

Powerscourt's Poor Literary Rich Girl...

ANNE ROPER

I had wanted to make a television documentary about the Viscountess, Lady Powerscourt since the late 1980's. Those were the days of film cameras and large crews so expense was one obstacle. But in truth, amid the Troubles in Northern Ireland, no one was much interested in the story of a fading Anglo-Irish woman poet. Undeterred, I grabbed a borrowed audio cassette recorder, travelled to the Ticino in the Alps where, in a penthouse overlooking Lake Maggiore, I taped a final interview with the wealthy but invalided Sheila Wingfield. That recording sat in a drawer for twenty years.

In the meantime, someone invented the internet. I can't remember what I was looking for at the time, but I was trawling through the Movietone website, that trove of early archive film footage with such historical interest. Suddenly I noticed a clip shot in 1933 entitled: *Irish Couple Receive Medieval Welcome*. And there it was: Sheila Beddington Wingfield arriving home to Powerscourt House with her new husband Pat following their wedding in Jerusalem—a Hollywood couple if ever there was one. Maybe the small clip might engender new interest?

I dug out the old interview. In the 1980's few people knew of Sheila Wingfield's aspirations as a poet. But from her bed in the Italian Alps, she would tell me her story and how, much as she loved Powerscourt from that first day to the end of her life, the role of chatelaine became far too difficult a one for her to cope with.

"You won't mind, dear, that I've had a brandy to steady my nerves," she asked as I put batteries in the tape machine.

In 1980, Sheila Wingfield was in her 80's. The reclusive and bed-ridden poet was about to publish her final book, *Ladder to the Loft*. Over the next three days I would learn how great a role nerves had played in her life and her eventual downfall: succumbing to fear was largely the reason for her obscurity as a writer.

How Sheila coped with her fears only emerged years later: the crippling addictions to drink and drugs; the rages that blighted relationships; the charade of dutiful wife and

loving mother. But in the end, it was fear that isolated her, that kept her from entering the very literary world she craved.

In 1906, when she was born Sheila Beddington, the future seemed much brighter. Beauty, brains, breeding - even money - Sheila had it all. Her mother, Ethel Mulock, was from good Irish Protestant ascendancy stock, “but we were Catholics much further back, real Irish!”

The Mulock’s Ballycumber and Bellair estates lay in County Offaly. There, Sheila spent childhood summers and holidays. Sheila’s mother was cultured, blue stocking and a literary groupie, friendly with both Yeats and Shaw. Sadly, Sheila and her mother did not get on. Sheila feared her mother’s high standards and cold temper. She feared her humiliating punishments.

“My mother lived for admiration and nothing else. She was mean and cruel and I was only too glad when I didn’t see her.”

On the other hand, Sheila adored her father. Major Claude Beddington had been away for much of Sheila’s childhood, leading British troops in the First World War. His substantial London-based wealth had been built in the tobacco trade. But while Claude was upwardly mobile, he aspired to traditional Edwardian values. He was a dominant character pitted against an equally headstrong wife. Caught in the crossfire, Sheila felt it safer to side with her father.

But Claude saw worrying similarities between mother and daughter. He disliked Sheila’s early bent towards the literary, fearing it might ruin her chances of netting a high-society husband. When she was young, he forbade her to read.

Trying to meet both parents’ exacting but conflicting standards was the springboard for Sheila’s first brush with anxiety. Writing at night and in secret became a way of calming the turmoil. The strain had the unexpected result of making her a poet.

“The compulsion came with adolescence: the absolute and overwhelming need to put things down in verse. My father wasn’t keen. I got no encouragement,” she says.

This early brush with deceit also proved thrilling. Sheila had only one ally in her secret life — her beloved older brother, Guy.

“Guy was musical and charming and I can’t say too many good things about him.”

Sadly, Guy caught TB while at university. Sheila’s mother refused to visit him. Ethel claimed boys with consumption were dissolute, that they brought disease on

themselves through Bohemian pursuits like jazz. But the sick room mellowed Claude. He was devoted to Guy's recovery. The Swiss sanatorium where Guy lingered soothed young Sheila: a sick-room comfort she would try to recreate in later years. When Guy finally died aged only 23, Sheila was bereft.

I think Odysseus, as he dies, forgets
Which was Calypso, which Penelope,
Only remembering the wind that sets
 Off Mimas, and how endlessly
 His eyes were stung with brine;
 Argos a puppy, leaping happily;
And his old father digging round a vine.

After Guy's death, Sheila's parents separated. Ethel refused to speak to Sheila for taking her father's side. The emotional pressures on Sheila, who was not yet 20, were overwhelming. She distracted herself by playing Claude's hostess at dances and dinner parties. She occupied herself with a debutante's life.

