Angela Thirkell

A WRITER'S LIFE

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Anne Hall



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Foreword

Angela Thirkell was a complex character whose upbringing gave her supreme confidence in her own opinions as well as an impressive fund of knowledge of classical, English and European literatures. These factors made her a formidable neighbour at dinner parties where her intellect combined with sparkling wit intimidated many; but later they were to provide her with a way to earn her living. She could easily have studied at a university but had the same curious resistance to higher education for women that George Eliot – a friend of her grandmother's – also evinced.

Some of her best novels, produced annually at her publisher's behest during the Second World War, covered the contemporary scene, in effect giving us a progressive portrait of the 'Home Front'. Food rationing figures more largely than air-raids and mass slaughter is represented by the tribulations of a handful of male characters with serious war injuries and the quiet courage of women whose men may not return. Thirkell's cast of characters grows steadily through the Barsetshire titles and whole families become known to us, not just the local nobility and gentry but those who keep their houses, gardens and farms running. Hardly anybody is nasty and there are few cliffhangers. And running through the relatively straightforward plots, like embroidery silks on a canvas, is the wit, ranging from subtle to laugh-aloud.

It is this combination, not otherwise notable in English novels of the period, which has made Thirkell's novels endure. Neglected after her death, they were first revived in the USA where her work was loved. Recently Virago has republished some of the best of them in its Modern Classics series. Middlebrow fiction has become acknowledged as a genre in its own right. Anne Hall's new biography, demonstrating her well-honed research skills as well as her understanding of a difficult woman, answers many longstanding questions concerning Angela Thirkell's life, relationships and writing.

Hilary Temple
Chair of the Angela Thirkell Society



PART ONE

Old Kensington

I was born at 27 Young Street which was sublet to my parents by
the Ritchies – it is the Rectory in *Old Kensington*,
with a swing at the bottom of the garden, just as we had –
and opposite the little bow-windowed house where
Charlotte Brontë had that deadly party with Thackeray
at which she never spoke. All very old history now.

Angela Thirkell, letter to Violet Milner, 30 March 1952

Angela's parents, Margaret Burne-Jones and John William Mackail, first set eyes on each other on Commemoration Day at Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre, 22 June 1881.

Margaret, who had just turned fifteen, was the adored – some descriptions say spoiled – only daughter of the painter. It was the height of what was already being called the Burne-Jones era, and Margaret and her brother Philip accompanied their parents to the ceremony where their father was to receive the honorary degree of Doctor of Civil Law.

The previous year Burne-Jones had exhibited his painting *The Golden Stairs* at the Grosvenor Gallery. The painting featured cameos of Margaret and other Burne-Jones muses, and it inspired the women's costumes in *Patience*, Gilbert and Sullivan's popular satire of the aesthetic movement. *Patience* premiered at London's Opera Comique in April 1881 and when, two months later, Burne-Jones walked to the front of the Sheldonian to receive his degree, the undergraduates greeted him with a verse of the libretto – 'An ultra-poetical, superaesthetical,/ Out-of-the-way young man' – and cries of 'Quite too utter'.[1]

The ceremony ended with the recitation of prize compositions. John William Mackail – known to friends as Jack – was almost twenty-two, and reputedly the most eminent undergraduate scholar of his generation. A collateral descendant of Hugh Mackail the martyr and a son of the manse,

Opposite: Edward Burne-Jones, *The Golden Stairs*

born on the Isle of Bute, he had won a scholarship to Balliol College after studies at Ayr Academy and the University of Edinburgh. In 1881 he was awarded the Newdigate Prize, and on Commemoration Day he declaimed his poem 'Thermopylae' 'with unusual force and effect'.[2]

Mackail was subsequently elected to a fellowship at Balliol, and in 1884 joined the Board of Education in London. In the next few years he became a familiar presence at The Grange, the Burne-Joneses' Fulham residence, and in February 1888, Margaret and he announced their engagement.



T.M. Rooke, interior view of The Grange, Fulham

Burne-Jones confided his feelings in letters to friends, such as the artist George Frederic Watts:

> … I begin with a bit of news that will touch you both I know – for my little Margaret is engaged.
>
> I haven't felt very good about it – I have behaved better than I felt. She looks very happy, and before he wanted her, and before I dreamt of any such thing, I thought him a fine gentleman through and through, and yet, look what he has done to me! I have known him for seven years, and always he seemed a grave learned man who came to talk to me about books – and it wasn't about books he came, and now where am I in the story?[3]



T.M. Rooke, exterior view of North End House, Rottingdean

Margaret and 'Djacq', as the painter took to spelling his son-in-law's name, were married on 4 September 1888 at St Margaret's church in Rottingdean, Sussex, where the Burne-Joneses had acquired a holiday home. Brief newspaper accounts described the bridegroom as 'one of the rising men of the Education Department', and one noted that the ceremony 'was of an unostentatious character'.

Margaret carried a bouquet of white roses and jasmine, and the wedding party was made up of eleven people. Burne-Jones's gifts included a clavichord that he decorated (the Mackails seem to have received it a few years later), a very large and finished study of Sleeping Beauty modelled on

Margaret, and a heart-shaped jewel box tooled with golden willow boughs in which Margaret presumably kept the moonstone her father previously had given her 'that she might never know love, and stay with me. It did no good but was wonderful to look at.'[4]

The moonstone 'did no good' in the sense that Margaret married and left home. Yet it may have been of some use, because the husband she chose apparently shared her father's reverence for her. After Mackail's death in December 1945, Angela commented in a letter: 'For [my father] Mother was the Virgin Mary, the sun, the moon and the stars. I have never known him go against her in any way … . [H]e tried to see good in everything she liked. His adoration of her never faltered, I think, from the first moment he saw her.'[5]



Melicent Stone, interior view of 27 Young Street, Kensington

The Mackails' first home was at 27 Young Street, around the corner from the house at 41 Kensington Square where Margaret had been born. Their first child was born on 30 January 1890. They called her Angela Margaret after her grandfather, nicknamed 'Angelo' due to his admiration for Fra Angelico, and 'Margaret' after her mother. The writer J.M. Barrie was her godfather. An early description comes from Burne-Jones: 'Miss



Philip Burne-Jones, exterior view of 27 Young Street, Kensington

Angela Mackail [is] the principal comfort at present. She is a haughty-looking person, with an expression mostly of indignant surprise.'[6]

When Margaret was young, Burne-Jones and Millais had had a friendly competition over whose daughter was the more spoiled. After Angela's birth, Burne-Jones and Gladstone compared notes about spoiling their respective granddaughters. In her memoir *Three Houses* (1931), Angela recalls that when her grandparents kept open house on Sundays, she always sat next to her grandfather:

> I was allowed to blow into the froth of his beer 'to make a bird's nest', or to have all the delicious outside from the mashed potatoes when

> they had been browned in the oven. If, disregarding truth, I said that at home my toast was always buttered on both sides, my statement was gravely accepted and the toast buttered accordingly. There can have been few granddaughters who were so systematically spoilt as I was… .[7]

In the day and night nurseries at Rottingdean, Burne-Jones painted scenes to amuse Angela, such as a windmill and a peacock, in addition to the countless sketches that she requested.

Angela recalled that at first she was allowed to choose the pictures, 'but after I'd asked him to draw my stuffed tiger, which was a very, very hideous animal, my mamma drew the line at it, and said that I must let him do the choosing'. Her grandfather then took a sketchbook and wrote a name 'on every page with the picture he was going to draw'. Unfortunately, 'owing to his dying when [Angela] was still quite small; a great many of the pictures were never drawn'. The drawings he made included 'Image That Sings at Dawn', 'The Tree That Weeps', and 'The Mirk Striders', which 'was a very frightening one, of a huge figure striding with seven league boots, as it were, over dark country at night. But "The Fen Gangers" and "The Werewolf", I'm sorry to say, were never drawn.'[8] When Angela was two-and-a-half, a series of photographs were taken of grandfather and granddaughter. Her memoir reproduced the photograph where she is 'standing with a fat, rather sulky face turned away from his, which is lightly pressed against mine with a look of deep, patient adoration'.[9]

The Mackails' son, Denis George, was born on 3 June 1892 – his mother's birthday – and named after the hero of Thackeray's *Denis Duval*. Clare Beatrix Anne, Angela and Denis's baby sister, was born on 30 June 1896. Her middle names came from Jack Mackail's sister Anne and from the actress Beatrice Stella Campbell or 'Mrs Pat', the Kensington Square neighbour loved and admired by the Burne-Joneses and the Mackails, known to the Mackail children as 'Auntie Stella'.

In 1892 Margaret Mackail's cousin, Stanley Baldwin, had married Lucy Ridsdale, whose family lived at the Dene in Rottingdean. (Young Angela was supposed to have been a bridesmaid, but the organ caused her to scream and she never made it into the church.) The Baldwins went on to have six children, and Margaret and Stanley's cousin Rudyard Kipling, his wife and their three children also settled for a time at The Elms in Rottingdean, across the green from the Burne-Joneses, in 1897. Angela was not only the oldest of three siblings but also the oldest of a widening circle of second cousins. (She had no first cousins since her father's sister died young and Philip Burne-Jones never married.)



Edward Burne-Jones and Angela

Margaret Mackail devoted a volume of her diaries to memorable statements by her children and grandchildren when they were very young. A few months before her sixth birthday, Angela declared that she liked rough games and preferred them to quiet ones: 'I like to tear myself from the grasp of boys.' Family friend Graham Robertson once jokingly proposed to write a foreword to Angela's memoir, 'stating what a highly objectionable child she was and that between the ages of four and nine she was the most terrifying female I have ever met'.[10]

Josephine Kipling, about three years younger than Angela, was her very good friend and 'always played second fiddle in our particular entertainments' (until her parents returned to America, where she died in 1899). When the two girls wanted to play Roundheads and Cavaliers, Angela remembers in her BBC interview, Cousin Ruddy would 'always be a Roundhead for us, so that … Josephine, my beloved cousin, and I could sit on him and beat him and pummel him'. Angela continues, 'But he did take revenge sometimes, because I wrote to him a defiance under the name of Sir Alexander of the Lake, and I spelt Alexander A-L-I-X. And he answered my cartel and said at the end "Thou hast misspelt thine own miserable name."'

Cousin Ruddy also

> used to tell us some of the stories out of the *Just So Stories* before they got into print. With a very, very special way of telling them that I wish I could imitate. It was almost a kind of intonation of them; almost like intoning a service: with a deep voice for certain parts and a rising and falling of the voice … .[11]

When Margaret Mackail and Rudyard Kipling were young, Mary de Morgan (1850–1907), the artist William de Morgan's youngest sister, had entertained them with fairy tales. She was pressed back into service for the Mackail children and dedicated her last book of stories, *The Windfairies*, to Angela, Denis and Clare. When Angela was two, William Morris's Kelmscott Press published her father's *Biblia Innocentium*, 'being the story of God's chosen people … written anew for children'. Flora Annie Steel's *Tales of the Punjab*, illustrated by Lockwood Kipling, Margaret Mackail's uncle, was published in 1894.

Angela's parents were temporary members of the Loony Club, presided by their friend Graham Robertson (and photographed in 1895). When Angela and Denis 'were learning to write their names, … a formal birthday greeting, laboriously signed by them, began: "We, the undersized members of the Junior Loony Club … ." As [Robertson] himself parodied:

> Life is real, yet the earnest
> And the grave scoop not the pool.
> Bust thou art unless thou learnest
> When and how to play the fool.'[12]

As a child Angela received illustrated letters from her grandfather and from Beatrix Potter. Another correspondent was the cleric Dr Augustus Jessopp, to whom she would later devote her first published article.



The Loony Club. Clockwise from upper left: W. Graham Robertson, president; Henry Justice Ford, permanent honorary member; J.W. and Margaret Mackail, temporary members; Jessie E. Thomas, honorary treasurer; Melicent Stone, honorary secretary

In 1901 Angela, Denis and Clare were among twenty children privileged to attend the world premiere of Barrie's *Greedy Dwarf*, with Gerald Du Maurier and Sylvia Llewelyn-Davies in the cast and the author himself in the role of 'Cowardy Custard'. In a serious vein, in 1906 Angela's grandmother Georgiana Burne-Jones became a published author with her impressive *Memorials* of her husband. With a childhood rich in art, narrative and comic theatre, it is not surprising that both Angela and Denis eventually became novelists.

The Mackail children might have been raised in Oxford, if their mother had ever agreed to leave London. Many years later Angela's son Graham wrote:

> The family rumour had it that when [Dr Mackail] was offered an important post at Oxford – perhaps the Mastership of Balliol – he was willing, eager and able. It would seem almost incredible that he was not: his own old college; a life amid the dreaming spires where he had first known fame.
>
> But, said the family, [Margaret] threw a tantrum and said she couldn't bear to live so far away from London … ; couldn't bear to be separated from her father; from her mother. Whatever the truth, [Dr Mackail] gave in … .[13]

Over half a century later, in Angela's Barsetshire, Justinia Lufton asks Eric Swan – who 'would be perfect for Oxford' – whether his wife would like it. He had not considered the point and asks her to expound: 'Well, to be a Don, or a Fellow, or a Master, or a Provost, or any of those things, is splendid … . But their wives have to know all the other wives, and some of them … do folk-dancing in slacks.'[14]

27 Young Street was a William and Mary house, and three of Angela's children's stories feature Mary and William, a small girl and her somewhat younger brother, who are apparently based on the author and her brother. In the story called *FOST*, one day, when the children are alone in the nursery they decide to create a society whose purpose is finding out secret things (FOST). Since they are almost always with their nanny they feel there is little to discover about her, and since their parents are always downstairs, they have little chance of learning more about them. The society therefore focuses for a time on the cook and the housemaid.

However, the children's secret society finishes abruptly one evening when Mary gets out of bed, goes downstairs and listens at the drawing-room door. She overhears her parents saying they enjoy the quiet when their children are sleeping, and in no way look forward to having the children with them in the evenings. Mary goes back to bed and howls, refusing to tell her parents what the matter is, but finally allows herself to be comforted and then goes to sleep. The next day FOST is at an end; Mary calls William an idiot when he mentions it.

Mary's anxiety about being wanted is consistent with an anecdote Burne-Jones related about Angela: 'Yesterday she tucked me up warmly and fondly on the sofa, and when she had finished she crept up to my ear and whispered, "You won't let any of the others – no other little girl – wrap you up, will you?"'[15] On the same topic, Margaret Mackail recorded the following conversation with her four-and-a-half-year-old daughter.

> Angela: 'Bapapa [Burne-Jones] is your friend – your father and your true-hearted love.'
> Margaret: 'He is.'
> Angela: 'But I wonder whom he loves best: me perhaps because I have imp ways and you haven't.'

'The First Nowell', a second Mary and William story, opens a few days before Christmas. It is 'babytime' – after tea – and the children are in the drawing-room with their parents. Their mother, somewhat sentimental about Christmas, begins singing carols at the piano and when she leaves the room briefly, Mary suggests a society against carols. It is difficult for the

children to disobey their mother completely, but Mary feels that as chief of the society she can at least sing the carols in a cross, sulky way. After a successful Christmas the children fall asleep, and Mary dreams she is grown-up: married and the mother of twins who prefer musical comedies and jazz to carols. She wakes up screaming, 'Mother, Mother!', then sees she is safe in the night nursery and goes back to sleep.

'Christmas at Mulberry Lodge', recently republished in *Christmas at High Rising*, is a third Mary and William story that expands upon the dormouse incident mentioned in *Three Houses*. In 'Mulberry Lodge' there is no society for finding out secret things, just Mary who awakens on Christmas Eve in time to overhear her mother and the nanny filling the stockings. On Christmas Day the children disobey and take some of their new playthings to church. Mary's pet dormouse escapes and eventually drowns, but its funeral, and their father's drawing of the dormouse flying to heaven, elegantly framed by their grandfather, console her for her loss.

In one of her journalistic pieces Angela mentions that a family friend referred to her as 'Enough Wants More'.[16] Her mother recorded the story behind this epithet. Three-and-a-half-year-old Angela had been collecting heaps of chalk stones at Rottingdean, and was for getting still more. Her grandmother remarked, 'Why should you when you have so many already? I'll tell you a story: there is a saying "enough is as good as a feast" that means enough is plenty.' Angela turned away to her playing, and shortly said, 'I'll tell you a story: enough wants more.' And then half to herself as she played away: 'Take my advice: don't interfere.' These anecdotes and Angela's stories combine to paint a picture of an impish, precocious child, who was also sensitive and could be prone to 'sulkiness' when grown-ups thwarted her desires.

