



# **Sheila: The Australian ingenue who bewitched British society**

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## **Sheila: The Australian ingenue who bewitched British society** Robert Wainwright

Vivacious, confident and striking, young Australian Sheila Chisholm met her English husband, Lord Loughborough, in Egypt during the First World War. Arriving in London as a young married woman, she quickly conquered English society, and would spend the next half a century inside the palaces, mansions and clubs of the elite. Her clandestine affair with young Bertie, the future George VI, caused ruptures at Buckingham Palace, with King George offering his son the title Duke of York in exchange for 'never hearing of the Australian again'. Sheila subsequently became Lady Milbanke and ended her days as Princess Dimitri of Russia, juggling her royal duties with a successful career as a travel agent. Throughout her remarkable life, she won the hearts of men ranging from Rudolph Valentino to Prince Obolensky, and maintained longstanding friendships with Evelyn Waugh, Wallis Simpson, Idina Sackville and Nancy Mitford. A story unknown to most, Sheila is a spellbinding account of an utterly fascinating woman.

## **Sheila: The Australian ingenue who bewitched British society Details**

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## **Alison says**

For some unknown reason, I am drawn to biographies of (mostly) British society women if the early part of the twentieth century...the Mitford Sisters, Idina Sackville, Alice de Janze...and this biography of Sheila Chisholm certainly fits that mould. The difference being that Sheila was Australian. She charmed British society and her way to three marriages (a Lord, a Baron and a Russian Prince), had an affair with Prince Albert, the future King and was one of the original 'It girls'. The most fascinating part of her story is that while Sheila (Lady Loughborough, Lady Milbanke, Princess Dimitri) was one of the best-known figures of her day, her name is barely recognised now.

This is an excellently researched biography which pieces together all the remaining evidence to recreate her story.

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## **Porcelina says**

In recent years, stories centering around British royal history in the early 20th Century have been popular, with a particular focus on Princes Edward ("David") and Albert ("Bertie"). We've had films such as 'The King's Speech', and books written on Wallis Simpson, the divorcee that Edward scandalously abdicated for.

It's therefore easy to think that we already know the whole story, with all of the tangled love affairs and their inevitable conflicts with the duty to the throne. Imagine my surprise then to learn of a whole new chapter in the brothers' story that I never knew existed!

The story begins in Australia of all places, and one of the central characters in this new-to-me chapter is a spirited and beautiful woman named Sheila Chisholm. Born the daughter of a bloodstock owner, and growing up riding, hunting and swimming fearlessly in shark-infested waters, she accompanies her mother on a life-changing trip to Europe as WWI breaks out. In Egypt, working as a volunteer nurse, she meets Lord "Loughie" Loughborough, and so begins the series of events that catapult her into the highest social circles.

I don't want to give too much away in case you don't know the story, but Sheila and her bosom friend Freda Dudley Ward, both married women, are soon making up 'The 4 Dos' with Princes Edward and Albert, tearing up the town with them at countless parties and balls. This frivolity is all set in great contrast against the failing marriages of both women, where gambling, violence and other very real problems seem insurmountable.

The book isn't just about Sheila's part in the Princes' lives - her story leaves them behind and goes on to new social circles, new husbands, and twists of fate that lead her around the world. Each part of the story is more remarkable than the last, and left me with a real impression of the strength of character that Sheila must have had. Although noted for her beauty, from looking at photographs and reading about her, it's clear that she had "something else", a captivating quality. (Not unlike Wallis Simpson perhaps)

The centre of the book is filled with wonderful photographs from Sheila's life, from her childhood, through

Royal encounters, to her subsequent marriages, and beyond. Painted by Cecil Beaton and Simon Elwes, she was also muse to celebrity photographers. Well written without being obtrusive in style, Wainwright makes this easy to read and follow, and makes use of sources such as letters, so that it all feels very evidence-based. I don't always like celebrity biographies, and it's a credit to Wainwright's approach that Sheila's story never feels sensationalised.

I happened to spot a book 'Letters From a Prince' in a charity shop recently that shares letters written from Edward to Freda and will be keen to read that book at some point also. (Their romance even appeared in a storyline in *Downton Abbey*, but I hadn't realised it was based on a real relationship!)

Utterly fascinating, I couldn't put "Sheila" down - I would recommend this to anyone interested in 20th century history, or those that just like to read about interesting lives.

<http://www.porcelinasworld.blogspot.c...>

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### **Monika says**

I THINK Sheila Chisholm lived to the fullest: she grew up on the farm; lived in big cities; kept herself busy with husbands, children, nursing of wounded during both wars, charity work; kept herself entertained by famous people, clubs and travel (she didn't mind quiet hobbies like knitting either). She experienced triumphs and losses. An interesting life!

BUT I wish the material was compiled and written better.

From an initial idea to finish this book took about 3 years to research and publish, another undercooked potato of today's literature.

READING about British high society made me realise that I would rather read about much simpler people cooking porridge or baking bread while wars trample by, governments change and rich gamble.

It doesn't help that ROBERT WAINWRIGHT's writing is extremely blunt. Any librarian with a good bottom to sit on to do research could have written this book.

