilton, refusing to believe that something so delicate could harm the trees around which it coiled so prettily. Lord Pembroke had been one of Disraeli's allies and his sister Lady Maud had married Sir Hubert Parry, the composer of 'Jerusalem' amongst other things and 'a whirlwind of genius'; another sister, Lady Mary, married Baron Freddy von Hügel the Christian philosopher; and his youngest sister was Lady Ripon, married to a famous shot and herself a 'dazzling . . . social queen' to whom her friend Oscar Wilde dedicated *A Woman of No Importance*.²⁵ As a child, at the Rectory, Edith was required to be silent and dutiful; a role she accepted willingly to avoid upsetting her parents. But at Wilton House she was encouraged to speak her mind and give free rein to her imagination. And though she looked like a mouse there was nothing timorous about Edith: she was spiky, energetic and bold. There is a photograph of her as a young woman in 1897, a grin on her face, her arms swinging in gleeful abandon as she skips along the gravel path behind the Rectory in a puff-sleeved blouse and long, tightly belted skirt of late-Victorian fashion. Edith would never suppress the 'natural' side of her personality as her father had learnt to do.

Her other education took place in the drawing rooms of Wilton House. As a young woman she would tramp across the estate to dinner at the big house with her sisters, galoshes over their satin shoes and the full skirts of their evening dresses pinned to their waists. Wilton House was 'the centre of our lives', she would write.²⁶ Socializing with the Pembroke's circle of aristocratic and intellectual friends, listening to the conversations of dukes and duchesses, artists, historians, poets and politicians had given her strong opinions and fanciful ideas. It gave her a sense of superiority, both socially and intellectually, that never left her. And she became a dedicated Tory in the aristocratic tradition. In the park at Wilton as a child she had seen Mrs Patrick Campbell perform in *As You Like It*. It had been played there before with Shakespeare amongst the company. The world within the walls of the estate was sheltered, grand and immutable. There, she would later write, her soul resided, and she came to realize that she never wanted to leave.

Edith enjoyed the elevated position in society that her link with Wilton House and her close friendship with Lord Pembroke's eldest son Reginald, or 'Regy' as she called him, provided. This connection meant that by the time she was an adult Edith had a large network of grand friends with grand houses set in beautiful estates. Amongst them, the Morrisons at Fonthill, the Radnors at Longford Castle, the Marchioness of Bath at Longleat, Lady Juliet Duff at Bulbridge, the Duchess of Devonshire, the Marchioness of Salisbury, Lady Desborough and Lady Violet Bonham Carter, the politically minded daughter of the Liberal Prime Minister. Reginald Herbert married Lady Beatrice Paget, sister of the Marquess of Anglesey. The Marquess's wife, Marjorie, a daughter of the Duke of Rutland and sister of the beautiful socialite Lady Diana Cooper, was Edith's friend.

Beyond the Wilton House circle, amongst Edith's closest friends were the American-born critic Alice Douglas Sedgwick and her sister Anne, who was a writer, a great friend of Henry James and married to the critic Basil de Selincourt. Another life-long friend was the adventurous writer Yoi Maraini, who lived in Florence with her second husband, a sculptor. And nearby, across the meadows at Netherhampton House, lived Sir Henry Newbolt, the patriotic poet, and his wife Margaret. He shared with Edith a love of history and tradition.

But as the daughter of a country rector, and later as a very active woman in the community, Edith's social world was never confined to lofty patrician and artistic circles. She came into contact with everyone from church grandees to farmhands. She had resigned herself to an eternal spinsterhood, but Edith might have considered herself more of an Emma than a Miss Bates. She knew everyone and everyone knew her. Society people and townspeople marvelled at her endless energy and enjoyed her eccentricity.

