

Edith Olivier: Writing in Wiltshire and Beyond

Susannah Walker



Men writing about place tend to get more attention than women. But that doesn't mean they weren't there. In writing my book, *The Hard Way*, I discovered many extraordinary women who walked and wrote in the southwest of England – so many in fact that I couldn't fit them all in.

One of those left out was Edith Olivier, and it's something I still regret because she is one of the most interesting I found. But only when you look beneath the surface.

A Conventional Start

Olivier has at least been remembered. If you go to the Georgian rectory in Wilton where she grew up, there's a blue plaque that commemorates 'Edith Olivier: First female Mayor of Wilton, author and founder of the Women's Land Army in Wiltshire. Born in this house on 31 December 1872.'



In many ways, Edith Olivier was exactly what that plaque described, the kind of gentry stalwart who kept England ticking over right up until the 1960s.

The last two of eight children, Edith and her sister Mildred were marked down by their autocratic father, Canon Dacres Olivier, to be his help and support in old age, so no talk of marriage was ever entertained. Thus, she stayed in the house where she was born for forty years, because that's what he wanted. When her father retired in 1912, the trio moved to a house in Salisbury Cathedral Close.

Even at this stage, Edith was not an entirely conventional county spinster. To start with, she had a car, although her father refused to travel in it because being driven by his daughter would undermine his authority. But she loved driving and used her voluntary work in the early days of the Women's Land Army to explore her home county of Wiltshire.

Dacres Olivier died in 1919, but perhaps even more shocking was her sister Mildred's death from breast cancer just eighteen months later. For the first time in her life, Edith was entirely alone, at the age of fifty-one. She could easily have become a maiden aunt, looked after by the wider Olivier clan. But that's not how things turned out.

New Beginnings

A Wiltshire friend, Pamela Tennant, invited Edith to the Italian Riviera, where she had taken a villa because her youngest and most indulged child, Stephen, had tuberculosis. Stephen was studying at the Slade and had brought along his close friend Rex Whistler, and the two were dreading the arrival of a mourning, middle-aged woman. But within days, they realised they had a true comrade and set about dragging Edith into the 1920s and back into life itself, taking her out to buy shorter skirts and, most daring of all, getting her hair cropped.

Not only would the duo become friends for life, they introduced her to all the Bright Young Things of the age. Edith never pretended to be the same age as her new friends; instead she offered them a refuge and a listening ear. But she could also match them in energy and witty talk, what Stephen Tennant called her 'most appalling vitality' which allowed her to leave a party and still read a book for review and then write her diary before she slept. Edith galvanised them as much as they did her.

Their loyalty to her can be seen in the financial help she got. Edith, who had spent a lot of her capital on Mildred's medical treatment, was never as well off as she seemed and when he learned this, Stephen Tennant bought her a car. During the 1930s, when Edith was particularly worried about her finances, Siegfried Sassoon gifted her an annuity of £300 a year, the equivalent to £20,000 today, giving her financial security for the rest of her life.

A Writing life

Edith did not just become a foil to the young people she met, she also created a new independent life. Within a year of Mildred's death, the shape of a novel came to her suddenly one night and she wrote the first draft of *The Love Child* in just a few weeks. The book was a success, and for the rest of her life Edith Olivier was a writer, a job which she approached with her customary energy and ability, producing twelve books over the next twenty years, a mix of fiction, autobiography and stories of Wiltshire.

Her writing style was impeccable and she helped Cecil Beaton a great deal with the text of his first books. She also met John Betjeman – who was, she told her diary, cleaner than she had expected – just as he had started work on the Shell County Guides. He commissioned her to write the gazetteer for the second in the series, Wiltshire. Edith's contribution turned out to be far better than the one he himself had written for Cornwall. Betjeman was not daft and, recognising the quality of what Olivier had done, he used it as the template for all the books that came after.



Her love of place also benefited her friends. She loved driving, setting forth across Salisbury Plain 'like a tank', as she described it. Both Rex Whistler and Cecil Beaton (pictured left) loved architecture, so their quarry would be the best Georgian domestic buildings they could find. One day, the trio headed out for a house that she had been told about by a friend.

Ashcombe turned out to be a perfect, miniature Georgian gem, hidden in the folds of the downland. Beaton fell in love with the rundown house on the spot and immediately got Edith to negotiate for him to move in. Ashcombe became the setting for dinners, for eighteenth-century fancy dress parties and, as Beaton remembered it when he had to move out, for 'hysterical laughter around Edith'.

It's hard to preserve a personality like that for posterity, but Edith Olivier's books are in themselves good enough reason to remember her. I would recommend *The Love Child*, her autobiography *Without Knowing Mr Walkley* and her book about Wiltshire past, *Country Moods and Tenses*, to anyone. But if you live in Wiltshire, there's even more reason to make her acquaintance.

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