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### **Claire says**

A look at the period of war, abdication and *The King's Speech* from a different perspective. Sheila married into the aristocracy then, like many of her class and generation, shagged her way round pretty much anyone who was anyone and beautiful including the future King George VI of England and kept letters from many of her lovers. Sheila also remained friends with Wallace and David and visited them in Paris on numerous occasions. Her final marriage was to a member of the exiled Russian aristocracy. Fascinating stuff; how the other half live (despite 'never having any money' Sheila and various husbands never seem to have lacked staff, country weekends at various mansions, trips to the US etc etc).

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## **Cathy Smith says**

I have read all I am going to read of this book. It's a biography of a rich girl that I don't really like. It felt like I was reading Paris Hilton's biography from a different era. The social justice part of me kept saying " why am I giving so much attention to a girl with everything, in an era where millions of people had nothing. I don't want to give her my focus, it doesn't seem fair or important". If she was a fictional character I might have given her more time, but still I never really found anything that I liked about her, or her lifestyle choices. The photo sections were a helpful summary of who she was and what (or who) she did.

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## **Ape says**

Engaging, well-written and light biography of Australian society rich girl, Sheila Chisholm. It says something for Wainwright's writing that I enjoyed this book, because having read it, I wouldn't say Sheila is the kind of person I'd immediately want to read the life story of. She's rich and she's in high society, moving over to London as a young woman, marrying a Lord, hobnobbing it with the royals and throwing and attending parties. The book is one long name-dropping session in some respects, but that's because these were the people she socialised with and this was her life. Yes, she raises money for charity hospitals. Yes, she suffers personal tragedy during the second world war (but a lot of other people suffered far more) but really I wouldn't say she led a particularly fascinating life or did anything amazing or eccentric or revolutionary that would make you think, here is a life that needs to be documented. And yet despite all of this I enjoyed the read.

In a nutshell, pre world war one, Shelia moves over to England, marries a Lord (who turns out to be a gambling waste of space who possibly has some kind of nervous breakdown and throws himself out of a window in the end?). She has a couple of kids. She marries another rich guy, rather charmingly nicknamed Buffles. Later in life she marries a Russian prince. She travels a lot. Has a lot of parties, friends and larks. Appears in the society columns and fashion magazines of the age. Never knows financial hardship or true poverty or suffering. That's about it. Perhaps it doesn't sound like much, but it did actually turn out to be an interesting read and I never got bored of it.

I won this in a goodreads giveaway and am a little embarassed to realise that I actually won it a year ago and am only getting around to reading it! Still, it was worth the wait.

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## **Roz Naughton says**

A fascinating life of a very unusual woman- Sheila Chisholm , she came from Outback Australia And mixed with the literary and wealthy set in London and New York. A good read

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## **Alison says**

This is a really strongly written biography about a remarkable Australian woman who lived an extraordinary life in an historically important time. The biographer had access to her personal papers, historical accounts of

her life in women's magazines and newspapers of the day, and correspondence to her and from her. Sheila embarked on a six month European tour with her mother at a young age (18?) but was immediately caught up in the war effort in Egypt where her brother was serving. She volunteered in the hospitals in both wars, and lost a son and a brother in the conflicts.

She was a fixture in many social circles across Britain and the United States, including among her friends both future kings (George and Albert), and movie stars of the 20s and 30s (Fred Astaire, Rudolph Valentino). She married into the British peerage, and married twice more after a divorce and her husband's death.

The biography lightly touches on the issue of Wallis Simpson and I was left feeling (not for the first time) that the media of the day made her the villain of the piece unnecessarily. George and Albert were both lads about town and although Albert might have felt unfairly thrust into the role of king after his brother's abdication (or most likely his wife felt the shock), he can't have been surprised. Nothing in George's life suggested he cared about being king long before he met Wallis - and she was the last in a long string of unsuitable lovers.

Sheila was a tireless charity fundraiser often using celebrities to draw guests and funds. She ran a successful travel business in later years and travelled on an early commercial flight (or flights) from London to Australia after previously making the journey by ship.

While Sheila's beauty is made much of, this story is so much more about the depth of character of this extraordinary Australian woman who forged her way in the world in the first half of the twentieth century.

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## **Karen says**

There's a slightly obvious reason for being attracted to this novel, way outside my normal reading preferences. The story of a young Australian woman who arrives in England just before the outbreak of the First World War, ends up in Egypt working with injured soldiers during that war, marries a Lord, returns to England and promptly inserts herself into the upper echelons of English Aristocracy, right up to the Royal Family themselves, becoming good friends with the young Princes, and ultimately having an affair with the future George VI.

It's a piece of social history, that is sometimes absolutely fascinating and informative, and at others a long drawn out recital of names names names (with the obvious hat-tip to Ab Fab). When it's delving into the life and times, and even into the connections between the well-known, the Aristocracy and the strictures and nuances of society it's interesting, although a little more detail would have been preferable. When it's simply a bit gossipy, encumbered by a tendency to refer to names and titles that didn't necessarily call any particular significance to mind, it did become tedious.