Although she forged an independent life for herself, Edith was always rather contemptuous of the

suffragettes, undoubtedly more for their conduct than for their cause. At St Hugh's, Annie Moberly had encouraged a progressive and quietly persistent attitude towards votes and degrees for women but without the drama or aggression of the later suffragettes, one of whom was enrolled at the college for a term in Edith's first year. Emily Davison, born in the same year as Edith, devoted her life to the cause of women's suffrage and later martyred herself beneath the King's horse at Epsom. Edith never mentions Davison in her memoirs. She deplored violence and found a way to assert her voice and freedom without upsetting anyone. One of Mildred's friends recalled Edith returning home from Oxford 'like a bright particular star a little out of its course and visiting a lesser firmament'.²⁷

Edith remained good friends with Annie Moberly until her death in 1937. A respected and pioneering academic, Annie had another, more unusual side. In 1901 she had been walking in the gardens of the Petit Trianon at Versailles with Eleanor Jourdain, a fellow scholar, her close companion and, according to some, her lover. The two women suddenly found themselves in a scene from the eighteenth century and encountered various characters, who were, they were later convinced, Marie Antoinette and members of her court. They sought to 'rationalize' their experience and set about investigating it in the manner that was instinctive to them both as academics. After years of exhaustive research, they discovered that Marie Antoinette had been sitting in the gardens of the Trianon on 5 October 1789, when she was informed that a mob was marching from Paris. By way of an explanation for their vision, Annie and Eleanor formulated an elaborate theory that Marie Antoinette's memory of this terrifying moment had been so powerful that it lingered in the same place through time and that somehow they must have entered into it telepathically and witnessed the scene for themselves. They went on pseudonymously to publish their account in 1911; the bizarre story of the eccentric spinster-visionaries gripped the public imagination and quickly became a bestseller.

There are various theories as to what the two women actually saw, but the aspect that has most fascinated the critics of *An Adventure* over the years is the vehemence with which the two women defended their vision and the dedication with which they researched their claims. One explanation is that it was a case of contagious insanity, a shared delusion or *folie à deux*, or more specifically in this case, *folie imposée*, whereby the delusions of one person are imposed on another, revealing, it has been suggested, a repressed lesbian affinity.²⁸ Despite the authors' use of pseudonyms, their identity was known to acquaintances and some reviewers. Their academic status lent credibility to the story but the story did little for their academic reputation. Moberly and Jourdain were two of only a handful of women spearheading the burgeoning women's education movement at Oxford and Cambridge and the publication of *An Adventure* seemed to confirm the fears of their detractors. It cast an embarrassingly long shadow over the college and the careers of the two women.

Some of this folly clearly rubbed off on Edith, who never doubted the validity of the claims in *An Adventure*. She too had a curious combination of common sense, intelligence and a profound fascination with 'things past explaining'.²⁹ Edith was infatuated with history and the romance of place, believing that darker and more primitive energies existed deep within the Wiltshire landscape. Salisbury Plain with its 'great impersonal changelessness'³⁰ fascinated her: 'the hauntings of the Plain are not personal, they are universal. The word "Revenant" fits them better than "Ghost"', she later wrote. 'Abstract presences seem to come and go upon the Plain, and they pass like the cloud shadows which move eternally over its still, impassible face.'³¹

Late one afternoon in October 1916 Edith was wearily driving home through rain from a meeting of the Women's Land Army. Leaving the main road she came across a huge avenue of megaliths, beyond which a village fair was in progress. She realized that she was looking at the stone circle at Avebury. Though the stone circle still stood, it was some years later when she discovered that the avenue of stones had disappeared before 1800 and that the fair had been abolished in 1850; she decided that she

must have stepped back in time to the eighteenth century.

But despite inexplicable things happening to Edith she didn't consider herself a psychic. She believed that her imagination was so finely tuned as to be receptive to the supernatural. Nowhere did she feel this more keenly than in Wiltshire, and Salisbury Plain in particular. 'It is not a question of "seeing ghosts" or of "having visions"', she would write, 'it is that sometimes, under the influence of that great spirit that seems ever brooding over the plain, one's own little outlook is lost and is incorporated into something older and bigger and wiser than oneself. One knows what the past was like.'³²

Her sense of place derived from an elaborate patchwork of remembered anecdotes, local legends and folklore, history and literature. In the manner of Kipling in *Puck of Pook's Hill*, she had fiction and fact organically fused in her imagination. 'I know of no one who claims to have seen an apparition of one of the most beautiful and tragical funeral processions in the world's history', she would later write, 'when for two nights and the best part of two days, Sir Lancelot and his seven companions were on foot the long forty miles from "Almesbury unto Glastonbury", escorting the bier upon which lay, with face uncovered, the body of Guinevere the Queen . . . If strength and poignancy of feeling are the cause of hauntings', which she believed, 'one might expect still to meet those figures on that long way of sorrow, but the beautiful vision has never been seen'.³³ Undoubtedly Edith hoped that she would be the one to see these 'revenants of the Plain'.³⁴