In her memoir *Three Houses*, Angela wrote that 'All the summers run into one as the young shadows of so many friends come to join us. Viola and Una Taylor talking French with their mother, which seemed a little suspicious to our less cosmopolitan nursery … .' Years later Angela recalled that 'Viola was endlessly kind and gave me a set of Miss Edgeworth's *Early Lessons*, a very early edition with tiny vignettes pasted in the beginning as chapter headings. And every summer we would find her again at Rottingdean on the beach with us.'[17] Viola would be of particular significance for Angela's Barsetshire novels. Viola Taylor, born in 1882, grew up to be Viola Garvin, the second wife of *Observer* editor J.L. Garvin. As an adult Angela was close to Viola; some of her most popular novels were written in Beaconsfield, where she lived near the Garvins during the Second World War. (Viola's younger sister Una became Lady Troubridge; she is best known today as the companion and first biographer of the novelist Radclyffe Hall.)

In Rottingdean there was also Mr Stanford's boys' school, officially known as St Aubyn's: 'Mr Stanford was related to our beloved "Aunt Madeline", Mrs Percy Wyndham, and so had some of the blood of Lord Edward Fitzgerald and the enchanting Pamela, and more than one Fitzgerald descendant was at his school.' Other boys who would attend the school included Angela's second cousins John Kipling and Oliver Baldwin.[18]

Edward Burne-Jones died at home in Fulham, early in the morning of 17 June 1898. It happened to be the last day of rehearsals for Mrs Campbell's production of Maeterlinck's *Pelléas et Mélisande*, translated for her by Angela's father. Gabriel Fauré composed the music and Mélisande's costume was inspired by Burne-Jones. By coincidence, it was also the day of Aunt Madeline's birthday party, and the painter had been due to dine with her that evening, as she stated in a note to Mrs Campbell:

> Dearest Beatrice,
>
> I must write to you although I can say nothing. Your heart is with Margaret today, this bitterest of days for Margaret and all his, mine is with her also… . And I really grieve for you to have to act tomorrow with this on your heart, but so life goes on.
>
> He was to have dined (they were all coming tonight) with me for my birthday, but now he dines in the Courts of Heaven. The King of Kings needed him.
>
> Ever yours affectionately,
>
> Madeline Wyndham[19]

The painter's body was cremated, and the following day the funeral took place in Rottingdean. The mourners included the extended family, and many artists and friends such as Percy and Madeline Wyndham, accompanied by their older son George and oldest daughter Mary, now Lady Elcho.

In late 1898 the Mackails left Young Street, not for Oxford but for larger accommodations at 6 Pembroke Gardens. Denis recalls that he, his sisters and their nurse were sent to relatives for a week or so while the move took place. When they returned to London and approached their new home for the first time, Clare was too young to fully appreciate what had happened, Denis wept at the thought he had lost his home, but Angela was 'chirping with anticipation'.[20]

Denis described himself as 'notorious for my timidity'. Writing to her friend Gilbert Murray in 1902, who also had a son called Denis, Margaret commented, rather harshly as far as her own son was concerned, that 'I wish our Denis had a little of your Denis's hardiness and manliness: school



Mrs Patrick Campbell as Mélisande in a costume inspired by Burne-Jones

has made no difference so far, and he remains soft and silly. Angela is twice the man.'[21]

Pembroke Gardens remained the Mackails' home for over half a century. Angela was living there when she wrote her memoir *Three Houses*, but she left no loving description of 'P.G.', as she did of Young Street and of the Burne-Joneses' homes in Fulham and Rottingdean. Angela's sons, however, wrote about their grandparents' home in Pembroke Gardens: it made much the same impression on all three. Colin described the exterior as 'one of

those bleak, inconvenient neo-Roman piles that still encumber the Royal Borough'.[22] On the inside, wrote Lance, the 'large, cold and uncomfortable house … was virtually a museum of Victorian decorative art'.[23]

The drawing-room, in particular, was a sort of 'Pre-Raphaelite oasis in the heart of good grey bourgeois Kensington' (according to Graham).[24] Colin gave the following account:

> Its papers and chintzes were all by Morris, and except for a large and quite conventional sofa, the more decorative pieces of furniture had a splendid Pre-Raphaelite austerity (cushions half an inch thick … and elegant woodwork backs to thoroughly unwelcoming chairs). There were … paintings by [Burne-Jones] on the walls, including a colossal water-colour … of a sleeping beauty entwined in thorns, and two portraits of [Margaret] – the 'blue', full face before a convex mirror, and the 'grey' in profile, more restrained. There were a piano, a harpsichord and a clavichord which Burne-Jones had decorated as a gift for his child's wedding.[25]

Graham added: 'Over the clavichord hung the study for Burne-Jones's *King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid*. Straw-bottomed chairs with black precarious legs alternated with wooden chairs designed as studio props for the innumerable paintings Burne-Jones did of King Arthur and his Knights … .' He concluded, 'Not a room in which to feel comfortable, but on the other hand not one you'd be likely to forget.'[26]

Colin was particularly fascinated by a Chinese chest in one corner. On top was a box containing the letters Rudyard Kipling had written in India to his cousin Margaret, never published in her lifetime. And the 'Funny Drawer' of the chest

> … contained all the curious oddments that had come my grandparents' way during their long years of married life. There was, for example, a collection of all the envelopes on which their names had been grotesquely misspelt by correspondents – as 'Mocktail' and 'Crocktail' for versions of my grandfather's surname. Some of the items, in so austere a household, were astonishingly bawdy: for instance, a massive list of all the English family names they could discover which are indecent.[27]

One imagines that as a child, Angela too would have been attracted by the Chinese chest.

After starting school at the Froebel Institute in West Kensington, Angela was one of ten winners of a three-year scholarship to St Paul's Girls' School

in November 1903. She began attending in January of the following year. Much later in life Angela mentioned a few memories from her school days.

In her BBC interview she recalled:

> I and another girl, for some reason, didn't take Scripture – I've forgotten – our parents must have had some religious or anti-religious feeling about it and so we did our – we were allowed to go to Prep. while the class did Scripture which was lovely for us and she was very good at arithmetic – much better than I was and my French was much better than hers and we used to swop; but unfortunately it was a bit too plain that though my answers were right, the working-out was entirely wrong and I was jumped on.[28]

Elsewhere she wrote: 'As for Physics I never could understand a word and was always bottom till I copied a bit out of the Ency[clopedia] Brit[annica] and got an A+. My conscience did not worry me at all. I was deeply in love with the Science Mistress … .'[29]

The first issue of the school paper, *The Paulina*, appeared in July 1904 with an article by Angela on the opening of the school. A brief report on the hockey team described her as 'A useful half-back. Has much improved, but might back up her forward.' In 1905 Angela was awarded the French and German Prizes and shared the Senior Music Prize. The July 1905 *Paulina* contained Angela's essay, 'Of Collections', which concluded that 'a good collection of stamps, or autographs, affords endless interest, becoming more valuable and more interesting with increasing age'. (Little did she then know that her second husband, George Thirkell, would be a passionate stamp collector.)

Angela's prize-winning story, 'The Thrush and the Owl', was published in the same issue, and it finished in the December number. The last sentence reads '"Good-bye, dear thrush", [the Princess] cried; "thank you a thousand times for finding my Prince for me".' Angela's parents attended a private concert by the man who would become her first husband in just this period.

Georgiana Burne-Jones and her daughter Margaret were both musical, and so were Angela and Clare in the next generation. In the 1880s Burne-Jones's desire to 'reform pianos' had put him in touch with Broadwood's, the piano manufacturers. Lucy Broadwood (1858–1929) was a trained classical musician and singer, and in addition to her family's connection with Burne-Jones, she had Kensington friends in common with the Mackails, such as Richmond and Anne Thackeray Ritchie, and the artist Edward Clifford.

In 1898 Lucy Broadwood had been one of the founders of the Folk-Song Society and six years later the society needed reviving. To that end

Broadwood gave an evening party for forty musicians, family and friends at her home at 84 Carlisle Mansions in Carlisle Place, Westminster. The Mackails and Graham Peel, a composer to whom we will return, were among the guests. One of the performers was James Campbell McInnes, a handsome baritone of Scots background from Lancashire. A wealthy woman in his village had sponsored him to come to London in 1895 to study at the Royal College of Music with William Shakespeare.[30] Shakespeare was a 'sought-after and fashionable' performer and teacher; Lucy Broadwood herself had been a pupil since 1884.[31]

McInnes had met Broadwood in 1899 and became close to her: she helped send him to Paris for further training and accompanied him at the piano when he was in London. At her party on 17 March 1904, the programme was entirely classical, with the exception of some Breton songs sung by McInnes. Angela had just turned fourteen and was newly enrolled at St Paul's; her parents probably described the concert to her, and perhaps also the singer.

Angela left St Paul's after only two years. She spent six months in 1907 perfecting her French in Paris at a *pension* kept by a former French teacher at Kensington High School, and then a few months in Germany. In January 1908, Angela turned eighteen and attended her first ball. May Rawlinson, the wife of the wealthy collector William George Rawlinson, sent Angela tickets for one of her daughter May Spender's charity balls at the Grafton Galleries. Angela attended with her mother and Christopher Whitelegge, the son of Margaret's friend Fanny Whitelegge. Margaret noted in her diary that Angela had plenty of partners.

In February, Angela began to learn typewriting in the typewriting and translation offices managed by family friends Maisie Dowson (the former Mary Aglaia Ionides) and Mary de Morgan. That same month Angela and her parents attended 'a beautiful Campbell McInnes concert' at the Aeolian Hall.[32] The programme included four traditional songs, six *Magelone* romances by Brahms and a Bach cantata. Angela had only just started to go out in society, but a relationship of some kind with the singer may already have been beginning to develop: 'Possessed of a superb natural voice and a magnetic raw masculinity which appealed to both men and women, McInnes was proudly working-class. Tall [six foot four], moustached and with a shock of pomaded dark hair, he cut a striking figure and was welcomed on the concert circuit.'[33] McInnes's friend and mentor Lucy Broadwood was among Margaret Mackail's callers in March, and in April Margaret took Angela to an At Home at Miss Broadwood.

Angela sat to the painter Wolfram Onslow-Ford and attended another ball, this one at New College during Oxford's Commemoration Week. She

began singing lessons in St John's Wood with William Shakespeare – the teacher of both Broadwood and McInnes. In August, Aunt Madeline's youngest daughter, Pamela Tennant, lent her home, Wilsford Manor in Wiltshire, to the Mackails, as she often did when she and her family were in Scotland. In April 1910, Margaret Mackail was again at Wilsford and she noted that 'there is nobody here but the family – darling family'. The feelings were apparently reciprocal; Stella Campbell noted that when speaking of the Mackails, Pamela once said to her that 'It would be an honour to black their boots.'[34]

Angela's great interest in, and affection for, the Wyndhams and their descendants was largely inherited from her mother. After her April 1910 stay at Wilsford, for example, Margaret recorded that Clare and she went from there to Clouds, Percy and Madeline Wyndham's home in Wiltshire:

> In the evening we looked at old drawings of Mary Wyndham's. I am in the summer bedroom full of photographs of Father's pictures and Clare in the dressing room. The peacocks cry, the doves and pigeons coo and roocoo, the laughing jackasses chortle; all sounds, scents are the same, and the atmosphere of love and long friendship is familiar and sweet, and to-be-thanked-for.

A few years later Margaret was again at Clouds, 'and once more beheld the beloved form of Aunt Madeline in the Hall with wide outspread opening arms, and smelt the Clouds smell'.

At a fancy-dress ball given by friends in Kensington, Angela dressed as a water sprite, with shells and sparkling fishes in her hair. For her nineteenth birthday Angela had a tea party; the fourteen guests included Walter Ford, a professor of singing at the Royal College of Music, and his wife, Henry and Christabel Marillier, and Margaret and Jack Mackail's four fellow members of the Loony Club: Graham Robertson, Walter Ford's brother the illustrator Henry Justice Ford, Melicent Stone and Jessie Thomas.

Two men of about Angela's age described her as she was in this period. Sir Laurence Collier, the son of the painter John Maler Collier and his wife, the former Ethel Huxley, friends of the Mackails, recalled: 'Her conversation proved sadly discouraging to the numerous young men who were attracted by her appearance, for she seemed to prefer wit to sentiment and did not suffer fools gladly; but luckily for my peace of mind I was too young to be numbered among the snubbed *soupirants* [suitors].'[35] The formulation is somewhat surprising, given that Angela was only six months older than Laurence.

The composer Arnold Bax was the nephew of an associate of William Morris, and he came to know the Mackails through the Marilliers, who lived at Kelmscott House, Hammersmith. Bax's memoir offers a brief portrait of the family as well as an interpretation of Angela as she was then:

> Professor Mackail – one of the handsomest human beings I ever beheld – had married Burne-Jones's daughter, and the whole family, father, mother, and their three children, Angela, Denis, and Clare, looked for all the world as though they had stepped out of one of the dead master's paintings … .
>
> The elder daughter Angela … was in her teens a rather breath-taking young beauty, and I shall never forget her as she stalked up and down the drawing-room at 6 Pembroke [Gardens], dressed in a gown modelled by herself after her grandfather's picture *Sidonia the Sorceress*. A somewhat formidable young woman in those days, with at whiles an acid wit, and an assumed contempt for men, which may have been mainly defensive.[36]

Angela wore her gown to a ball at the International Society of Painters at the New Gallery; she noted proudly in a letter that Sidonia was 'a great success' and was mentioned in the *Manchester Guardian* 'in glowing terms'.[37] The anonymous journalist wrote that 'Undoubtedly the most effective dress there was a black and white and gold replica of Burne-Jones's "Enchantress", and it had the merit of exactly suiting the very beautiful wearer. But then she was the grandchild of the painter.'[38] The dress must have been fragile because after two balls it was too tattered to be worn again, but John Copperfield had photographed Angela in the dress and Neville Lytton painted her.

Neither Collier nor the slightly older Bax were ever among Angela's *soupirants*, but Godwin Baynes (1882–1943), a central figure in the Bax brothers' 'neo-pagan' circle, may well have been. He is mentioned in Margaret's diary over a period of about a year, beginning in the summer of 1909. The writer Eleanor Farjeon described him as

> the sun-god of our brilliant circle. This giant rowing-blue from Cambridge (six-foot-four in his socks), with a heart and brain to match his physical prowess, was the most popular man I have ever known. When he was talking to you he compelled you to feel that you were more interesting to him than any other person in the room, and I still think that at the given moment this was almost true.[39]



Left: Edward Burne-Jones, *Sidonia von Bork 1560*
Right: Angela as Sidonia

Baynes was among the twenty guests at Angela's twentieth birthday party, held in the afternoon. The guest list included Angela's Uncle Phil, the six members of the Loony Club, Mr and Mrs Walter Ford, the Colliers, the architect Cecil Brewer and his wife Irene, and the painter Harold Speed and his wife Clara. Margaret gave Angela snowdrops, a white satin petticoat and an Italian dictionary. She noted that Mr Baynes stayed to supper.

Baynes had interrupted his studies at Cambridge – funded by Mrs Bax – to attend an opera school in Dresden for a brief time, and then pursued his medical training at St Bartholomew's Hospital. In April, Margaret and Angela visited Baynes in his room at the hospital; Margaret noted that his friend, the painter Jacques Raverat, was also there. Within a few months, however, Baynes became engaged to his friend Rosalind Thornycroft, a daughter of the sculptor Hamo Thornycroft, whom he later married. At the time he knew Angela, Baynes was apparently already hesitating between Rosalind and her cousin Brynhild Olivier, to whom he wrote:

> I am not disturbed when I think of Rosalind and then of you, I see you both so clearly and know I can be faithful to both. One cannot put a padlock to one's heart and give it to one woman. Love comes to one

like light from the stars. No single star can blind one to the glory and wonder of the firmament.[40]

Rosalind eventually divorced Baynes, who went on to become a disciple and translator of the Swiss psychiatrist Carl Gustav Jung, and to marry three more times.