One that you can, however, dip in and out of as mood permits, which is ultimately how this reader finished it eventually. A chapter or two at a time, when untaxing reading was required.

<https://www.austcrimefiction.org/revi...>

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## **Dr.J.G. says**

One begins with an intriguing opening about someone elderly arriving home after a lifetime spent across the world, in glitterati society as someone who takes it all naturally, and yet is more regal in spite of being very natural, very casual about it all - wondering if this person was real.

It is a bit disappointing to realise this is a halfway compromise between biography and gossip chronicles cleansed with hints of alliances but more details of who attended what wearing what, not because one wishes more gossip, rather the opposite - because one was expecting more in depth about the world as it was during the era. After all this person lived in very interesting times, and being disappointed with the book halfway through when it has arrived slowly to just before beginning of WWII is no mean achievement in being a court appointed cleaner of royal reputations.

Of course, it could become suddenly interesting, but seems doubtful going by what three quarters of it has been so far.

Wonder if this author is related to, or same as, the person who tried to put across a face saving "they were applauding the song, not the speech" despite truth being observed by the whole world (and as it was watched on live television, too) obviously to the contrary?

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Friday, May 13, 2016.

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Funnily enough the relevance comes through at the end when it is mentioned why the author took up the project at all - it was an elusive reference to Sheila in a biography of the king, her friend of many years during youth when he was Prince Bertie, along with the then Prince of Wales - it was clear that the mention of Sheila was rare because she had been a chief love in life of the then prince, which intrigued the publisher and thus the book proposal. The author mentions just how difficult it was to find material about this person so elusive on fringes of so many glitterati lives, and that the book was only possible because the material was made available by the various sources.

But the book does become interesting, as expected, in the last four tenth or so part - partly it is due to the WWII and post WWII world, and partly it is due to her finally finding peace with a Russian prince in exile, Dimitri Romanoff. He was introduced on the first page, but came later in her life as a main figure.

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Wednesday, May 18, 2016.

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## **Jeanette Lewis says**

This is an account of the English aristocracy and the wealthy set in the era just prior to WW1, the privilege and decadence that was constant within their lives. Living off the proceeds of estates and titles this idle populace of entitlement spent most of their waking hours attending social events, hunting, gala balls etc. The effects after WW1 saw some change in English society, however the treatment of those ordinary men and women returning from war tell a very different story of neglect and terrible hardships. "The Bright Young Things" a terminology used to describe the children of privilege after the first world war continued with the fiasical lifestyle, extreme activities, sex, alcohol, cigarettes, opium and other drugs making some activities of today by some pale against these young people of that time.

There are many accounts of this era and of many of the personalities in this book for I found references to

those I have read previously.

The book makes reference to the possibility of the terminology describing Australian women as "sheilas" being attributed to the fame of Margaret Sheila MacKellar Chisholm (known always as Sheila) who married Lord Loughborough, Earl of Rosslyn. Even though this marriage ended in divorce Sheila's life from then was of privilege.

There is a small account of Sheila's family, her father Harry Chisholm became a well known identity within the horse breeding and racing industry and would be a very interesting read.

This book gives a good account of this era, a lot of personalities included, attention is needed to keep track of the divorces, name changes by marriage and royal events.

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### **Gina says**

An intriguing story of a young Australian girl who ends up marrying two British aristocrats and a Russian prince. She and her mother had traveled to England to be closer to her brother who had joined the military prior to WWI. Coming from a fairly modest background she ends up knowing and socializing with some of the famous people in the first part of the 20th century. She was even the close friend of two future British kings. Altogether a fascinating figure, especially given the time period she lived through. There is an underlying sadness to the story as she leaves behind her family in Australia and only returns for several short visits.

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### **Ann says**

This is the biography of Australian born Sheila Chisholm who came to England just before WW1 and became a leading figure in smart society particularly between the wars. She married three times. Her first two husbands were British aristocrats, the third a Russian prince. She may or may not have had an affair with Prince Albert later to become George VI. The author is rather ambiguous on the matter. She certainly moved in the same circles and was very friendly both with him and his brother the future Edward VIII. The book is well researched and tells in great detail what Sheila did and where but for me she never emerged as a fully rounded character.

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### **Linda says**

This is an amazing book about an amazing Australian woman.

I think it is a must read to learn some history that most of us don't know about.

I can't stop talking about this book.



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## **Olivia says**

In the arena of historical biography, Sheila is somewhat lacking.

It may be that too much time was spent gushing over her beauty as opposed to telling her story, which once we got past her fortunate placement in London society was a little on the boring side.

It is more likely that when compared to her contemporaries Sheila was something of a bore. Her extra-marital affair with the future King George had little romance, her charity work seemed more right place at the right time than ground-breaking and her husbands and lovers all as vapid and self-centred as she.

The book gives little thought to the wonders of the time and place it is set in and apart from some lovely descriptions of Sydney there isn't much to promote this early twentieth century

Less of a romp through one of the most fascinating times in history than a slow meander with a uninspiring narcissist.

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