Edith's Christianity sat happily with her belief in visions, primitive energies and the predictive power of the horoscope. Every morning, throughout her life, she attended daily communion. She would go to evensong almost as often. With its ceremonies, rituals and symbols, Edith's Anglican faith was like a romantic ideology, one that was almost pantheistically tied up with nature. The perfect synchrony of the Christian year with the seasons delighted Edith, as did the aesthetic and sensory pleasures of the Anglican Church. And so it was that the lyrical world of Edith's imagination mingled seamlessly with her real world: that of laundry lists, of milk yields, parish matters and committee meetings. It illuminated her faith and the landscape around her and she responded to both with equal passion.

The farmers and parish councillors might have been bemused by her flights of fancy, but Edith had kindred spirits. One of them was her great friend Pamela Wyndham, the daughter of the Honourable Percy Wyndham and his wife Madeline. A statuesque society beauty, Pamela had the blood of French royalty and Irish nobility running through her veins. She was a year older than Edith, and as children they had played together on the lawns at Wilton. In 1895 she had married Edward Tennant (later Lord Glenconner), scion of the exceedingly rich industrial family whose fortune derived, rather more prosaically, from the invention of bleach by a Victorian farming ancestor. Eddie Tennant's sister Margot was married to Herbert Asquith, the Liberal Prime Minister. Of Pamela's five surviving children (a sixth, a girl called Hester, died a few hours after she was born in 1916) Stephen, born in 1906, was the youngest. At Clouds, her parents' home in Wiltshire, she had been brought up in a lofty but tolerant atmosphere amongst Pre-Raphaelite artists and socialist writers. William Morris had been a frequent guest. Pamela had keenly imbibed their values and carried them with her into her own family life, shunning society and the Tennants' London house in Queen Anne's Gate as much as she could, in favour of a quiet country life. But Pamela's idea of country living was a Ruskinian ideal, one that belied the industrial source of the family's wealth.

Edward Tennant had built his wife a house, Wilsford, in the Avon Valley in Wiltshire, designed by Detmar Blow in the style favoured by the Arts and Crafts architects. There Pamela indulged her imagination, writing poetry and books on folklore, nature and her children. She loved her children, her 'jewels' as she liked to call them, more than anything. When her favourite son Bim was killed by a

sniper's bullet on the Somme in 1916 (the son she had brought up to believe that fighting for one's country was the noblest cause) Pamela was distraught. Though she had profound faith Pamela was also a mystic. Like Edith she believed in second sight and it became her mission to contact Bim on the other side. With her friend and neighbour, the respected physicist and Christian spiritualist, Sir Oliver Lodge, who had also lost a son in the war, Pamela conducted seances at Wilsford and together they sought to conjure up the ghosts of their beloved dead. A few years later in 1921, Pamela published *The Earthen Vessel*, an account of her spirit-communication with Bim, and a curiously personal and painful relic of an age of mourning.

History has not been kind to Pamela. Later generations have vilified her as a vampire-mother whose own life overshadowed and warped the lives of her children. Rather than nurturing her 'jewels', her overwhelming love had drained the lifeblood from them. Edith privately disapproved of the way Pamela raised her children and of her incessant attempts to contact the dead. But despite these differences, the two women had a great mutual understanding. Edith admired Pamela's sensitivity and dedication to a life fuelled by the imagination. She also considered her to be a fine poet.