But the double life of writing by night and acting dutiful daughter by day led to stress and depression. Sheila turned to cocaine to get by. It was common enough 'medication' in the Twenties. Opiates and stimulants were available over the counter in Harrods. But it was a habit that would have devastating consequences for Sheila.

On the surface, Sheila was glamorous and enchanting. Behind the facade lay a lack of confidence. She attended hunt balls and grouse shoots and point-to-points across England and Ireland. She briefly went to art school in Paris. She was accepted at university but turned it down to please her father. Claude despaired she would never marry. Then suddenly, aged 27, Sheila met what her biographer, Penny Perrick, calls "the husband from central casting". Best of all, Pat Wingfield was heir to the great Powerscourt Estate in Co Wicklow.

"I fell in love with him then and there," remembered Sheila: "this handsome young man with blond hair and blue eyes."

However, a deception Claude had urged on Sheila years before threatened to end the young socialite's dreams of marriage. In the anti-Semitic 1930's, Claude hid the fact

that his family was Jewish. To her death, Sheila held fast to the secret, always feeling an outsider, denying the truth even to her own children. But Pat Wingfield knew and it didn't matter. He loved Sheila passionately. So much so he even ignored her odd habit of writing. When their engagement was finally announced, Pat's father famously ran into the Kildare Street Club shouting: "He's done it! She's Jewish, but she's rich!" Ironically, the couple married in Jerusalem, where Pat was serving as police officer with the British Mandate.

By the time the young couple began that long carriage ride home to Powerscourt, the House was facing financial ruin. The new Free State government had crippled the estate with high taxes and compulsory land purchase. While the marriage would gain Sheila an aristocratic title, Powerscourt House gained a crucial benefactress.

The first cracks in their fairytale romance came not long after. "It was a happy marriage to start with, but it soon began to deteriorate. I can't consider myself as having been a happy wife. I hope I was a good one, but I wasn't very happy."

Sheila fulfilled her duty of providing Powerscourt with an heir. There were three children in all: Grania, Mervyn and Guy, the last named after her dead brother. But what Sheila really wanted was recognition as a poet. Her first submitted verse appeared in *Dublin Magazine* alongside Patrick Kavanagh's. Lady Ottoline Morrell invited Sheila to her influential literary salon. Literary success seemed within Sheila's grasp.

"But I made the mistake of taking my husband along. Pat was very un-bookish. The only thing he read was the *Farmer's Weekly*. He was very put off by the poets we met at Ottoline's. He made me promise never to have anything to do with a literary crowd again."

"He was so severe and stern about it I thought I'd better stick to my promise - but imagine my grief, because being on your own and writing without the help and friendship of other writers is excessively difficult."

Penny Perrick thinks this story is another of Sheila's deceptions. So does Sheila's daughter, Grania. They describe Pat as a kind-hearted man who would have let Sheila do as she pleased. But Sheila's son, Guy, and I both think there is truth in Sheila's story. The salon incident occurred when Pat and Sheila were not long married. Sheila was arrestingly beautiful and sparkled amongst the male writers. What husband wouldn't feel a flash of jealousy?

But Sheila may have imposed the critical voices of her parents onto Pat. She may even have used her husband's anger to bow out of a literary world she felt unequal to.

"My father loved my mother," Guy remembers. "But I think he resented her intelligence, and the fact that she held the purse strings."

Then, an untimely and unseemly row with WB Yeats threatened more damage to her literary chances. Yeats had praised Sheila's early poetry in private correspondence. When the publisher of Sheila's first collection used Yeats's comments on the book's jacket, a literary scandal erupted:

"Mrs Wingfield," Yeats wrote, ". . . that you who have not the excuse of ignorance or poverty should do this vulgar thing fills me with regret . . . If I could keep you out of it, I would bring the matter to the Society of Authors."

This stress, combined with Sheila's desire to please, was a dangerous cocktail. On the eve of the publication of *Poems* in 1938, Sheila suffered the first of a series of breakdowns. She was drinking to calm her nerves and taking morphine. The doctors blamed her poetry habit. They said a sensible wife should pay more attention to her children. Grania and Guy were suffering in the fallout.

"My mother had no maternal instinct at all," Grania says. Guy, who was born deaf, speaks movingly of Sheila's cruelty. His description is almost a mirror image of Sheila's childhood abuse at the hands of her own mother.

"She would mock the way I spoke and if I didn't improve she beat me around the head. Her bedroom was at the end of a long corridor and when she called me I felt not only a physical, but a psychological distance."

