



That Woman

By Anne Sebba

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Genre and Subject

Nobility—Great Britain—Biography

Wallis Simpson

Marriages of Royalty

Synopsis

Twenty-five years after her death, Wallis Simpson exerts a more powerful fascination than ever. She became one of the most glamorous and vilified woman of the last century yet who was the real person behind the iconic image? In *That woman*, the first full biography of the Duchess of Windsor by a woman, Sebba tries to explore the mind and motivations of this enigmatic American divorcée who nearly became Queen of England and provide a new interpretation of what really happened during the abdication crisis.

Those who know only one thing about British history in the 1930s know about the King who abdicated because he could not continue "without the help and support of the woman I love." Yet many people cannot imagine who such a woman could be to exert such a powerful magnetic force on a man groomed from birth to do his duty as head not just of Britain but of a great Empire.

'That Woman,' as she was referred to by the Queen Mother and other members of the Royal Family, became a hate figure for allegedly ensnaring a British king. Born in 1896 in Baltimore, Bessiewallis Warfield endured an impoverished and comparatively obscure childhood which inflamed a burning desire to rise above her circumstances. Neither beautiful nor brilliant and over 40 when she married the former King, she became one of the most talked about woman of her generation for inspiring such deep love and slavish adoration in Edward V111 that even renouncing a throne and an Empire for her was not enough to prove his total devotion.

Wallis lived by her wit and her wits, while both her apparent and alleged moral transgressions added to her aura and dazzle. Accused of fascist sympathies, having Nazi lovers and learning bizarre sexual techniques in China, she was the subject of widespread gossip and fascination that has only increased with the years. In death the duchess became a symbol of empowerment and a style icon often pitted against her assumed rival, the Queen Mother. Wallis Simpson was a woman whose unequivocal aim was to win in the game of life.

Author Biography

Anne Sebba was born in London in 1951. She read *History at King's College, London (1969–72)* and after a brief spell at the BBC World Service joined Reuters as a graduate trainee, working in London and Rome, from 1972-8.

She wrote her first book while living in New York and now lives in London. Her discovery of an unpublished series of letters from Wallis Simpson to her second husband Ernest Simpson, shortly before her eventual marriage to the ex- King, Edward VIII, later Duke of Windsor, formed the basis of a Channel 4 film, *The Secret Letters*, first shown on UK television in August 2011, and also the biography of Simpson. The letters have led to a reappraisal of The Abdication Crisis.

Discussion Starters

- Why has Wallis been demonised for so long?
- What factors have contributed to a reassessment? Do you think revisionism is justified?
- Why might Wallis have been seen as pro- Nazi?
- To what extent was her Americanism part of the problem? Can you understand why for some in America Wallis has always been a heroine?
- What characteristics of Wallis's personality are admirable?
- How do you explain the attitude of the Queen Mother towards Wallis and towards Wallis and Edward?
- Was the denial of royal honours for Wallis justified in the circumstances or vindictive?
- Why has Edward VIII been so little criticised?
- Why are duty and pluck no longer revered compared with today's goals such as ambition and personal fulfilment?
- Has our attitude towards divorce changed for the better?
- What about some of the other characters in my story: Why do you think Winston Churchill behaved as he did? Was Mary an admirable character?
- What role do you think was played by the wives of politicians such as Lucy Baldwin, Nancy Dugdale Helen Hardinge and Hilda Runciman and why do you think their views have not been taken into account before?
- Which of the characters do you feel most sympathy for: Mary, Ernest, Henry/Aharon, Aunt Bessie, Alan 'Tommy' Lascelles?
- Which of the characters do you feel should have done more to understand or guide Edward earlier in his life e.g. his parents, his private secretaries, the Archbishop of Canterbury and other church leaders or his girlfriends?
- Do you agree that Wallis performed a useful service by delivering a new monarch for such critical times?
- How should she be remembered? As a style icon and if so why? Describe her style. Or as a victim and if so why?
- Do you believe every generation has a different attitude to key personalities according to historical context?

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