Dacres died two months after the Peace, in January 1919, at the age of eighty-seven. Edith and Mildred were in their late forties and finally at liberty to begin an independent life. They left the Cloisters for temporary accommodation in a former laundry cottage on the Wilton estate, until they found a more permanent home of their own. Eventually they rented a house from Edith's friend Lord Bledisloe, who had helped her to set up the Women's Land Army. Fitz House was a fifteenth-century manor house with mullioned windows in Teffont Magna, perhaps the prettiest village in Wiltshire, a few miles from Wilton. A stream ran along the village street from the chalk down, and access to the house was provided by a bridge. Edith believed the water in the stream was the finest in Wiltshire after she was given an ancient recipe for an unguent that listed it as a magic ingredient. For the two years they lived there, the house was a happy place, often full of their many nephews and nieces and their friends' children. Reginald Pembroke's four children, Patricia, Sidney, David and Tony, as well as their cousin Michael Duff, often came to stay. Edith's childhood friends the Parry sisters, Dolly Ponsonby and Gwendolene Plunket Greene, by now had children of their own, and they too, along with Pamela Tennant's children, were frequent visitors. Edith's memories of Teffont Magna were that it was 'full of noise and laughter and children's games'.³⁵

A photograph taken in about 1920 shows the sisters in the garden at Fitz House: Mildred, carrying parasol to ward off the sun, and Edith, in profile, playfully gesturing to her sister. It is a picture of contentment and happiness. Mildred was Edith's beloved companion in all things. Like Edith, she loved conversation and the sisters talked to each other incessantly, about books, music, the piano – which Mildred played very well – their garden and their friends. They stimulated each other's minds and perhaps it felt to them as if their lives were complete. Dolly Ponsonby would later recall Mildred as a warm and sympathetic friend who was interested in everything and everyone around her.

With Mildred we felt clever, amusing and attractive . . . Certainly she had the power of transmuting prosaic and everyday things into exciting and funny things. She could extract amusement from a door-scraper . . . she retained some of the absurd caprices of youth, enthusiasms or dislikes for unaccountable things; there was the charm of the unexpected and the unexplained . . . Mildred never had a middle-aged point of view . . .³⁶

In 1921, Lady Pembroke offered the sisters the old dairy cottage, set in a corner of the Wilton estate. And joyfully they returned to the place that they loved. 'I found my lost soul in the park', Edith later wrote and Mildred described it as 'the most wonderful thing that ever happened to us'.³⁷ They hired a housekeeper and a maid, set about making alterations and planned a rose garden. They renamed it the Daye House, the old Wiltshire word for dairy. Soon, as at Teffont Magna, the house was teeming with children, camp beds filling up every available space. Edith and Mildred adored their young guests –

indulging them by telling ghost stories and dressing up as witches or Indian squaws in a tent in the woods. And in turn the children adored them. At the Daye House there were no routines and nothing humdrum; all was fun and magic and adventure.

And so it could have continued. But then Mildred found a lump in her breast and was diagnosed with cancer. She had an operation on the dining table at the Daye House, while Edith sat nervously in the next room, the smell of ether seeping out from underneath the door. But it was to no avail. After months of debilitating radiation treatment, Mildred died on 19 November 1924. Edith was fifty-one, and she believed her life was over.

Rex



It was heaven-clear to me, solitary and a dreamer; let me but gain the key, I would soon unlock that Eden garden-door.

Walter de la Mare, *Henry Brock*

Just before the turn of the century, at around the time Edith Olivier returned home from Oxford, Helen Ward came out at a hunt ball in Basingstoke Town Hall. Like Edith, Helen was the daughter of a country rector; she had learnt French in Brussels, wrote poetry and played Chopin, and then appalled her family by making a *mésalliance* with a man in trade. In 1898 she married Harry Whistler at a church in Notting Hill and the couple honeymooned at Lulworth Cove. A builder, uneducated and unsophisticated, was not at all what the Reverend Charles Ward had in mind for his daughter. But Harry was a gentle soul, quietly spoken and charming. His company, on the High Street in Eltham, south London, was modestly successful and carried out all kinds of jobs from building, decorating, sanitary work and electric lighting (the poster declared the company as the rather evangelical-sounding ‘Agents for the Incandescent Light’) to inventories, furniture sales, auctions and property lettings. It supplied everything from manhole covers stamped with the Whistler name, to architectural services, specializing in suburban houses in the popular half-timbered ‘Tudorbethan’ style.