When Angela turned twenty-one, her parents gave her a fur-lined coat and held a party for sixty. Angela wore 'a yellow satin dress swathed round her and a cap of blue Egyptian beads'.[41] Two weeks earlier, Margaret had attended a James Campbell McInnes concert with the Leeds Choral Society and although McInnes was not among the guests at Angela's birthday party, he came to a small dinner party at the Mackails' a few days later. On 1 March, Margaret wrote that 'Angela and I met Jack at Mr McInnes and Mr Peel's and dined with them: they sang and played to us afterward.'

The composer Gerald Graham Peel and the singer James Campbell McInnes lived together in St John's Wood from about 1905, first at 2 Clifton Hill and then at 10 Cavendish Road (at the time of the 1911 census, McInnes's widowed mother and her two young granddaughters were also living there). Peel, three years younger than McInnes, had also been born in Lancashire. However, where McInnes's parents were a calico printer's engraver and a cotton weaver, Peel's father was a wealthy cotton manufacturer who left £250,000 when he died in 1910. Peel had been educated at Harrow School and the University of Oxford.[42]

On 9 March, Margaret noted that 'Mr McInnes dined with Angela and me … . Then Angela played Debussy and we talked till Jack came in.' The following week Angela and her mother went to Queen's Hall to hear Bach's B minor mass with McInnes as a soloist: Margaret wrote in her diary, 'Words and music by God.' Frequently Margaret comments that McInnes and Angela chose to walk home together, both in Kensington and in Rottingdean. (Angela's son Colin remembered that she told him that she and his father 'had often met clandestinely [in the Brompton cemetery] before their formal engagement was approved of'.)[43] After two more family dinners and a Popular Concert by McInnes, whose programme Margaret saved, the pair became engaged on 7 April. In Margaret's words,

> Mr McInnes [was] in the drawing room with Angela: presently he came in to me in the dining room, and they love each other, thank God. I went in and saw her, and then left them to themselves, and went up to tell Jack. Presently he came down, and they came to him in the dining room, and then he went to bed. Mr McInnes left about one o'clock.

Two days later Margaret received the following letter from Graham Peel:

> Dear Mrs Mackail,
>
> I am so glad to know that it is settled and that they are both so happy. It will be splendid for Jim [i.e., McInnes] in every possible way, and I expect we shall see great results in his work and increased success. I am extra-specially glad because I always dreaded loneliness for him – and lately I have been wondering – owing to my Father's death and Mother's very precarious state of health – whether I might not be obliged before long to arrange my life differently and so break up this little London home of ours. But that is all about him. I do most sincerely wish your daughter all happiness. It will be a busy life and tremendously interesting, for she will be able to take such a big part in his work so much of which is done at home and cannot be done well without advice and sympathy and practical help in a hundred different ways.
>
> I am going down to my mother at Bournemouth for Easter and am afraid there may not be a chance of seeing you till I get back to town again. Thank you so much for asking me to come.
>
> Mothers ought to be condoled with on these occasions – oughtn't they? But I suppose there's some truth in the old saying – and this is not quite so bad as a son getting married!
>
> Sincerely yours,
>
> Graham Peel

McInnes also informed Lucy Broadwood of his engagement and the following day she went to have a long talk with Margaret Mackail, who recorded in her diary that 'Miss Broadwood is James Campbell McInnes's best and oldest friend in London [and was] brimming with tears and joy over the news he had brought her.'

In a letter to Lady Mary Murray, a family friend, Angela announced her engagement: 'You will love him I think. He is a wonderful creature, and most strong and tender. My prayer is that I may be good enough for all that he wants.'[44]

On 25 April 1911 – ten days before the wedding – organist and accompanist Henry Richard Bird came to see Margaret about Angela having accompanying lessons.

PART TWO

Marriage, Motherhood, Divorce and Remarriage

> [Caroline Danvers] sometimes looked back with incredulous longing to the first year of her married life, to nights of refreshing dreamless sleep, to a waking that was a daily miracle of happiness, to days that were full of the joy and excitement of James, his friends, his writing, his delightful irresponsibility, his passionate worship of herself.
>
> Angela Thirkell, *O, These Men, These Men!* (1935)

Angela and Jim, as McInnes was called, were married at St Philip's church in Kensington on 5 May 1911. The witnesses were Angela's father, brother, grandmother and Uncle Phil; and Jim's younger sister and a friend. After the ceremony they took the train to Sidmouth where they stayed at the Knowle Hotel.

Meanwhile, Graham Peel came to lunch at the Mackails'. Margaret noted he was 'So unhappy at losing his Jim, poor man.' Margaret also mentioned her own sadness: 'Jack reads aloud in the evenings like an angel and I fall asleep and forget my heartache.' She wrote in a letter to Gilbert Murray that 'I am trying to pick up the thread of my own life again – but I have had no life of my own of late. I lived so entirely in, and for, those two, that I feel entirely lost.'[1]

Margaret's expression of her intense investment in her daughter's relationship to McInnes tends to support the observation made many years later by Lance Thirkell, Angela's son from her second marriage. Lance wrote that 'the high society of the day' – and his grandmother – had 'adored' McInnes. The unfortunate consequence for Angela was that her mother, 'in her innocent infatuation', apparently completely overlooked the fact that McInnes and Peel were lovers, and later, McInnes's alcoholism.[2]

Perhaps McInnes's voice was responsible. On hearing him sing once again as an adult, his son Graham wrote: 'His rich treacherous voice had not lost its power to grab your intestines and tie them in knots against your will. Listening to him breached social fortresses, made castles crumble and

found you alone on the darkling plain filled with a nameless dread. It was a voice that unmanned you: the rich gritty bray of the authentic bard.'[3] In an autobiographically inspired novel, McInnes's younger son Colin wrote of his fictional alter-ego's father's 'violent angelic voice like Lucifer's with its sickening power to pass through the mind and grasp the centre of the strongest, most intimate emotions'.[4]



James, Angela and Graham Campbell McInnes

After a few months in a furnished flat in St John's Wood, Jim and Angela went to live at 108 Church Street, now Kensington Church Street. Their son Graham Campbell McInnes was born there on 18 February 1912 and named after his godfather, composer Graham Peel, who became a regular guest at Angela's birthday parties as well as at those of his godson.

Graham McInnes described his family's first home as follows:

> The house was the usual browny-purple brick and yellow stucco of that part of London, in a terrace with a side door opening into a diminutive hall whence the stairs crawled up one wall, and the rooms opened off it; kitchen in the basement, my father's 'studio' on the ground floor, drawing room on the first floor, the parents' bedroom on the second and the nurseries on the top under the leads and slates with a view west out of the front window on to Church Street and the Campden Hill water tower and east out of the rear window on to the backs of similar houses on Brunswick Gardens.



Graham noted that it was 'still London, still W.8, and still very close to Mother. [Angela's] mother I mean.'[5] In February, Margaret noted in her diary that Collier's portrait of Angela was 'now finished and wonderfully like'.

From 1912 Margaret's main family concern was her younger daughter Clare, who kept losing weight. Her parents took her to Dr Vaughan Harley, who had previously treated Philip Burne-Jones; in November, Dr Harley prescribed a cure in a rest home where Clare stayed until mid-January. There are intermittent suggestions of a somewhat cool relationship between Clare and Angela. Margaret noted, for example in December, that 'I tried heaps of Angela's old dresses on Clare, and to her joy they none of them fitted.' In March 1914, Clare was sent for another three-month cure in Freiburg, Germany. Meanwhile, Angela was expecting again and in May she found a house to let at 20 The Grove, Boltons; the McInneses moved there at the end of the month.

McInnes sang at Wilsford Manor, the home of the Wyndhams' daughter Pamela, on several occasions. His most notable performance there took place on 28 July 1914, with the foreign minister, Sir Edward Grey of Fallodon, in the audience. According to a journalist, 'As McInnes was singing he saw Sir Edward receive a message and hasten away with a look of consternation on his face. He learned later that news of the worst complexion had come from Ambassador Goschen at Berlin and that the war which was supposed to have been isolated or averted was inevitable.'[6] On returning home that evening McInnes sent the following note: 'Dear Sir Edward, I am so glad you liked the music, and if the world is going to become a howling wilderness, won't you let me sing to you again?'[7] On 4 August, Margaret noted the mobilisation of the navy and army; she added that 'Angel Graham [her young grandson] came and lightened all our hearts.' Colin Campbell McInnes, the McInneses' second son, was born on 20 August 1914.



James, Angela, Graham and Colin Campbell McInnes

Opposite: John Maler Collier, portrait of Angela Campbell McInnes

Graham McInnes wrote in his memoir that The Grove – now in The Little Boltons – is about the same short distance from Pembroke Gardens as Kensington Church Street, to the south this time instead of the north. He provides a physical description of the house:

> On the top floor the day nursery ran right across the front of the house with the night nursery and the maids' quarters behind; on the next floor down was the parents' bedroom, mother's sitting-room and my father's dressing-room … . Below this was the drawing-room facing the street, with a grand piano at which Mother used to accompany my father, and the dining-room facing out into a little garden surrounded by blackish-brown brick walls and full of sunflowers.

'Uncle Graham' (Peel) visited occasionally, and 'It was from … The Grove that we went once or twice in the earlier years of the war to spend holidays with Uncle Graham at his house in Bournemouth, deep in a huge lawn set with monkey-puzzle trees and only a few minutes' walk from the cliffs overlooking the sandy beach.'[8] In June 1915 the McInnes family also spent two weeks at Charford Manor in Wiltshire, not far from Bournemouth, lent by the Wyndhams' younger son Guy.

During the war, Angela's sister Clare worked for the Kensington Red Cross. In early 1916 Margaret Mackail gave news of her daughters' work of various kinds in a letter to her friend Lady Mary Murray:

> Clare is a bit fagged at Weir Hospital with mingled dreary work, and emotion over hearts laid at her feet that she doesn't know what to do with, not knowing what that sort of heart is like yet: she is such an odd mixture of wise, grown-up person and utter child, and love still fills her with terror.
>
> Angela is pretty hard at work – private work: of grappling with her soul, helping her husband, doing housework, owing to the dearth of servants. Sargent has done a heavenly drawing of her and I use the word advisedly. I began to cry when I saw it, and all it meant.[9]

In addition to accompanying her husband at the piano, Angela Campbell McInnes, as she was then called, also translated songs from the French. Three of these were published in 1916 and 1917, entitled 'Songs by the Waterside', 'A Fairy Story by the Fire', and, prophetically in light of coming events in her own life, 'The Power of Grief'.

In late June 1916 Angela became pregnant with her third child, and from that month through the following year, according to her divorce



John Singer Sargent, portrait of Angela

petition, 'McInnes has been habitually addicted to drink and has treated [his wife] with great unkindness and cruelty.'[10] After their divorce was granted the *Weekly Dispatch* published the fullest account of the case. The leader was 'WIFE'S LIFE OF HORROR. Husband's Boast of Relations with Nurse Girl.'[11] In July and August at Rottingdean, Jim 'would keep [Angela] awake all night swearing at her'. In September, at the Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh (where Graham Peel joined them), when asked to sign the register, McInnes 'made a scene. When they went to their room he flung a heavy suitcase at [Angela], but fortunately missed her.'

In February 1917, Jim announced to Angela that he had been arrested and fined for drunkenness, and 'he used to come and swear at her during the night after [their daughter, Mary] was born in March'. Finally, in April 'he told her that he had had improper relations with the under-nursemaid'. James apparently boasted to his wife that the nursemaid 'belongs to me, body and soul'. Angela did not believe the claim, but nevertheless sent Lily Cowley, the nursemaid, away. Lily and her mother later thanked Angela for this, and she agreed to testify that despite her struggles and screams James had locked her in the dining room for three hours in the middle of the night.

As the McInneses' marriage fell apart, the First World War raged on. On 26 September, Margaret Mackail wrote in her diary that 'Now every one of my Wyndhams [the five children of Percy and Madeline] that had an eldest son has had him killed in the war'. But Angela's parents were completely unaware of the drama surrounding their first granddaughter's birth until 30 April. That afternoon Angela's postnatal nurse, Queenie Campbell, rang to ask Margaret to telephone Graham Peel on Angela's behalf to ask him to come early the following day, and to say that she (Nurse Campbell) had sent for her own sister. Something was clearly wrong, but Angela's parents had no clue as to what it was. Then late in the evening McInnes himself called, and asked the Mackails to come to the house. Margaret continued:

> … thankful we were, for we daren't have gone otherwise, and thankful were Angela and Nurse for they daren't ask us. We went round via the Fords and got Henry to come with us, and there was our dear Jim like a beaten child: tousled and weary and quite drunk. I went up and saw Angela and Mary, Queenie and her sister. Queenie to sleep on a mattress on Angela's floor, and the sister looking after Mary. Jim so dear and hospitable it rent our heart. All night his drunken burden was 'Go to Angela'.

The next morning 'he was gently saying to Angela "Promise you won't do it again" and she said "I promise" … they kissed tenderly.' The meaning of McInnes's remark is unclear, but it suggests he was trying to shift the blame for his behaviour to Angela. The illustrator Henry Justice Ford, a friend of the Mackails, saw Jim to the train to Northampton, where he taught singing at the music school. Later that day 'at Ely Place Angela told [Sir] George [James Graham] Lewis [a solicitor and long-time family friend] all her trouble, and he was kind and helpful'.

Angela fictionalised the aftermath of a marital separation in her seventh book *O, These Men, These Men!*, published eighteen years after her first marriage had ended. As the novel opens the heroine Caroline has just left

her violent, alcoholic husband James. While three of Angela's first six books had been lovingly dedicated to her parents, this book is lovingly dedicated to 'J.H.' – her publisher Jamie Hamilton.

The first sentence of *O, These Men* announces that 'Caroline Danvers's parents had long been dead.' Caroline has taken refuge with the sympathetic parents of the husband she has just left, but curiously the senior Danverses have several traits in common with Angela's parents, the Mackails.[12] The motif of Caroline's long-dead parents and her post-separation 'adoption' by her parents-in-law, whom she comes to call 'Mother' and 'Father', allowed Angela, late in the book and in the voice of a minor character, to make what amounts to a mild critique of her own parents:

> Caroline … was the last person [James] ought to have married. If his parents had had more sense they might have stopped it. But Mrs Danvers adored James and could never deny him anything and as for Mr Danvers he is an angel and quite unfit for a world where you have to keep your wits about you. … I must say they both of them made it up to Caroline as well as they could.[13]

A few pages later James is dead, having slipped in the bathroom (making divorce unnecessary).

In real life McInnes lived on, as did Angela's parents: it was with them that she and her three young children took refuge. On 1 May 1917, a few days before her sixth wedding anniversary, Angela returned to Pembroke Gardens and never saw McInnes again. Her mother rang family friend Maisie Woolner (née Ionides), who had divorced her first husband Benjamin Dowson on grounds of infidelity and cruelty: 'the splendid creature came round and did us all good, as well as Angela'. A few days later Henry Justice Ford came to tea 'and gave Angela a message from Jim which threw her back'. In mid-May, according to Margaret's diary, 'Mary [Wemyss] came by to see Mother, bringing a great sheaf of cherry blossom and beech, and a huge bunch of pheasant's eye narcissus. I had to tell her about Angela, and the tears gushed from her eyes like fountains.'

Angela kept appointments with both Sir George Lewis and her doctor and then went to Clouds. At the end of the month Margaret noted that she saw Angela and Jim's 'once lovely and orderly home wrecked, by all Jim's belongings being piled to be taken away. Went over the house with many a sigh. My darling Angela.' In June, at age forty-three, McInnes joined the Royal Flying Corps; singer Walter Ford replaced him for the summer term in Northampton. McInnes was sent first to patrol the streets of London as a special constable; within a year he had become a private in the trenches.

On 8 June, Margaret wrote in a letter:

> [Angela] is beginning to get better: youth is on her side, and the prolonged quiet and feeling of security are telling, and her nerves are quieting down, and doubtless sleep and appetite will follow. She has gone to Rottingdean today to visit her children: her baby she has not seen for half its life, and her sons for nearly three months. You can't think – or rather you *can* think – what a difference it makes that it is not Angela who had behaved badly: it is so much better to be done evil to, than to do it: but neither is very nice.[14]



Edward Burne-Jones, 'Love in a Mist' from *The Flower Book*

A week later Angela's brother Denis married Diana Granet at the Holy Trinity Church on Sloane Street. A newspaper item was headed 'A Burne-Jones Bride': Denis was the painter's grandson, and Diana's wedding bouquet was made of delphiniums and love-in-a-mist, one of the flowers

represented in Burne-Jones's *Flower Book*. Due probably to the emotional turmoil surrounding her recent separation, Angela did not attend the wedding, although her parents, sister, uncle and grandmother were all there, in addition to the Countess of Wemyss, the Dowager Lady Lewis, Sir George and Lady Lewis, the bride's family and other guests.