Guy thinks Sheila's recurring illnesses were psychosomatic. Every time one of her ten books was about to be published, she would relapse. More tablets were prescribed and more injections. Delia Meacle, one of the Powerscourt staff, blamed the doctors who "were getting well paid" to keep Sheila on her medication. She also recalls Sheila's many kindnesses and how eager she was to help out when any of the staff were ill ("although she probably used the meeting with the doctor for more prescriptions.")

My theory is that illness gave Sheila the solitude and permission she needed to write. It excused her from public duties expected of the future Viscountess Powerscourt.

So it is no surprise that Sheila's most prolific period of writing came during the Second World War. Pat had joined the fight and was captured in Italy. Fearing internment in a concentration camp, Sheila and the children sought safety in Bermuda. There,

Sheila felt a freedom she'd never known. *Beat Drum, Beat Heart*, the two thousand-line poem she wrote about the war and the women left behind, is considered her masterpiece.

By the end of the war, Sheila's marriage had changed irrevocably. Guy remembers his father returning shell-shocked. "The war simply pulled the trigger."

"They'd grown apart over the five years," Grania says. "They fought a lot."

During Sheila's 'well' periods, there were bursts of non-literary energy. When Pat inherited Powerscourt in 1947, Sheila threw herself into the mammoth task of launching the house into the 20th century. She bought carpets, installed en-suite baths, painted and decorated. She dreamed of literary salons at Powerscourt but Irish writers in the 1950's stayed away. As Penny Perrick says: "It was all just too grand."

During the 1950's, Sheila won the Poetry Society Book Choice. She wrote a memoir of her time at Powerscourt which included several pen portraits of the staff she loved so much. Her work was praised by Betjeman and TS Eliot. But her success was ephemeral. A patrician woman didn't fit the image of an Irish poet in the New Ireland. Her themes and language were not shared by readers and publishers of Kavanagh and O'Faolain.

Sheila immersed herself in public duties: heading up the Irish Girl Guides and helping Chester Beatty catalogue his collection. There were horse shows and charity galas to support. She opened Powerscourt House for the filming of *Captain Lightfoot*, a Hollywood epic starring Rock Hudson. When ill, she would even hire an ambulance for shopping in Grafton Street's Switzers.

But by 1963 her marriage was over. Sheila left Pat, taking her money. The family was forced to make the painful decision to sell Powerscourt. The estate had been in the Wingfield family for more than 400 years. "It devastated my father," says Grania.

After that, Sheila began a life of wandering. She moved from hotel to hotel, from Bermuda to London and from Dublin to Switzerland. She struggled with recurring, mysterious pain. She tried coming off drugs and failed. Loneliness pursued her but it brought a change of heart. By the time she died in 1992 in a nursing home outside Dublin, Sheila acknowledged her failures and her cruelties. She apologised for "causing rents that would never mend". To the end, there was bravery in the face of crushing fears, to the end she was writing.

Irish poet, Eavan Boland, remembers meeting the same frail Sheila propped up in a bed in the Gresham Hotel in the 1960's. Eavan was a young student with her own literary ambitions. In Sheila, she was staring at one kind of future.

“The conversation I had with her that day has stayed with me all my life. She was the first woman poet I ever met. I saw somebody out of their life say to me: ‘I’m a poet and I’m a woman.’ Nobody else had ever said it to me.”

“Yet I had a sense of how vulnerable she was. She was quite open about how hard her life had been as a writer, and quite disappointed about not making her way in it. Here was this woman hiding in plain sight, yet she was still full of courage and determination. That impressed me.”

I made friends with Sheila Wingfield more than twenty years ago and started writing about her shortly after. I wanted to make an invisible woman visible. I wanted to bring readers to her marvellous poetry: the snapshots of Irish rural life and Wicklow; epiphanies of love and grief; minutiae of a woman's life from a time now lost. I finally got to make that documentary in 2007—and included the clip from Movietone. Sheila's life is now commemorated fully on film.

Still, I know there will be those wondering why anyone should bother with a writer like Sheila Wingfield. What could an ascendancy woman, whose hey-day was Depression era 1930's, possibly have to say to modern Ireland? All I can answer is that the world is always more complex than we imagine. Every day, new voices rise to the surface and add richness to established cultures. They bring fresh perspectives into the light. Familiar or not, each voice has something of value to say - enough value to make us listen.

Eavan Boland agrees: “We don't want the easy people whose backgrounds we approve of, whose stories we recognise, to represent us as artists. We want the people who have a story to tell out of their humanity. We want to put aside our sense of race and class and history and listen to those people. And Sheila Wingfield is one of them.”

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