Harry and Helen’s third child, Rex, was born on Midsummer’s Day, 24 June 1905, at the family home, a modest mid-Victorian detached house around the corner from the office. A photograph taken in 1911 shows the Whistler family formally arranged in their back garden, a portrait of pre-war, middle-class respectability: Harry, thickset and moustachioed, serious in a dark suit and boater; Helen, elegant in white and draped in a wicker chair; beside her, perched on the arm of the chair, their daughter Jess, then aged eleven; and their two sons, sitting in miniature chairs on either side of their mother, dressed in wide-collared sailor outfits and straw hats with upturned brims; on the right, Denis and on the left Rex, with fat cheeks, grinning at the camera. Their last child, Laurence, was born the following year.

Harry had no social ambition and no desire to make gentlemen of his sons but Helen had other ideas and her boys were duly sent to local prep schools. Though she was a loyal wife and would never regret her rebellious marriage, it did not stop her hoping for better things where her children were concerned. Rex was christened Reginald John but Helen called him Rex from birth; it sounded noble and romantic.

Helen encouraged all her children to draw from a young age but as it became clear that Rex’s talent was rather more precocious she began at once to nurture it. Pencils and paper were kept in constant supply and she would cherish his childhood drawings all her life. Between 1912 and 1923 he won a prize every year at the Royal Drawing Society exhibition.

These drawings were almost always dramatic, and usually suffused with Rex’s own variety of gentle, absurd humour. As one looks at them now, they appear unrefined, inelegant and often gruesome, but they also resonate with the same sense of energy and delight in the grotesque as his

adult work, hinting at the artist he would become. And they reflect, too, his inventive interpretation of history, literature and the Bible stories his mother read to him. The images burst from the page and invite a closer look. One picture, drawn when Rex was nine or ten, is of decapitated Moorish soldiers their long ponytailed scalps bleeding beside them. There is a drawing of the crumpled carriages of a train crash; another of a drilling machine in a mine with pieces of rock spinning off it; and a cartoon of a wronged wife seeing her husband with another woman, about to smash his portrait and being carried off by the police. Invariably Rex coupled drama with farce, as he would always do.

For most of his life Rex preferred to draw from memory. His imagination served as a catalogue of learnt images, and his talent always lay in his ability to reproduce, elaborate and reinvent reality. Amongst his very earliest drawings is 'The Knoll Palace', in which he has romanticized and upgraded the Knoll, the family home at the time, to a palace. Another was entitled 'Prince Rex of Troy leaving for Grece [sic]'

Rex was a popular little boy; sunny, open and affectionate. He worshipped his elder brother Denny and the two were inseparable. Where Denny led, the younger boy would follow and whatever they were doing, Rex was always striving to keep up with him. He would constantly seek to prove himself always believing that he had failed.

One morning in February 1915 when he was eleven, Denny began to feel unwell at school. He left without permission and returned home. He had measles, then whooping cough and eventually developed pneumonia. An air of horror hung in the Whistler home as the boy lay in his bed upstairs. A month later he died. His mother, who had great faith in God but a constant, seemingly irrational fear of accident and illness, was inconsolable. She could not face the funeral and Harry went alone. For nine-year-old Rex, the sudden loss of his best friend was the beginning of an underlying sadness that would never leave him. He was also now the eldest son, and became the focus of his mother's hopes and expectations.

In 1919, when Rex was fourteen, he was sent to Haileybury, the public school in Hertfordshire founded to educate civil servants for India. A sporty, austere sort of school, it was an odd choice for a boy who wanted to do nothing but draw and paint. Rex was bright but not intellectual. He would later remember the relentless boredom he felt at Haileybury – a dreamy schoolboy, whiling away the hours in class doodling strip cartoons across the pages of his exercise books. In a letter to the school in the 1980s, Laurence Whistler would write that his brother 'owed nothing to the art school, which he didn't much frequent, and the art master thought nothing of his work'.¹ Yet Rex found that his talent won him friends, as it had at prep school: 'I did a drawing for a boy yesterday and after that I got no peace everyone asked me to do them one'.² So it would always be.