Denis had left Balliol College after three years without a degree, feeling overwhelmed by his father's reputation there. He then worked as a set designer until the war came, when ill health prevented him from enlisting. During the war he was employed at the War Office, the Board of Trade and the Print Room of the British Museum; after the war he became a novelist. His wife Diana was the daughter of Sir Guy Granet, a prominent railway manager who was put in charge of military railways during the war. Denis Mackail gave a fictionalised portrait of his happy marriage in *Greenery Street* and other novels.[15]

After her stay at Clouds and a brief visit to her children at Rottingdean, Angela then spent about a month at Stanway House with the Wyndhams' oldest daughter Mary, who had now become the Countess of Wemyss. As mentioned in Part One, the Wyndhams' patronage of Burne-Jones had initiated what became a three-generation friendship between Percy and 'Aunt Madeline' Wyndham and their descendants on the one hand, and Edward and Georgiana Burne-Jones and their descendants on the other. Like Clouds, Stanway House was very dear to the Mackails.

Cynthia Asquith, the eldest daughter of Lord and Lady Wemyss, described her family home as follows:

> The most striking thing about the house is the beauty of the golden hue of its mellowed stone softened by centuries' growth of silver and yellow lichen and thickly clustered over with great masses of magnolia and clematis leaves. More than any other building I know, the house seems to have a face – an actual countenance with an expression that changes like that of a living creature. At times, it looks withdrawn into itself, utterly aloof, benign; at others sheltering and steeped in memories, as though its golden walls had participated in the joys and sorrows of all the generations who have lived within them and were still ready to throb in sympathy with their descendants. I once heard Burne-Jones's daughter, Margaret Mackail, exclaim, 'The very stone of the house looks as if it would bleed if you scratched it!'[16]

During the summer of 1917 Stanway's golden walls must have throbbed in sympathy with Angela, the 'pathetic refugee', as Cynthia Asquith noted in her diary, from a failed marriage.[17]



John Singer Sargent, ***The Wyndham Sisters***, beneath the G.F. Watts portrait of their mother Madeline. From left: Madeline Adeane, Pamela Tennant and Mary, Lady Elcho

Writing from Stanway in answer to a letter from Lady Mary Murray, Angela explained her situation and gave optimistic news of her baby daughter:

> I was nearly worn out physically with all I had been through and need rest and quiet very much. My Mary is quite unaffected by it all and is even fatter and more placid than her brothers, which is a great comfort and will make me jeer at any theories about 'pre-natal influences' in the future.

> It was so dear of you to write to me, and I am so glad that you have only known the best side of Jim, as you will be able to think of him only as he really was. I never knew anything about drink before – but with him it was literal *possession* and it simply wasn't my real beloved Jim who did these things. His own heart and mind were not there – only something horrible in their place. All the strength and beauty and goodness that were in his singing are what he really was – and that is what I shall remember and the other things will slip back into the darkness that they sprang from. I think we loved one another more than most people and we were very happy for five years and though the last year was a nightmare, it has now to me almost as little reality as a nightmare. Only I am more sorry for Jim than I can say, and I have to *trust* that good will come to him out of it somehow.[18]

From Stanway, Angela went to the Lewises' at Bibsworth House in nearby Broadway, and then took her sons to Wilsford to stay with Lady Wemyss's sister Pamela, now Lady Glenconner, leaving young Mary McInnes at Pembroke Gardens with her nanny Barbara Parson.

Angela had begun to recover. In August, while at Wilsford, Margaret wrote that 'Angela looked exquisite in a cream madras muslin dress of great simplicity and trails of vine round her bodice and a wreath on her head with tiny bunches of green grapes hanging by her ears, a jade necklace the same colour as the grapes and looking like muscat.'

In their stays at Wilsford the Mackails had become acquainted with the Lovibonds at nearby Lake House. In September they attended a picnic tea there and Margaret noted the presence of two Australian officers: Major Gould and Mr Thirkell. The Australian soldiers were temporarily stationed at military camps on Salisbury Plain. George Lancelot Allnutt Thirkell, who would become Angela's second husband, was a third-generation Tasmanian born on 19 May 1891. After finishing an engineering degree in July 1914, he joined the Australian Imperial Force in August. Historian Michael Roe has studied Thirkell's war diaries and written an account of his experiences.

When the Turkish attacked the Suez Canal, 'Thirk', as he was called, became one of the first Australians to engage in the war and was promoted to lieutenant. He spent his twenty-fourth birthday in Gallipoli – 'hell' – and then became dangerously ill with enteric fever and was sent back to Australia. After a year's recuperation he re-enlisted. His ship landed at Devonport at the end of January 1917, and '[t]here followed a chain-reaction of meetings with the élite'. Roe comments that a war stereotype 'is the contrast between exuberant leave-life in Britain and the horrendous trenches'. Thirk's diaries feature both, 'but the former especially'.



Captain George Thirkell

At the end of February, he travelled to London with Lady Maude Du Cros (the wife of motor magnate Sir Arthur Du Cros), and attended a dinner at the Ritz. The diary also mentions Thirk's meetings with the Hon. Moyra Brodrick (a niece of the Countess of Wemyss) and Lady Mary Hamilton (the daughter of the Duke and Duchess of Abercorn). The king and queen entertained 200 wounded overseas soldiers weekly at Windsor Castle – one hundred to lunch and one hundred to tea – and Thirk was a guest at a morning tea. Princess Alexander of Teck looked after the guests, and Thirk noted that 'she was very, very nice. So natural.' Lady Ashbourne (the former Marianne de Montbrison) taught him the fox-trot at a party held by Lady Greville (the former Olive Grace Kerr, who had inherited $1m after the death her first husband, an American banker).

According to Roe, Thirk's 'deepest association was with the Countess of Strathmore, who mothered him warmly' and introduced him to her daughters: '[h]e spent 1 April, the eve of his departure for service, almost entirely with the Strathmores …'. In France, Thirk served first with the 17th Field Company, Royal Australian Engineers, and then became Captain with the 11th Field Company. One of the Strathmores' daughters,

Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon, who would marry the future King George VI in 1923, wrote to Captain Thirkell from time to time. In early September 1917, he visited the Strathmores' home, Glamis Castle, and then travelled to Wiltshire, where he met Angela and her family. He and Angela continued seeing each other on successive Sundays.[19]

Graham McInnes recalled the moment when Colin and he, aged three and five-and-a-half, respectively, were introduced to Thirk by their mother, complete with a literary allusion. The boys were playing a war game that involved making a coffin out of roof slates and cow manure, when a carriage rounded the corner and accidentally shattered the slates:

> We were so distraught at the destruction that we didn't notice who was in the gig until a man's voice said in a strange twangy lilt: 'Come on now, be a soldier.' High above the shattered tiles and cow manure was a handsome captain with dark brown hair and freckles in the irises of his eyes. Next to him sat Mother and she was smiling and red faced and not angry with us, which filled me with wonderment.
>
> 'Well Thirk,' she said, addressing the soldier, 'these are the "Helen's Babies" I was telling you about.'
>
> 'Budge and Toddie, eh?' said Thirk.
>
> 'You'll have to put up with them,' said Mother laughingly. 'Boys, go and get that disgusting mess off under the tap and then come and say hello to Thirk.'[20]

Thirk, for his part, wrote in his diary that 'it beats me how a fellow [McInnes] can neglect such a lovely little soul [Angela] and such glorious kids'. Roe comments that the 'two dear little kiddies', as Thirk called them, 'seem to have enchanted the swain as much as did their mother'.

In October, Angela and her sons returned to Pembroke Gardens, and Graham and Colin began attending the Froebel Institute. Angela's divorce was granted in November. Margaret Mackail informed Lady Mary Murray:

> [Angela] is much better since all is settled: the 'ordeal' as so many kind friends call it passed calmly by, though the revelations were deplorable: but the great initial fact of her loving and beloved husband having completely changed to become her tormentor swallowed up everything, and no fiery furnace she had to pass through afterward was so fierce as that, or could hurt her much.[21]

In December, Thirk returned to the Western Front, and Angela began

volunteering at the Officers' Club. On New Year's Eve 1917 Margaret recorded that Angela went to a dance at the Australian Officers' Club 'by herself, her first outing like that at night and alone. She got back soon after midnight, escorted.' For several months she saw a Major Roos, a South African officer.

In mid-February, Angela's daughter Mary, not quite one year old, was hospitalised in order to operate on an abscess in her throat that would have suffocated her if left. Margaret recorded in her diary that Mary began to recover, then developed acute pneumonia and died a week later. Completely distraught, Angela left the cremation and funeral arrangements to her mother. Angela's parents, her sister Clare and nanny Barbara Parson attended the burial in Rottingdean.

At the end of March, Margaret noted that Angela was 'very anxious about Captain Thirkell whose division is in the thick of it – and goes to the Australian Headquarters every morning to see the casualty list'. The Mackails' younger daughter Clare was a friend of Reine Ormond, a niece of the painter John Singer Sargent, and in April Margaret wrote that Rose-Marie Ormond, Reine's sister, had been killed in church in Paris by a German shell.

The previous May, Campbell McInnes had attempted to see his sons in Rottingdean, leading to a struggle with Philip Burne-Jones, and in May 1918 Margaret wrote, 'Phil again had to turn him away from Rottingdean.' A day later he turned up at Pembroke Gardens, but the Mackails had been forewarned and did not answer the door. That summer on Kensington High Street, Graham and Colin had the last glimpse of their father that they would have for many years, until their nanny hurried them home. Graham wrote:

> Upon returning to 6 Pembroke Gardens I rushed in to Mother, full of excitement, to tell her the startling news. Her response was chilling. She said that she did not ever want to hear about my father again, and she went on to ask if I knew why she had sent him away. When I shook my head she said:
>
> 'You remember Reuben?'
>
> Of course I remembered Reuben. Mother had been reading aloud to us from Anna Sewell's *Black Beauty* and Reuben was the drunken coachman who allowed Black Beauty to go lame through failing to notice that he had a sharp stone embedded in the frog of his hoof.
>
> 'Dadda was like Reuben and I had to send him away.'[22]

Angela took her sons to Stourport, near her Baldwin cousins, for a month-long holiday. At the end of August, Thirk asked Angela to marry him,

and after the Armistice was signed he went to live with the Mackails at Pembroke Gardens.

Colin recalled Armistice Day and the coming change in his family's life:

> … we were given whistles to blow out of the nursery window – thus adding our childish mite to the cacophony of hysterical short-lived joy that heralded the end of war to end all wars. We heard much, at this time, of a person much admired by adults called Lloyd George – but as I mis-heard it as 'Lord George', and had also been told that there was an equally (if not more so) admired personage named King George, this added to my general confusion about what this enormous thing, the War, which so obsessed our elders, possibly could be. But in direct human terms the war soon entered our young lives decisively; for there began to frequent our house a stalwart young Australian officer who seemed much in the company of our mother, and to steal from us part of the attention we felt our due. One day, when she took us to Hyde Park Corner to view a procession in which a cousin of my grandmother's rode in a ministerial coach … , our mother asked us whom, if she married again, we would wish her to select. We at once nominated her brother, an uncle who was always kind to us, but she did not hearken to this wise sucklings' counsel, preferred the young Australian, and we all soon set sail from London to the far side of the globe.[23]

Thirk and Angela were married on 13 December 1918 at Kensington Town Hall.

In February 1919, Anne Ritchie, Thackeray's daughter and a successful novelist herself, died at Freshwater where she had retired, at age eighty-one. A newspaper item mentioned: 'In *From the Porch*, published in 1913, Lady Ritchie had much to say of the torch-bearers of the Early Victorian days – George Eliot, Mrs Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë, and Mrs Oliphant, who were all well known to her.'[24] She had been the Mackails' neighbour and landlady when they were living in their first home on Young Street, and Angela often mentioned that the house where she was born had been portrayed in Lady Ritchie's novel *Old Kensington.*

By coincidence, Angela, at age twenty-nine, was about to move away from London for the first time in her life. Thirk had decided to pursue 'non-military employment' in the research laboratory of the Brown Firth Steel Company in Sheffield. He and his new family relocated to the village of Totley where they spent about six months living in a boarding house called Sunnyside. Graham and Colin loved trains and were delighted that their street overlooked the entrance to a long railway tunnel. They



George Thirkell with Graham and Colin

would watch for the puffs of smoke that emerged from the tunnel as trains passed through it: 'They fascinated Mother too who used to say, having been educated in a classical household, that they were like the angry snorts of Pluto as Persephone escaped his clutches to return to Demeter.'[25] The Thirkell family returned to Pembroke Gardens for Christmas 1919, and then prepared to embark for Australia.

At the end of Angela's semi-autobiographical 'divorce novel' *O, These Men, These Men!*, the heroine gets remarried to Francis Lester, a distant cousin who had been one of her best friends and companions while growing up. '[N]ow I shan't have any more trouble with those horrid apostrophes,' Caroline tells Francis on the last page, 'I mean all that trouble about esses.'[26] Where Caroline and her first husband James had been 'the Danverses' – rather troublesome to say – she and her new husband would more simply be 'the Lesters'. Similarly, in real life Angela went from being one of 'the McInneses', to one of 'the Thirkells'.

Where Jim was sixteen years older than Angela, Thirk was fifteen months younger, but neither man had much in common with her cousins, friends and companions while growing up. According to Graham, his grandfather 'used to say that Thirk wooed Mother by tales of "anthropophagi and men whose heads do grow beneath their shoulders".'[27] Angela would stay with Captain Thirkell twice as long as she had with James Campbell McInnes, but she was still somehow cast as Desdemona, 'the unfortunate one'.

PART THREE

Another Country

I would wish that [my mother's] earliest neo-Beerbohmian pieces, written to pay for the laundry in Australia, might one day be collected. (She had imagined a title for this collection before she achieved fame … – *Hardly Worth While*.)

Colin MacInnes, 'Mum's the Word' (1963)

It was in Melbourne that I began to write small contributions to newspapers and magazines, so that my literary career owes much to these beginnings.

Angela Thirkell, 'Three Reasons Why I Like Australia' (1950)

In January 1920, Thirk, Angela, her two sons and their nurse took the train to Devonport, where they boarded the SS *Friedrichsruh*, a German ship that had been granted to the Australian government as part of war reparations.

Before handing over the ship, the Germans had tampered with its plumbing and electrical wiring, leading to some occasionally comical but mostly annoying mishaps in the first few days. During the seven-week trip the ship docked only twice, in Port Said and Colombo, due to the potentially dangerous presence of prisoners on board.

In 1934, Angela turned the experience into a novel called *Trooper to the Southern Cross* and published it under the gender-neutral pseudonym 'Leslie Parker'. In her BBC interview with her son Colin, she recalled:

> It was a nightmare of a voyage – I didn't know it at the time – we didn't know how near real danger we were. All the bad eggs in the [Australian Imperial Force] were put on board at the last moment. … [The] cells weren't strong enough to hold them and the first thing they did was to take off their chains or manacles or whatever they had and to open the cell doors and bash the soldiers who were looking after them and pretty well had the run of the ship, and I wrote the whole book, as you remember, in the person of an Australian army doctor who was going

> back to Australia with his English wife. In those days I still could speak Australian but now I couldn't.[1]

Thirk also wrote about the voyage in his diaries, and historian Michael Roe confirms that 'words and phrases from the diaries do sound through Bowen's [the army doctor's] mouth'.[2]

Angela dedicated the book 'To S.C., G.T., and G.C. the cobbers who helped see me through it'. G.C. and S.C. were Gerald and Sunnie Carr, Thirk's former Commanding Officer and his English wife who were travelling on the same ship; G.T. was of course George Thirkell. Angela's second marriage was over by the time she wrote the novel, and as Tony Gould points out in his introduction to the book, she did not portray herself as Bowen's – the Thirkell character's – wife, but rather as the colonel's wife. This allows Bowen, the narrator, to describe the colonel's wife as 'a nice-looking woman, darkish and bright-eyed, and I could see at a glance who was master in that family'.[3]

On landing in Melbourne, Angela received the news that her adored grandmother, Georgiana Burne-Jones, had died. The Thirkells spent only two days in Melbourne before boarding another ship to take them to Tasmania, where Angela would meet her new in-laws. After an overnight journey they landed in Launceston, and from there took the train to Hobart.

Angela had a tendency to conduct herself 'like a suave settler in darkest Africa', according to Colin, and at least at first to refer to the Australian accent as 'Orsetrylian'.[4] Throughout her stay on the continent she would maintain her English standards, linguistic and otherwise. Thirk's parents, Emma Alicia Genevieve and Robert Anthony Claude, were known to friends as Nymmie and Bob, but, according to Graham, Angela preferred to call them 'Mamà' and 'Père'. Her sons transformed Mamà to the more casual 'Meoma', and then 'Meo'.

Graham describes his step-grandparents' home on Elizabeth Street, 'the main road of the Island', as 'hideous both inside and out': 'What Mother thought of it I simply cannot imagine.' Meo often spoke nostalgically of Bellevue, the house at New Town, Hobart where she had been brought up. Thirk himself had spent his boyhood 'on a big farm near Richmond' where his parents lived for the first twenty years of their married life. Michael Roe characterises Richmond as 'probably the most "antique" and picturesque village in Australia', but unfortunately the Thirkell family's former home there had been 'lost to the bailiffs'.

For Graham, 'Père was a bit of a deadbeat', and 'it was clear that he was held responsible for the decline of the family fortunes'. Roe, however, adds

the information that Père was a member-elect of the Royal Geographic Society and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (Scotland), and had at one time listed his occupation as 'explorer'.[5] Roe sent his article to Graham McInnes, whose brief response was also published.

Among other issues, Graham's response addressed their contrasting portrayals of 'Père':

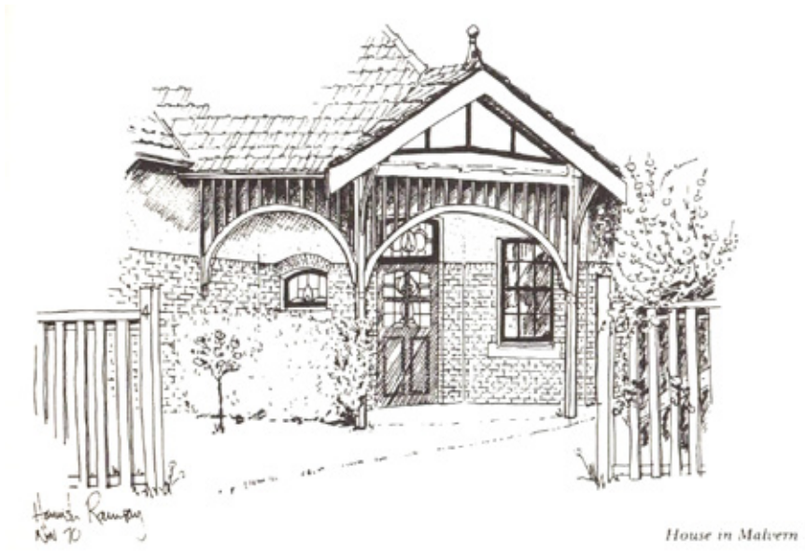
> I don't know how to square the dead-beat slipper-clad 'Père' with my step-grandfather having been a member-elect of the Royal Geographical Society. It must have been something in the past. At any rate, it was never mentioned in my presence. One of my large brood of step-cousins told me after reading *Gundagai* [the first volume of Graham's autobiography] that the sheep farm near Richmond which 'Père' owned was run into the ground by his wife's airs and extravagances. I find that not impossible to believe.[6]

'Run into the ground by his wife's airs and extravagances': despite many obvious differences between Angela and her mother-in-law, such as the fact that Angela eventually became the sole financial support of her family, Graham's formulation seems to hint that Père's financial and marital woes anticipated those of Thirk.

Before studying engineering at the University of Tasmania, Thirk had attended the old and distinguished Hutchins School. Angela was anxious that seven-year-old Graham and five-year-old Colin should continue their schooling, and so they too were sent to Hutchins. Leaving the boys in Hobart in the care of their nurse and their step-grandparents, Thirk and Angela then went to Melbourne to look for housing and employment. Before she left, Angela explained to Graham that Colin and he would be attending school under their stepfather's surname Thirkell, rather than McInnes. In the short run this simplified things for everyone and precluded potentially awkward questions, yet in the long run, as Graham explained, 'Mother succeeded in transferring from herself to me and my brother the burden of explanation and embarrassment which she herself was unwilling to assume.'[7]

After one term at Hutchins, Graham and Colin learned from their nanny that their stepfather had found a job and a house in Melbourne, so they moved on to yet another new home and another new school.

In Malvern, a suburb of Melbourne, the Thirkells purchased an eight-room bungalow 'partly by means of a loan made by Stanley Baldwin to [Angela] at the time of her divorce' and partly through a mortgage financed through her husband's demobilisation gratuity.[8]



Sketch of Four Grace Street, Malvern

Just after buying the house Angela learned that her Aunt Madeline had died, a month after her grandmother Georgiana Burne-Jones. She wrote to Lady Wemyss, Madeline Wyndham's daughter:

> She and my grandmother, both something stronger and lovelier than the world seems to make now, were close together and one can't help envying them in a way the Glorious Company of friends that they have gone to. Aunt Madeline is a feeling of love forever, … and no one who knew her and Clouds, almost as much one person [as] they could be, can forget the Clouds-Wyndham feeling. It was a spacious, love-giving life and I am thankful to have known it.

Angela ended the letter with the hope that Lady Wemyss's youngest daughter was 'being a great success and captivating dukes and millionaires', sent her love to '*all* Wyndhams', and signed it 'Ever your loving daughter, Angela'.[9]

The Thirkells moved in to their new home in June and their son Lancelot George – Lance – was born in Melbourne on 9 January 1921.[10] Lance wrote that for him Four Grace Street, Malvern 'will always be home with a very large "H"'. Malvern 'consisted mainly of detached or semi-detached bungalows standing in their own suburban gardens'.[11] Graham

recalls that in the 1920s these bungalows 'alternated gamboge and burnt umber with chocolate', whereas his mother 'painted the house, fence and gates bright green and white and she even persuaded the municipal council to turn the bandstand in Malvern Park and the kiosk in Malvern Gardens from the familiar muddy brown to white and green'.[12]

As was the case in the Mackails' home in Kensington, the drawing-room was particularly noteworthy, according to Lance:

> … although it was a product of bungalow architecture, it contained the only good furniture in the house and all the pictures and books [Angela] had brought out from England, among which was a large charcoal of herself which Sargent had done … . There were fascinating ornaments too, peacocks' feathers and large glass vases with a raised spiral pattern like a helter-skelter.

The drawing-room housed Angela's writing desk and the piano, and it 'was also the scene of reading and reading aloud, for my mother did more than her duty by all of us in both these respects'.[13] On this topic Colin, in other instances very critical of his mother, concurs: 'my grandparents often read to each other in the evening, and my mother continued this splendid practice, in later years when we left for Australia, to my own and my brother's immense benefit'.[14]

Graham explains what was and what was not deemed suitable for reading aloud:

> Buchan was all right, because he was a gentleman; other contemporary literature was frowned upon. Mother herself might conceive a passion for *A Passage to India* or *Babbitt*, but they were never read aloud to us; nor did she ever read to us any of the spate of novels which her brother was at that time actively producing and which culminated in *Greenery Street* in 1925. What she read was an extraordinary grab bag from a treasure chest of girlhood memories. Over a period of seven or eight years we listened to the entire works of Dickens with the exception of *Barnaby Rudge* and *Master Humphrey's Clock*; to most of Scott's Waverley novels; to Thackeray's *Henry Esmond*; to the *Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones*; and to curious private anthologies edited by Lady Glenconner. We were also encouraged to read to ourselves such ancient children's classics as the books of Charlotte M. Yonge and Mrs. Molesworth, Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies* and the fairy stories of Grimm, Hans Andersen and Mary de Morgan.[15]

If the transmission of literacy skills was one purpose of reading aloud, it clearly worked. Margaret Mackail's habit of reading to her children sowed the seeds of Angela's and Denis's novels, and in the next generation all three of Angela's sons grew up to write memorable accounts of their childhood, among their other publications.

Yet, Graham explains in a chapter of his autobiography entitled 'Angela (Sui Generis) Thirkell', the 'code of conduct' that reading aloud conveyed to him 'had nothing to do with ordinary human relationships':

> What we learned were basically literary postures to be assumed in fictive situations. It was a code of highly articulate cleverness rather than of intellectual honesty. The emphasis was on the skills required to solve acrostics, word games, dumb crambo, crossword puzzles. Familiar quotations, including 'capping' one's rival, were a favourite. Literary allusions encouraged the kind of conversational gambits which pass for brilliance before the less educated, but which in fact depend entirely on a retentive memory and on an unwritten law (known to you but not to your interlocutor) that those who know more or who can parrot more (irrespective of how deep their knowledge goes or on what it is based) have the right to be rude to others and to say cutting things to them.

In democratic Australia, in particular, a boy could not easily assume these postures, and they were also to some extent problematic for Angela:

> Broadly speaking Mother looked on Australians, with few exceptions, as members of the Lower Classes. She agreed heartily with an English visitor who once told her (within our incredulous hearing) that Australia was 'a wonderful country for Warrant Officers'. The social attitude implicit in such a statement troubled her not one whit. The whole of this great grey sun-baked continent she regarded much as if it were Hornsey or Tooting Bec, and she a Kensingtonian of high degree. What made it unbearable on both sides was that in those distant days there was just enough truth in it to hurt. Mother *had* been a Kensingtonian and though never belonging to the 'establishment' had been able to arrogate to herself something of its attitudes, based on the genuine distinction of her grandfather and father. The Australian big towns of the Twenties did bear a superficial resemblance to London suburbs and what riled her was to find suburban types and members of the Lower Orders actually running the country. It never occurred to her that she was a guest in their house … .[16]

Similarly, Colin observed that 'Beneath a torrid sun, and often in circumstances of great material distress, [my mother] resolutely maintained the values – and the accent – of her Kensingtonian culture in London, much to the astonishment of the natives.' And yet, 'curiously, she got away with it: she was so resolute in her rejection of everything Australian (except for the beaches, for she loved swimming) that she acquired the reputation of a "character", or "card", and made countless Australian friends who almost wept when she finally departed'.[17]

In August 1921, the Australian soprano Dame Nellie Melba returned home after several years abroad. A few months later she was one of the honoured guests invited to an At Home held in connection with the Australian Art Association, at which Angela was also present. In November, Dame Nellie became the patron of the newly formed Victorian branch of the British Music Society; Angela was on the committee. Angela saved the letter she later received from her new friend:

> Dear 'Angela.' Is this cheek?
>
> I am off to Sydney tomorrow: but on my return I am surely coming to see your della Robbia & your Sargent which I am looking forward to very much indeed. I know how homesick you must get sometimes & my heart is with you – may I send you my love –
>
> Nellie Melba[18]

Angela also participated in the Melbourne Musical Club, which Nellie Melba had founded some years earlier. Angela was particularly friendly with members Emily Scott – a pianist who had studied in Vienna and married English-born Ernest Scott, a history professor at Melbourne University – and Mr and Mrs Lindsay Bernard Hall.

Angela's meeting with what her son called the most 'engaging and exciting' of her new friends came about through 'the Mackail Burne-Jones old boy' network.[19] These friends were Basil and Nell Hall: 'Uncle Basil' and 'Aunt Nell' to Angela's children. Basil was the son of Lindsay Bernard Hall, the Director of the National Gallery of Victoria. Bernard Hall was English and had studied under Angela's great-uncle Edward Poynter at the Royal College of Art, before marrying an Australian woman and being appointed to the National Gallery in 1892. Basil Hall was a few years younger than Angela, and he, his English wife Nell and their children lived in an orchard called Fairview in the Yarra Valley, to the east of Melbourne.

Basil and Nell regularly invited Graham and Colin to spend their school holidays on the farm, and Graham estimates that in the ten years Angela lived in Australia, he and his brother spent a total of eighteen months with

the Halls. After living at Fairview for several years, the Halls moved to a homestead called La Côte in Ballan, to the west of Melbourne, near Ballarat. Angela described a visit there in 'A Week in an Australian Country House'. Anticipating names she would re-use for the children in her Barsetshire novels, Angela baptises the three children the Halls had at the time Tony, Dora and Dan: 'Tony, the eldest, is only just seven, and they are the most astoundingly impish, competent, self-possessed handful of bush babies.'[20] Graham devoted two chapters of *The Road to Gundagai* to his holidays with the Halls, and Colin's second novel, *June in her Spring*, was largely inspired by his adolescent experiences among the 'wool-growing aristocracy' in the vicinity of Ballan (called 'Ballantyne' in the novel).

Just before Lance's second birthday, Angela wrote to a friend:

> My nurse went back to England last month and I now do all cooking, house-maiding, nursery-maiding &c for the family, with just a woman once a week to do washing & clean the kitchen. And there is nothing else to do here. I rather like it and enjoy getting a feeling of mastery over raw food, having been a poor cook up till now. And how lovely it is to have the house to oneself when it's all on one floor and not to have to make polite conversation at breakfast, lunch & tea. Also it's an economy and halves the gas bill![21]

In reality Angela had already found something else to do besides cooking, house-maiding and nursery-maiding, something that also allowed her to help with the bills.

By the time Lance was one, Angela had published an article in the prestigious *Cornhill* magazine, originally edited by Thackeray. The current editor was Leonard Huxley, a brother-in-law of John Maler Collier who had painted Angela; her article was entitled 'Letters from a Shepherd of Arcady to a Little Girl'. She related the circumstances surrounding some of the letters she received as a young girl from the Canon of Norwich, an author and a family friend. She went on to publish four more articles that year in an Australian publication called *The Forum*, as well as in *The Cornhill*. Three of them were based on personal experience with family friends and relatives in England: her godfather J.M. Barrie, the music teacher Manuel García, and her 'Uncle Ruddy' Kipling. The fourth was an appreciation of a troupe of Irish actors touring Australia.

The women's page of the Melbourne paper, *The Argus*, devoted two columns to Angela in an article entitled 'Interesting People'.[22] It mentioned her Burne-Jones ancestry, her parents' impending visit to Australia where Dr Mackail would deliver lectures, her mother's cousins the Kiplings and

the Poynters, and a host of celebrated family friends, such as Mrs Patrick Campbell. Early in 1923 in London, Stella Campbell produced Henri Bernstein's First World War play *L'Élévation* (Uplifted) – in a translation by Angela.

Angela's parents arrived in May for a six-month stay in Australia. Graham recalled that his grandfather was given rooms with the Chief Justice of Victoria, while his grandmother 'mucked in with us'. According to him 'she found the hugger-mugger of our little house nearly intolerable', particularly as all three children came down with flu during the visit. Margaret Mackail was also 'really appalled by my accent. She made me stand each morning for ten minutes at an open window saying "round" fifty to one hundred times until I got the diphthong the way it would suit her.'[23]

Dr Mackail lectured on topics such as poetry and the modern world, Virgil, Tennyson and Shakespeare. His speaking tour had been largely organised by Alexander Leeper, the Irish-born, Oxford-educated, recently retired Warden of Trinity College at the University of Melbourne, whom Angela had met on arrival. Alexander Leeper's daughter Valentine recalled in an article that

> we looked forward to something new and significant from a great scholar. To our horror [Dr Mackail's] first public lecture turned out to be one that Father had read aloud to us two nights before; and others were either complete publications or put together from different books and papers that he had beside him and selected from. Father was particularly disgusted … .[24]

In what appears to have been the only newspaper interview she ever gave, Mrs Mackail explained her current activities at home to an Australian journalist:

> [M]y greatest public interest is the education of crippled children. Yes, and mentally crippled too, but one has to keep to one school to work effectively, and my own particular school is for physical defectives. It is a scheme of the London County Council's, by which special schools have been established all over London for crippled children. We call for them in an ambulance and take them to the school, which is specially built and all on one floor. There are trained nurses in attendance and visiting doctors. Besides the ordinary lessons, they are taught handicrafts and trades, such as weaving and boot-making, and it leaves them fit to make a living. … I am manager of a group of special schools, some of which are for mental and some for physical cases, and visit them regularly.