Rex left Haileybury in the spring of 1922, at the age of sixteen, and planned to go to art school. To his credit, Harry Whistler put no pressure on his elder son to take over the business that he had worked so hard to build. He was happy for Rex to become an artist and knew that Helen had greater things in mind for her son than the building trade. But she thought of Rex as a gentleman-artist, not a bohemian. She 'admired', Laurence Whistler wrote, 'the kind of artist who moved with grace in the world of affairs, such as Rubens . . . whose example she liked to fancy that Rex might follow'.³ Rex was far more fortunate than many of his contemporaries. Both Evelyn Waugh and John Betjeman were considered a disappointment by their fathers because of their refusal to work in their respective family businesses. Cecil Beaton's father was a wealthy timber merchant and wanted his son to work in the City after coming down from Cambridge. For Waugh, Betjeman and Beaton, taking up the pen and the camera were acts of rebellion. On the contrary, Rex's parents actively encouraged his artistic ambitions. For his mother, becoming an artist was a sign of respectability and cultivation rather than insurrection.

And so Rex entered the Royal Academy Schools on a probationary basis. But as he was essentially self-taught, and limited by his inability to draw from life, in the end-of-term examination Rex failed and, to his horror, lost his place at the school. It was one of the worst moments of his life but he was determined not to give up. He decided to try his luck at the Slade School of Art where he was interviewed by Henry Tonks, 'the revered, redoubtable, dreaded and loved master', whose former pupils included Augustus John and Stanley Spencer.⁴ When asked why he had failed at the RA, Rex replied: 'for incompetence'.⁵ Tonks offered him a place, beguiled by his frankness and impressed by his talent.

At the Slade, girls with bobbed hair, sandals and Augustus John smocks hung about the entrance. Rex befriended Oliver Messel, later a fashionable designer of sets and costumes. At times, later, Rex and Oliver would find themselves competing for the same commissions. But that was in the future. 'Instead of always slaving away in the somewhat uninspiring atmosphere of life classes (always flabbily grotesque models) at the Slade', Messel would later recall, 'Rex Whistler and I were inclined to fritter away the time in each other's company, doodling and drawing fantasy palaces and imaginary people. During the weekends we started making masks of papier mache.'⁶

Several weeks into term the Honourable Stephen Tennant arrived at the Slade. With his whippet-slim frame, shiny golden hair and finely modelled face he had the elegant androgyny of a Beardsley or Erté illustration – and the attendant whiff of aristocratic decadence which that implied. In the many photographs taken of Stephen his expression is one of either patrician disdain or limpid-eyed ingenuity. He was much preoccupied by his own beauty and took the greatest delight in the beauty of things around him.

One lunch-break he noticed Rex sitting alone reading Edgar Allan Poe and introduced himself. Perhaps it was the choice of book that first attracted Stephen, or perhaps it was that in Rex, solitary, quieter than the other students, he saw a potential kindred spirit. Rex took a very businesslike approach to art school; instead of the bohemian garb favoured by his classmates he wore a proper suit and carried an attaché case. He wanted to be taken seriously, and although he had a charming and easy manner with the other students, he found it difficult to make friends. Stephen would later recall:

He was a deeply shy man, with a great tendency to making reservations in his judgement of others. While not censorious, he was critical and recessive in the extreme . . .

He had a quality of essential simplicity that continually opposed the curious sardonic melancholy of his maturity. He had an essential gravity which his fooling played and like summer lightning [sic]. Sometimes his face in repose was curiously sad and thoughtful. He was sometimes capricious and quixotic, uncertain of his own feelings and predilections.⁷

Rex's first impression of Stephen was of a 'slender figure and extraordinary beauty, like a more delicate Shelley'.⁸ In contrast, Stephen saw Rex as 'a plump, thick set, very boyish man, with a manner both impulsive and diffident . . . His skin was pale, his eyes agate-grey, with a nuance of catkin hazel, almost topaz brown and grey depths . . . Something inhibited and repressed showed in his lips and the way he averted his head sometimes, when he was particularly thoughtful.' 'We both love fairy tales, mythology, legends containing magic spells', Stephen recalled, 'and we found a strong reciprocal bond in the passionate vividness of our imaginations.'⁹ They also shared a more contemporary fascination with Hollywood, the movies, fast cars: the glamour and gloss of America. Together they explored London; they went to parties, to the theatre, they set off arm in arm on moonlit walks and dipped their toes into the city's bohemia.

More than anything it was love of poetry that brought them together. Both young men were

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