> Besides that, I am chairman of the Care Committee of one particular school for physically defective children.[25]

Dr Mackail also lectured in Sydney, and a paper there noted that he was travelling 'with his women folk', who were charming the eye of Sydney as much as he was charming its ear:

> Daughter Mrs Thirkell, who lives in Melbourne, is really beautiful. She is the nearest approach to Annie Laurie, whose neck was like the swan, that one can hope to see. Until this dark lady with the red berries in her hair burst upon the vision, that neck had always sounded like a physical impossibility. Mrs Mackail has a beauty quieter than her daughter's, but none the less stirring.[26]

On returning to London, Margaret wrote to family friend Gilbert Murray, an Australian-born classical scholar, that

> I had forgotten how beautiful Angela is, or can be. She has had a heavy time. Life is not marked out on easy lines for her – and she does not yet seem much changed or developed by all that has befallen her: it is curious, and frightens me a little for fear it means that she must suffer more, till she is tender and wise. However it is no good trying to guess the future, or the workings of God.[27]

In late 1923 and early 1924 Angela published two more articles based on childhood memories in *The Cornhill*, another on British music in Melbourne in *The Forum*, and was then almost entirely silent for three years.

In the summer of 1924 Sydney-based artist Thea Proctor stayed with the Thirkells during a Melbourne exhibition of her drawings. Graham wrote many years later that the pencil sketch she made of Angela 'is the way I remember Mother; the way I most like to remember her'.[28] Thea Proctor's artwork was frequently commissioned by *The Home*, an Australian design journal of the 1920s and '30s comparable to *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* or *Vanity Fair*.

Graham believed that

> the only time [Angela] ever really came to terms with Australia was when [her friend] Emily Scott took her to a small country cottage she rented at a little village with the wonderfully tuneful name of Wandiligong … in the foothills of the Australian Alps. There she went with young Lance, who was by this time four or five, and spent idyllic weeks by pellucid



The Thirkell family



Thea Proctor, portrait of Angela Thirkell

> streams full of brown trout, among water meadows and foothills, and high above, the great massif of Mount Bogong towering … .[29]

Angela wrote about a visit to Wandiligong in 'An Australian Valley: Where the Bush Begins', published anonymously several years later in *The Times*.

Despite these idyllic few weeks, once back in Melbourne Angela was overworked and became ill, leading her doctor to recommend a visit home. At the end of April 1927 Angela and Lance boarded the *Themistocles*

to spend six months in England, leaving Graham and Colin with their stepfather and a 'lady help'. (Graham wrote that it was 'gesture either of supreme innocence or supreme indifference' to leave a young, unmarried woman in charge.)[30]

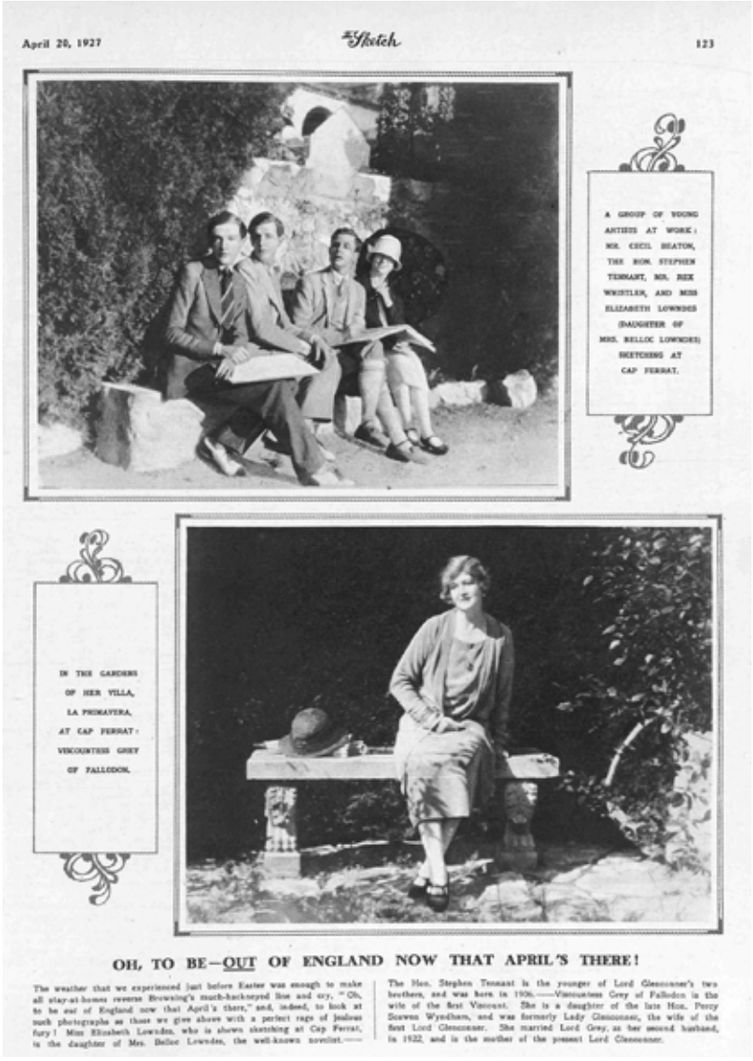
However, shortly before Angela's departure, the Duke and Duchess of York toured Australia. Angela had privileged insight into their stay in Melbourne, and her epistolary account of the event found its way into a book. Angela's friend Lady Cynthia Asquith – the eldest daughter of Lord and Lady Wemyss, and also, since 1918, J.M. Barrie's secretary – had contracted to write a brief biography of the duchess. Angela obliged with a 'pretty story' relating to the Government House Ball, at which 'Her Royal Highness danced and sat out with one partner who had no uniform or orders, and only the medals which show war service from 1914 to end.'

> All through the War, Lord and Lady Strathmore were kind to overseas officers, and among these was a young engineer officer from Tasmania who had seen service in Egypt, at the Dardanelles, and in France. The Strathmores were extremely good to him and invited him on several occasions to spend his leave at Glamis. He liked Lady Elizabeth immensely, and when he went back to France she wrote to him from time to time. Letters had such value to men who were twelve thousand miles from home. Lady Strathmore had also been more than kind, and would get up early on dark winter mornings to give him breakfast before he got the train back to the Channel and the front. So he had very grateful memories of all the family, and though he was very busy making a business for himself when the War was over and had a wife and young family to care for, he never forgot Lady Elizabeth, and kept all her letters and snapshots of her.
>
> When he heard of her marriage he felt it less likely than ever that he would ever see her again in her new and important position, and when the Royal visit to Australia was announced, he felt diffident about making himself known to her. However, he wrote to her (after tremendous family consultations as to the correct way to address a Royal Highness) and told her how happily he remembered his visits to Glamis and how he hoped to see her at some of the official functions.[31]

So it was that when the Duke and Duchess of York visited Melbourne, the Thirkells received an invitation to the Government House Ball. After the Governor-General and the Prime Minister, the Duchess's third dance partner was 'a civilian with no signs of glory': Thirk.

As Angela and Lance began their voyage, brief items about some of the

family friends whom they would visit were published by the British press: the Wemyss family at Stanway House and Lady Wemyss's sister Pamela, on holiday in France. After the death of her first husband Lord Glenconner, Pamela had re-married and she was now Viscountess Grey of Fallodon.



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A GROUP OF YOUNG ARTISTS AT WORK: MR. CECIL BEATON, THE HON. STEPHEN TENNANT, MR. REX WHISTLER, AND MISS ELIZABETH LOWNDES (DAUGHTER OF MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES) SKETCHING AT CAP FERRAT.

IN THE GARDENS OF HER VILLA, LA PRIMAVERA, AT CAP FERRAT: VISCOUNTESS GREY OF FALLODON.

OH, TO BE—OUT OF ENGLAND NOW THAT APRIL'S THERE!

The weather that we experienced just before Easter was enough to make all play-at-homes reverse Browning's much-hackneyed line and cry, "Oh, to be out of England now that April's there," and, indeed, to look at such photographs as those we give above with a perfect rage of jealous fury! Miss Elizabeth Lowndes, who is shown sketching at Cap Ferrat, is the daughter of Mrs. Belloc Lowndes, the well-known novelist.—The Hon. Stephen Tennant is the younger of Lord Glenconner's two brothers, and was born in 1906.—Viscountess Grey of Fallodon is the wife of the first Viscount. She is a daughter of the late Hon. Percy Scawen Wyndham, and was formerly Lady Glenconner, the wife of the first Lord Glenconner. She married Lord Grey, as her second husband, in 1922, and is the mother of the present Lord Glenconner.

Viscountess Grey and guests at Cap Ferrat, *The Sketch*

In England, the BBC was airing a recording of poems by Milton, Keats and Wordsworth, read by Viscountess Grey and her son, the Hon. David Tennant. In a pastiche of Browning, *The Sketch* headed a page of photographs of the Viscountess and her son Stephen, David's brother, 'Oh, To Be – *Out* of England Now That April's There'. Pamela is shown 'in the gardens of her villa, La Primavera, at Cap Ferrat'. A second photograph featured a group of young artists sketching at Cap Ferrat: Cecil Beaton and the Hon. Stephen Tennant looking almost like twins, Rex Whistler and Elizabeth Lowndes, whom Stephen at one time hoped to marry.[32] Another paper's social diary described 'A Barrie Fantasy'. The author J.M. Barrie – Angela's godfather – had written a children's play for Lord Wemyss, three granddaughters and five grandsons.[33] According to Denis Mackail, a Barrie fantasy called *The Wheel* was performed at Stanway three times during the Easter holidays of 1927.[34]

In London, Angela and her son stayed at Pembroke Gardens with the Mackails: Lance had his first introduction to his grandparents' life there, and Angela renewed her memories of home after an absence of seven years. Towards the end of their visit Margaret informed her friend Lady Mary Murray that 'Angela is very well, and all agog with seeing old friends, and getting clothes, and going to theatres: she remains a child in many ways.'[35]

On their return to Melbourne, *The Argus* published 'Mrs G.L. Thirkell. Her Visit to England' on its women's page. Lance, 'who had been the centre of interest and care among his mother's people overseas [and] who had enjoyed an orgy of sightseeing and excitements that might have turned any youngster's head, was overjoyed to be in Australia again, "because it is my home, and I am an Australian".' If his mother had once joked about the 'Orsetrylian' accent, now it was Lance's turn to be teased by Australians for the so-called 'siss-eye egg-scent' he acquired during his stay.

As to Angela, 'when [she] explained that she had spent the six months she was in England last year quietly among her own people it was evident at once that much that was most interesting of what she could tell of her experiences would be "not for publication"'.[36] Not for publication by another journalist, perhaps, but in fact 1928, the year Angela returned, was a banner year for her print journalism, and many of the pieces focussed on her recent trip home.

In 'Mum's the Word', Colin's article on his mother, he wrote: 'While in Australia [Angela] contributed to such fashionable periodicals as the continent then boasted (I recall a somewhat camp piece that sought to demonstrate the Romans really spoke *English*) … .'[37] Elsewhere Colin also recalled two additional somewhat camp pieces. The titles in full are: in 1928 'Shakespeare did not dine out' (*The Cornhill*) and 'Why I am not an

ancient Roman' (*The London Mercury*), and in 1930 'Why marry a sleuth?' (*The Home*). Edited by the poet Kenneth Slessor, *The Home* described itself as an Australian journal of quality. In 1930, its ten-year anniversary, it thanked Angela for her derisive humour, noting that her articles 'twit the Pecksniffs of modern Australian life'.

Angela's first two articles for *The Home*, published in its May and June 1928 issues, dealt with modern London life. 'Our Charming Decadents and These Alarming Women: A Plea for Some Sartorial Distinction for The Indication of Sex' opened at a piano recital of the romantic classics. Angela declared herself 'not a little puzzled by the number of good-looking, clever-faced young men whose clothes had a rather feminine cut and whose faces had a feminine cast'. Apparently, these were some of the modern young men with 'ladylike ways' that 'one hears so much about', but on looking on them with interest, Angela realised that they were in fact 'gentlemanly women'. The following evening at the Albert Hall, 'something' gave Angela the same perplexed feeling:

> It was sitting in a box, dressed in a dinner jacket exquisitely cut, white shirt, white waistcoat and stiff collar, with close-cropped hair brushed


OUR CHARMING DECADENTS

AND THESE ALARMING WOMEN

A Plea For Some Sartorial Distinction For The Indication Of Sex

By ANGELA THIRKELL

Illustrations by E. Collins

Angela Thirkell, 'Our Charming Decadents', *The Home*

> smoothly back, and monocle. No reason why it should not have been a rising author surrounded by his admirers; but it was a risen authoress; and when she got up between the music, a short black skirt and black silk stockings were visible.

This is almost certainly an allusion to Radclyffe Hall, whose novel *Adam's Breed* – the title was borrowed from Kipling – had recently won the French *Femina* prize (it was Hall's companion Una, Lady Troubridge, a childhood friend of Angela's, who typically wore a monocle). During Angela's stay in London the couple figured in a caricature of 'The "First-Nighters." Without Whom No Important *Premiere* Would Be Complete' in *The Sphere*. In 1930 in 'Divagations on the Censorship', Angela cited Hall's later novel, *The Well of Loneliness*. 'Our Charming Decadents' ended with 'the young men [who] go almost as far in the opposite direction'. Observing a couple of them at a very expensive London restaurant, Angela felt rewarded when she heard one say earnestly to his friend that 'Paternity to me means nothing: but maternity – yes.'

'Food and Art: The Tate Gallery with Its Aesthetic and Gastric Appeals' was Angela's second article for *The Home*. It was an enthusiastic


FOOD AND ART

The Tate Gallery With Its Aesthetic And Gastric Appeals; And A Suggestion For Mural Decoration In Australia

By ANGELA THIRKELL

Illustrations by E. Collins

REFRESHMENT DEPARTMENT

Angela Thirkell, 'Food and Art', *The Home*

appreciation of Rex Whistler's new mural painting in the restaurant in London's Tate Gallery, whose unveiling Angela attended. Rex Whistler, a student at the Slade School of Art, was one of the 'bright young things' who had been pictured in April with his friends Cecil Beaton and Stephen Tennant, while staying at Cap Ferrat with Stephen's mother Pamela, Viscountess Grey. After describing the scenes represented in the mural, Angela commented:

> It is very difficult to explain the charm of this work in cold blood. It depends partly on its original outlook, which reflects a tendency noticeable in modern writing to go back deliberately to the freedom of a fantastic setting (as in *The Green Lacquer Pavilion* and *The Venetian Glass Nephew*); partly on the free decorative treatment; and partly on a kind of nostalgia, known too well to us all, for dream countries that one can never see with waking eyes.

The two novels Angela cites were recently published historical fantasies by women writers of her generation: the first by Helen Beauclerk (and illustrated by the author's companion Edmund Dulac), and the second by Elinor Wylie, a friend of Rex Whistler and Stephen Tennant.

Shortly after the room was opened, Whistler and his friend Edith Olivier collaborated on a 'Guide to the Duchy of Epicurania and the Pursuit of Rare Meats'. According to the guide, the mural represents an expedition in Pursuit of Rare Meats and is led by the Crown Prince 'Étienne' – the Gallicised form of 'Stephen' as in Stephen Tennant:

> He was a youth of rare beauty and promise, an aristocrat from the top of his high brow, to the tips of his long and pointed fingernails. Narcissus-like, he was often seen bending over the fountains, streams, and pools of water in the Park, but this was not in order to admire his own beauty – admirable as it was. He was only seeking for newts, tadpoles, and other such rare creatures, to add to the collection in the Royal Reptiliary and Aquarium which he had presented to the Duchy in the commemoration of his twenty-first birthday.[38]

The articles Angela published just before and after the Tate article also dealt with Pamela and her family: '"The Charm of Birds": Viscountess Grey at Home' and 'In the Gargoyle: A Gentlemanly Night Club' (which was owned by David Tennant). Angela's journalistic pieces on Wyndham descendants, as well as on a few of the artistic and literary productions of those in Stephen Tennant's circle (or in a similar vein), announce some of

the features of the Barsetshire novels she would later write. They are set in a dream country, yet also have recognisable features of the present.

Angela's Australian journalism culminated on 29 September, when three of her articles appeared simultaneously: 'Lord Balfour: Some Reminiscences' in *The Argus*, 'Rossetti 1828–1882' in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, and 'Children at Sea: What Parents Suffer' in *The West Australian*. Balfour and Burne-Jones had first met in 1875 and often saw each other at Clouds, the home of Percy and Madeline Wyndham; Angela had recently seen Lord Balfour again at the home of a Wyndham descendant. The year of Rossetti's centenary was the occasion for a few words by a granddaughter of one whom he inspired.



Lord Balfour and Lady Wemyss, taken by Lady Ottoline Morrell

The most amusing of the three articles is 'Children at Sea', in which the character Angela would later call 'Tony Morland' first appears. The article begins, 'I have made a vow never to travel again by boat with any child under sixteen.' After several anecdotes drawn from Angela's recent sea voyage about Lance and a young friend he made on board, she concludes that 'in my next incarnation I am going to be a rich, childless widow'.

Within three years of their trip home, Angela and Lance had returned permanently to England, where she began writing and publishing books. George Thirkell was still very much alive and therefore Angela was not a widow. However, Tony Morland's mother Laura – the Barsetshire alter ego Angela was about to invent – would be. What Laura's husband, the late Henry Morland, was like is a minor but recurring topic in Angela's novels. The narrative voice in *High Rising* (1933) describes him as 'that ineffectual and unlamented gentleman'. In *Enter Sir Robert* (1955), Laura remarks that 'I have entirely forgotten my husband. Not that he was a bad husband but he was what the French call nul. I mean as a *character*.'

On returning to Melbourne Angela discovered that during her absence her husband had taken to calling Eileen McBride – the twenty-six-year-old 'lady help' she had left in charge – 'Paddy', while she called her employer 'Speck', due to his speckled brown eyes. (Angela later described Eileen as 'a very pretty, neurotic Irish girl' and the inspiration for 'the Incubus' in her second novel, *High Rising*.)[39] Once Angela realised the flirtatious nature of the relationship between her husband and Eileen, Graham recalls, '"Speck" and "Paddy" vanished instantly from the scene. Dignity, decorum and demure looks were the order of the day. The Grace Street ship shuddered, shook and altered course; it became more ship-shape; it became in fact less a happy ship than a tight ship. Within a month Eileen was gone.'[40] In Lance's words 'unknown to me, the crack-up was beginning'.[41]

In 1929 Angela published only about a third of the number of articles that came out the previous year, and a few of the topics were rather grim. In a previous account of her stay at Chequers – Margaret Mackail's first cousin Stanley Baldwin was Prime Minister – Angela had noted that 'Lady Katherine Grey, sister of Lady Jane Grey, was kept prisoner there for a short time after one of her ill-starred marriages'; on the wall 'are faint markings of some words which, rightly or wrongly are said to have been written there by the unhappy prisoner'.[42] Her first article of 1929 was 'Australia in 1842: How a Convict Prospered' in *The Argus*. Angela annotated a copy of the article: 'Just to show how dull I can be.'[43] Then came 'Gravely Speaking: Of These Final Departures' in *The Home*, occasioned by picking up a card on the ground that read 'Please act as pall bearer'.[44]

In a less gloomy register, Angela's article 'Burne-Jones: At Richardson's

Grotto' was later integrated into her memoir *Three Houses*, her first published book.[45] 'Mamsell Fredrika', in *The Fortnightly Review*, is an extended appreciation of the Swedish writer and translator Fredrika Bremer. After putting love and marriage out of her life, Fredrika 'found she possessed and could exercise a charming wit which had hitherto laid dormant in her' and began publishing anonymously. She only began signing her writings after she received the gold medal of the Swedish Academy. Mamsell Fredrika's writings were read and liked by Charlotte Brontë and Louisa May Alcott, among others.[46]

Just over a year after Angela's recent stay at Wilsford Manor, its chatelaine, Viscountess Grey, died suddenly, at age fifty-seven. In a year-end letter to Pamela's sister Lady Wemyss, Angela wrote:

> I remember talking with Pamela of what Mother we would have if we didn't have our own and I said Aunt Madeline and she said my grandmother. I never wrote to you about Pamela but I felt her death deeply and I miss her. Wyndhams should never die. I hear that poor Stephen [Tennant] is still ill and lonely. He wrote a pathetic letter to Mother. I did like him so much in spite of all his queernesses [sic] – he was so affectionate when I was last at Wilsford.

Not only had another Wyndham died, but in the same letter Angela also expressed concern for her own mother:

> You can think how wretched I am about Mother, with this awful and endless illness of Clare's. … I can't think how she bears it all and keeps up any physical strength, except that she is a marvel. I hear now that she means to take Clare back to the good doctor at Freiburg and *leave her* in his clinic which I feel *sure* will be better for them both though I know Mother's heart will ache at leaving Clare.

Angela's sister suffered from various ailments, never fully understood, throughout much of her adult life. In conclusion, Angela confessed to Lady Wemyss, 'I am having a difficult time of unhappiness and unwellness but try to believe that it can't last forever. I feel not being able to help Mother so much.'[47]

Due to the stock market crash of 1929, TAMECO (The Australian Metal Equipment Company), managed by George Thirkell, suffered, and he eventually lost his job. Angela continued print journalism, and in June 1930 began working in a new medium, as she recalled many years later in her BBC interview:

> I wish there were time to talk about the work I did for the [Australian Broadcasting Company in Melbourne], which was the greatest fun. … Because it was in their very early days when the whole thing took place in one large room, as it were an ex-factory room. … And you could get a job quite easily because they'd got no rules and regulations, which was rather fun. Some friends got me a job on it and I enjoyed it very much indeed because it was then so free and easy. There was very little strictness about it. There were just two lights in the studio, and you might easily have found a band rehearsing at one end and you were broadcasting in the middle, and a gymnastic show going on at the other end and nobody paid any attention to anybody else, except that occasionally a light would go on with the word 'Too Fast' on it, and then you would try and talk a little more slowly. And it was a great [way] of earning money to help my immigrant family, and I did anything that came into my head: talked for about twenty minutes, a quarter of an hour, on celebrated people I have known. They were very, very few, and I had to pretend they were celebrated to make much of them. … And pretend I had known them. They'd mostly died before I was born. … Keats and that sort of person, yes.[48]

Angela also recorded children's programmes with the English actor Frank Dawson Clewlow. One of her roles – which Colin described as 'truly ghastly' – was 'Mother Elder', a Hans Christian Andersen character. Graham notes that the pay for the work his mother did in Australia amounted to no more than 'a penny a line from the *Argus*', or 'three guineas for a fifteen-minute broadcast from the ABC'.[49]

Angela's semi-autobiographical first novel, *Ankle Deep*, published in 1933, thematised its heroine's English interlude. Sometime after returning from her six-month stay in England, she first wrote it as a play. Its main subject was, in Angela's words, 'a rather thwarted love affair, with great renunciation on both sides'.[50] But for those who knew the author well, the thwarted affair was not necessarily the primary interest of the book.

Graham McInnes wrote in his memoir that 'Mother has drawn her own parents' portrait so well in … *Ankle Deep*, that it would be an impertinence for me to try to improve on the performance.'[51] Long-time family friend Graham Robertson was particularly impressed with Angela's portrayal of Jack Mackail: 'The sketch of her father is brilliant, though I now understand her anxiety as to his possible reception of it. The sentence "His perception of right and wrong was so finely stern that it could be exercised practically in nothing short of a vacuum" is devastatingly true. That is Jack in a few words.'[52]

Just as Angela had done, the heroine Aurea has returned temporarily to her parents' home in London, leaving her husband – and children – in Canada (where Angela's first husband Jim was actually living). In real life Lance had accompanied his mother to England, and we have his word that she 'neither had, nor would have wanted' an affair.[53] It seems unlikely, in light of the fact that Angela was introducing her young Australian-born son to friends and family. Then, too, her recent letter from Melbourne, published anonymously in Cynthia Asquith's book, had drawn a rather idealised portrait of her second husband as a family man with 'only the medals which show war service from 1914 to end'. In transposing her own experience to *Ankle Deep*, Angela may well have mingled memories of past romances with those of her recent visit to her parents. Margaret Mackail's diaries allude to at least two probable suitors, Mr Baynes (before Angela's first marriage) and Major Roos (before her second marriage).

Unlike Angela's epistolary portrayal of George, Aurea's feelings about her husband Ned are not at all romantic:

> He wrote by every mail, he who was such a bad correspondent, to say how he missed her, and how he adored her. Yes, thought Aurea, but I know exactly why he misses me, and why he wants me back. The adoring has only one meaning to him, and I would give it quite a different name. Aurea shut her eyes quickly and tightly, trying to escape remembrances of the many times when adoration had taken the one hated shape, of her own efforts to stave off the adoration, of the humiliating scene that always followed, of Ned whimpering, actually whimpering because she was not what he called 'kind', of the utter contempt with which she finally gave in. A spasm of pain contracted her face alone in the dark. I suppose, she thought, I am a pretty bad wife. A person who, not to mince words, dislikes and despises her husband, can't be much of a success. And seeing his good side only makes it worse.[54]

Angela may have joked that her Australian journalism was 'hardly worthwhile', but in later years she was fully aware of what her literary career owed to its beginnings. In her ten years in Melbourne she had begun finding her voice: first in newspaper and magazine articles, then on the radio and now in the draft of what would become her first published novel.

However, as her son Lance pointed out, 'the very need to undertake such activities was a negation of the world in which she had been brought up, where marriage was the final consummation of romantic love and husbands supported wives'.[55] Angela herself expressed this view in a 1933 letter: 'We [women] should be nothing but good to look at and restful to


30 The HOME, April 1st, 1930.

MRS. GEORGE THIRKELL

Angela Thirkell, whose work is well known to readers of "The Home," is the daughter of Professor Mackail, formerly Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, and Mrs. Mackail, and grand-daughter of Sir Edward and Lady Burne-Jones. Lady Burne-Jones was one of the four brilliant and charming daughters of the Rev. George Macdonald; one married John Lockwood Kipling, and was the mother of Rudyard Kipling; another married Edward Poynter, later President of the Royal Academy (his son, Sir Hugh Poynter now lives in Sydney); and a third married Alfred Baldwin, and her only child is Stanley Baldwin. Angela Thirkell's brother is Denis Mackail, who writes amusing novels about bright young people.

Mrs George Thirkell, *The Home*

be with. But today's horrible economical conditions force us to be up and doing. No really nice woman ever ought to have to do *anything*.'[56]

In 1930 Graham was at the University of Melbourne on a scholarship, while Colin and Lance attended Scotch College. On one of his visits home Graham felt the atmosphere was particularly tense, and he also noticed that the rented piano was gone. Colin was able to tell him that their mother would be going to England before the end of the year. Graham reproduces the exchange that followed:

'Mother, I *have* to talk to you.'

She swung round and faced me over her half-moon glasses.

'Well, what is it, love?' she said with a judicious mixture of affection and exasperation.

'Are you going to England?'

'Yes, I am. Dad's not earning any money and it will be easier for him if I remove the family burden. Not you, darling, of course,' she added looking at me quizzically, 'You've been a *great* help.'

'You mean I'm self-supporting?'

She gave an enamelled smile but didn't answer directly.

'I shall take Lance with me, and Colin will follow.' She turned round to her desk again, but I wasn't to be put off.

'When are you coming back?' I said to the back of her head. She whirled on me this time, pushing the hair up out of her eyes.

'When your stepfather can earn some money to support us all!' she said with the teary edge to her voice that always intruded when she felt herself crossed. My stepfather, I thought? You mean your husband, don't you? But all I said was

'Are you taking the Sargent?'

'Yes,' she said shortly.

'Why?' I persisted ponderously.

'Don't ask silly questions,' she snapped.

'I'm sorry, Mother.'

She did an unexpected thing; she to whom any show of emotion or affection was so hard. She rose quickly from her desk, gave me a brief hug and a peck and said 'You're a great comfort. Now I *must* get the tea.'

Angela had written to her wealthy godfather J.M. Barrie to ask him for the fare for another visit to London. She then converted the return passage into two passages for herself and Lance. In late November 1930, two months shy of a decade after Angela and her new husband had left England, she and their son Lance boarded the SS *Oronsay* to return there permanently.

Thirk, Graham and Colin saw them off. Graham remembered:

> Everyone was very cheerful, most of all Dad, and as far as I could see the illusion that Mother was just off on her Trip Home, and would return as soon as Dad was able to make both ends meet, was believed in and shared by us all. Or perhaps we just put it at the back of our minds and got on with the job. We commiserated with a drink at the Naval and Military Club and I went back to the University to study for

> my end of year exams, with a quite extraordinarily light heart. I had to admit to myself that the prospect of being entirely 'off the leash' was not unwelcome.

In exchange for free lodging, Angela left a Colonel and Mrs Biggs in charge of her home in Malvern: 'No terminal date for this arrangement had apparently been made.'[57]

Angela's last published article before she left Australia – 'In which a Modern Mother talks of The Modern Boy (Dedicated to ONE, TWO, and THREE)' – appeared in *Women's World*. She expressed some of her thoughts on parenting at a time when her oldest son had been at university for a year and the two younger ones were about to face complete upheaval in their lives. One paragraph in particular sounds as if Angela is reassuring herself about leaving her sixteen-year-old son Colin:

> One has to realise the fact that one's boys have slipped away from one long before one begins to suspect it. They grow up earlier here and now than in England before the war. In my experience the boy of to-day is in many ways ready to face life and make decisions for himself at 15 or 16, and to this position one has to readjust one's ideas. Don't be over-anxious about your sons.[58]

In mid-December, after finishing school, Colin followed his mother and younger brother to England on board the P&O steamer *Ballarat*. According to his biographer, he later told a friend that the trip 'was one long nightmare: he suffered so badly from seasickness that he spent most of the journey prone on the floor of his cabin'.[59]

PART FOUR

A Female Writer

My dearest Fanny, do not put on the country mouse.
Mrs Norton's books are read by everyone, and what harm
can it do to speak to her? ... I must say I would like to see what
a female writer who is separated from her husband is like.

Angela Thirkell, *Coronation Summer* (1937)

Angela and Lance's return to London in January 1931 was unlike their visit home just a few years earlier, beginning with the fact that they did not initially go back to Pembroke Gardens.

In a letter written in Australia, Angela had mentioned 'this awful and endless illness of [her sister] Clare's', and suggested that her mother 'means to take Clare back to the good doctor at Freiburg and *leave her* in his clinic, which I feel *sure* will be better for them both'.[1] A year later, however, Margaret wrote that 'Clare's eight months in Germany were wasted.'[2]

This time, on arriving in London, Angela went to spend several months with family friend Venetia Benson, the widow of artist Willie Benson. From Venetia's home on Hereford Square in Kensington, Angela wrote to Lady Wemyss of her

> sad homecoming with Pembroke Gardens almost barred against me and at first not even allowed to see Mother because of Clare's insane jealousy of me. It is all like a (very bad, second-rate) Russian novel. It is literally *killing* Mother and Papa but for the moment there is nothing to do but stand by. Papa looks better already for seeing me but I can't get him to go anywhere with me or have a theatre or a jaunt, the dreadful charmed circle of Clare's illness holds them so. I am certain that the *only* salvation is to get her away from them but you know how determined Mother is … .

Angela added, 'Next week I am (with heart pangs) sending Lance to boarding school – the only thing to do at present as I have no home.'[3] Unfortunately, at Colet Court, Lance remembered, 'I spent the five loneliest and most frightening years of my life and endured the worst and most continuous bullying I have ever experienced although, to be fair, it was from the boys and not the masters.'[4] Unfortunately, too, he said nothing to his mother at the time.

In her letter to Lady Wemyss, Angela wrote that she was 'having [Colin] over for a bit to stretch his mind. He says he will "get a job" and settle here – to which I have no objection. In fact it is what I want to do myself.' Colin arrived in London three weeks after Angela and Lance. Years later, in a BBC broadcast, he recalled that when he 'set sail for home, I dreamed of England as the promised land, and of 6 Pembroke Gardens, Kensington, as an earthly paradise. And such, I'm glad to remember, it did turn out to be.' He returned on a winter night:

> And there they stood, my grandparents. My grandfather had white hair rather than grey, a severe face lit by gentleness, a rich, precise, melodious voice with a trace of a Scottish accent, and restrained, deliberate rather weighty gestures. I shall not forget his welcoming smile: it was one of those smiles human beings occasionally give that come straight from the heart, bridging all gulfs, suspending all judgements. My grandmother, as those who know her will bear witness, has an almost ageless beauty as much of feature as of expression; and it's the purity, the penetration, the spirituality, I can only call it, of her look, that are so memorable. It's a sad, almost mystical face – the face of a daughter of two Celtic parents – and yet, with what endearing, infectious laughter she'd greet any remark, or any situation, that had an element of fantasy, or of the ludicrous, in it!

For a few months Colin lived in his grandparents' home 'as in a dream; looking through portfolios of my great-grandfather's sad and exquisite drawings, opening books with inscriptions by Rossetti, and Swinburne, and William Morris, listening to my grandmother reading to me from letters her Cousin Ruddy once wrote to her from India, and to my grandfather reading aloud to her in the evening'.[5] He recalls having breakfast with his grandmother's cousin Stanley Baldwin, tea at J.M. Barrie's flat with Angela, and one day when he was the only one home, an unexpected visit from Mrs Patrick Campbell.

On leaving London, Colin spent three months with a French family who lived on the outskirts of Paris. The family were royalists, Colin recalled:

'The sons of the house … were both *camelots du roi*, and had painted "La République" on the family dustbin.'[6] Angela borrowed these details for her comic portrayal of the Boulle family in her third novel, *Wild Strawberries*. After his stay in France, Colin went on to Freiburg, where he attended a month of lectures on art at the university. Back in London, he announced his plan of going into business. Through family connections he found a well-paying job at the Imperial Continental Gas Association in Antwerp and then in Brussels, where he stayed for five years. It was during these years in Belgium that Colin added an 'a' to his surname, as he believed this would help French speakers pronounce it properly.

In letters, two members of the Mackails' circle of relations and close friends recorded their reactions to Angela's return to London. Writing to his sister Trix, Cousin Ruddy enquired, 'Has Agg [Angela] yet come your way? When she does you will not forget it. I go in panic dread of her descending upon Bateman's and telling me, as she did after her going to Australia, how the Victoria League should be run.'[7] The Victoria League had been founded just after Queen Victoria's death, and Kipling became its vice-president in 1908. It aimed to knit more closely together British subjects dwelling in various parts of the Empire.

Graham Robertson, pictured in Part One with the Mackails and other members of the Loony Club, commented to a friend who was considering naming his daughter Angela that 'Angela will always mean for me that limb of Satan, Angela Mackail. The said limb, by the bye, is now a very lovely, rather wistful woman, who has had a very bad time and has been softened and sweetened by it.'[8]

By the end of the year Clare was back in treatment in Germany, and Angela had returned to Pembroke Gardens. Her immediate task was to complete her first book, *Three Houses*, which was published by Oxford University Press in October. Graham Robertson was delighted with the book, and in another letter drew his correspondent's attention to potentially sensitive passages for the family:

> If you knew the family you would realise that the devil is not yet dead in Angela (for which I am very glad). The picture of Mrs Burne-Jones (I mean, Lady) reading Ruskin to the wholly unappreciative gardeners and old women, to the deep confusion and shame of her attendant granddaughter, is admirable, but, well, the painter thereof is greatly daring as she happens to be living at home at present. And some of her wise sayings, such as 'The chief aim of democracy is to make everything as uncomfortable as possible for the greater number', will not give pleasure to the earnest disciples of Morris. Yes, Angela is still Angela.[9]

Angela's mother and father – who were of course also Lady Burne-Jones's daughter and William Morris's first biographer, respectively – apparently accepted the book. However, Cousin Ruddy obliged with a disparaging comment. Writing to his Aunt Edith – Lady Burne-Jones's sister – he commented, 'I've read all "the family" books, and am not too grossly enamoured of any of 'em. They don't seem to me to be vitally necessary.'[10] (Besides *Three Houses*, Kipling also had *The Questing Beast*, Oliver Baldwin's recent autobiography, in mind.)

Kipling himself had won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1907, when he was roughly the same age as Angela was when her first book was published, soon after her return to England. One might have hoped for a more supportive reaction, but Angela probably did not. In a letter written many years later, she discussed the Mackails' relationship with the Kiplings:

> I wish I knew how the rift came about. … I can only think they all came to loggerheads on large issues. … I suppose the great break came over the Boer War, when my people, Mother of course in the van[guard], were what was known as pro-Boers. … But we must have lost (and the Kiplings must have lost) a great deal in the widening breach.[11]

Fortunately, Graham Robertson introduced Angela to a new young publisher, James Hamilton of Hamish Hamilton, who had recently published Robertson's memoir *Time Was.* Hamilton accepted Angela's first novel, *Ankle Deep*, which she had originally written in Australia as a play. Jamie, as Hamilton was called, eventually became Angela's permanent publisher and a good friend.

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Ankle Deep* portrays a married woman's flirtation with another man during a visit to her parents in London; Angela described it to Graham Robertson as 'very autobiographical'.[12] Curiously, she borrowed her fictional alter ego's maiden name – Aurea Howard – from the youngest daughter of the Earl of Carlisle, a Burne-Jones connection. Lady Aurea's older sister, Lady Mary Murray, and her husband, Gilbert Murray, were close friends of the Mackails. The real-life Aurea had divorced her first husband in 1929 and had then married an Australian officer. This biographical similarity with Angela herself probably explains her choice of the name 'Aurea Howard'.

Kipling's letters contain no comment on *Ankle Deep* – one assumes he did not read it – however he once again criticised Angela's activities in June 1933 when she became involved in the Tate Gallery's plans for a Burne-Jones centenary exhibition. After Angela enquired whether Kipling wished to participate, he wrote in a postscript to a letter to his daughter: 'And that

damned Ag. has broke loose on me apropos of the centenary of Burne-Jones. I don't mind the heathen eating their ancestors but I draw the line at "Christians" living on 'em.'[13]

Angela wrote two accounts of the tea party she and Sir William Rothenstein, the Director of the Tate, gave at the opening of the exhibition. First in a letter to Lady Wemyss, who was unable to attend:

> Bibs [Lady Wemyss's youngest daughter] and Evan [Lady Wemyss's brother-in-law] represented Wyndhams-Charterises. Bibs looking deliciously brown and well. Evan *very* distinguished. Such a love of old friends whom I had the greatest difficulty in recognising, as some of them I hadn't seen since Grange Days. Lady Horner, Lady Milner, Olive Maxse, Mrs Gaskell, Edith Plowden, Barbara Sotheby, Herbert Richmond, Gladys Joseph (Holman Hunt), Mrs Watts – heaps more, all delightfully young and enthusiastic. And little Mr Rooke who used to work in Edward Burne-Jones's studio, now 91, and apart from the fact that he can't hear what you say, and *you* can't understand what *he* says, as spry as anything.[14]

The first four women mentioned had been either muses or privileged correspondents of Burne-Jones: they were the former Frances Graham (one of the young women pictured in *The Golden Stairs*), the sisters Violet and Olive Maxse, and Helen Mary Gaskell (called May). Edith Plowden had been a close friend of Kipling's late mother (Lady Burne-Jones's sister); Barbara Sotheby was a photographer and the daughter of Burne-Jones's friend Eleanor Leighton; Herbert Richmond was the son of the painter William Blake Richmond; Gladys Holman Hunt was the daughter of the Pre-Raphaelite painter; and Mary Watts was the widow of the painter George Frederick Watts.

The Private View, the short story Angela published the following year, clearly reflects the same tea party, but from a very different perspective. The main character, Amelia, is the great-niece of the eminent Victorian painter Charles Wilson, who has been dead for many years. The Phelps family of Phelps's Galleries contact Amelia for help with a centenary exhibition of Wilson's works and she suggests a tea party for 'all the old friends who knew Uncle Charles, and all the children of old friends who are dead, and all the people who have lent pictures'. Amelia learns William Hay, an art expert, has just returned from three months abroad and will attend. She is excited, as William and she had previously met, fallen in love and quarrelled too quickly, yet both have been too proud to write.

Also, Amelia confides to a friend employed at the gallery:

> Uncle Charles was very forthcoming to his female friends, though all honourable. And two of his very special friends will be here, Lady Buzzard and Mrs Hunt. Lady Buzzard sat to him for several pictures and feels she was his great inspiration. Mrs Hunt never sat to him, but she used to buy his pictures and rather felt she owned him. They aren't very good friends, in spite of their age, which is so great that one might be excused for thinking they were old enough to be sensible.[15]

In the event Lady Buzzard (possibly inspired by Lady Horner) and Mrs Hunt – their made-up names reflect their description as 'courageous pushing women' – are rude to each other. Both seek to pin Mr Hay down for a dinner engagement, preventing him from having any meaningful conversation with Amelia. She also has to contend with a woman who lived with her Uncle Charles's widowed sister-in-law (Amelia remembers he gave her the epithet 'hell-cat'), as well as a Cousin Olivia, and a Cousin Freddie, whom she has never met. In the end she takes refuge in Mr Phelps's empty office and bursts into tears. Amelia is a sort of sister to Aurea in *Ankle Deep*: in both cases social conventions generally, and the family environment in particular, stand in the way of the heroine's romantic pursuits.

By the time the Burne-Jones centenary exhibition closed, Angela's second novel, *High Rising*, had been published, introducing Laura Morland, who would become her recurring alter ego. Laura is a 'solitary-hearted' widow who writes thrillers and lives with Tony, the youngest of her four sons. And yet, she tells her publisher, 'I never think of myself as a widow. I'm just myself. Have you noticed how real widows go all crumpled up after their husbands die? They seem to shrink and cave in. But I don't crumple a bit. I suppose I haven't the real widow spirit.' Elsewhere in the novel Laura Morland explains that she does not wish to remarry, as she has 'other fish to fry', namely, 'Books'.[16] Graham Robertson commented on the novel's wonderful reviews, adding, 'I myself feel jubilant in having rescued her from the Oxford University Press in which her first book is entombed. This one looks like a best seller.'[17]

Another change in the family life to which Angela returned was that after previous 'Quaker and Faith Healing episodes' her mother was now beginning to 'group'. Margaret Mackail attended 'house parties' organised by the Oxford Group founded by Frank Buchman, a Protestant Christian evangelist from the United States. The Group, later called Moral Rearmament, met in Northern Ireland in October 1934 and local newspapers reported that Mrs Mackail 'said she came under the influence of the Oxford Group last December. She had found in it the effective religion which she had so long sought, and had learned to ask God for

guidance, living a life of honesty, unselfishness, love and purity – all without compromise.'[18]

Initially, at least, family friend Graham Robertson was enthusiastic about this new interest of hers. He was delighted when his regular correspondent happened to meet Margaret at one of these events:

> Margaret is *very* difficult to know. She is still almost as shy as when she was a child, and has the Macdonald reticence and reserve developed to an abnormal degree. And apparently there she was telling you about her spiritual state when, as a rule, she would die rather than tell you what she was going to have for dinner. Is this the effect of having 'gone groupy' … ? She and I have known each other since we were twelve, but this expansive and voluble Margaret is new to me. I can't tell you how glad I am that she has managed at last to break her 'vow of silence' and to show a little of her real and lovely self. … I hope you could see her beauty through the veil of the years.[19]

Dr Mackail was increasingly supportive of his wife's 'grouping' but the rest of the family were immune to its appeal, although Margaret had initially thought eighteen-year-old Colin in Belgium might be receptive. Long after his grandmother's death, Colin related that he was at first favourable when she suggested that he attend a Buchmanite gathering in Brussels, to be followed by an international 'house party' in Paris where Buchman himself would be present.

The Brussels meeting was not successful, leading Colin to suggest that his grandmother reimburse him for his travel expenses if he found the Paris meeting equally unsavoury. It was unsavoury and she did reimburse him, but it marked the beginning of his estrangement from Margaret. (He attributes his estrangement from his grandfather to the latter's complete rejection of Auden's poetry.) Angela clearly agreed with Colin about the Oxford Group, yet she avoided a direct confrontation with her mother. Colin relates an amusing anecdote:

> [O]ne fatal day, when my mother was … at Kensington W8, the bell rang, and my mother answered it. Upon the neo-Grecian doorstep she discovered – all eager for cordial indulgence in some collective Buchmanite activity – a throng of youthful and expectant Groupers. The following crisp dialogue ensued:
> *Groupers*: Is Margaret in?
> *My Mum*: I think you want the servants' entrance.
> A bold gambit – however brusque – for had the Buchmanites descended

> the precarious area steps to the inferior portal thus recommended, and tugged there at its period ball-and-wire clarion bell, no 'servant' would have emerged to answer them, because there weren't any.[20]

In January 1935 Frank Buchman wrote to Margaret to congratulate her on her husband's Order of Merit. She replied:

> [I]t was a heart-warming experience for us to have 300 letters come to the house from every degree of friend & acquaintance, & from unknown scholars & students from all parts of the world. 'Our country' he said in his inaugural lecture as President of the British Academy last year 'is universal, & the race to which we belong is mankind' which might have been spoken by the Oxford Group. Some day scholarship & science may find their unity in Religion.

Margaret added that Dr Mackail 'becomes more & more interested in, & uncritical of this Way of Life, but I see no sign of his stepping definitely on to it'.[21]

Part of Buchmanism involved confessing one's sins; Kipling commented in a letter to Elsie that 'We are still acutely interested in Aunt [Margaret]'s "confessions" to the Buchman. Some day there will be an extreme scandal over some of his activities. You wait and see!' The same letter continued with further criticism of Angela:

> Ag has really embarked on the Higher Cannibalism in earnest. She has an article in the March *National* [*Review*], on some letters of the Mutiny dates which she has got from the daughter of the man who wrote 'em; and, in the course of her foreword, she has lugged in as many of the Family as she can. Give her the widest of wide berths, me dear. She is all things that are dangerous, and hard-up for money to boot.[22]

It is true that Angela's journalism had begun in Australia with articles based on her personal experience of family friends and relations: the Rev. Augustus Jessopp, her godfather J.M. Barrie, the music teacher Manuel García, an anecdote regarding tourists in Rottingdean looking for Kipling, her father's colleague William Paton Ker, the Baldwins at Chequers, and so on. She then gradually branched out into the neo-Beerbohmian or somewhat 'camp' articles that Colin liked. Kipling may not have read any of Angela's Australian journalism, but on arriving in London she continued with this type of articles and then published *Three Houses* before meeting Hamilton and turning mainly to fiction.

Kipling had also begun as a journalist, in India, but his articles were of a less personal nature. Perhaps it was the fact that 'Wilfrid Heeley's Letters from India: 1857' – Angela's *National Review* article – touched on 'the Family's' connection with India – Kipling's own territory in a sense – that angered him so. By 1934 Graham and Colin were self-supporting but Angela clearly did need money to help support Lance and to have some measure of independence from her parents. Still, it is difficult to view her writings as cannibalistic or in any sense 'dangerous' to the Kiplings.

Angela's eldest son, Graham, graduated from Melbourne University and spent a year teaching and doing musical theatre. He then decided to use the money he inherited on his twenty-first birthday from his godfather Graham Peel's insurance policy to cross the Pacific Ocean, cross Canada, and then cross the Atlantic from New York to Plymouth. Graham recalls that when Angela met him at Paddington Station, he hugged her and they had the following exchange:

> 'You know where I've been? I've been in Toronto and I've seen my father!'
> Mother's reaction to this tactless first greeting after four years was manful.
> 'Did you indeed, darling. And how was New York?'[23]

When Graham arrived at Pembroke Gardens the Mackails embraced him, and then he noticed that 'a well-built youngish fellow with wavy black hair and a noble bashed-in nose was standing beside Mother'. It was Jamie Hamilton, Angela's publisher. She explained that Graham's telegram had only arrived that morning, and of course she could not put off her dinner engagement with Jamie.

Graham dined with his grandparents and then Dr Mackail retreated to his study. His grandmother asked him briefly about New York, but then suggested he must want to go to bed after his travels. He stayed with his mother and grandparents for three months, and also did a round of country house visits with Angela, including one to Lady Wemyss at Stanway. Graham had only been there once before, at age five.

On their return Angela wrote to thank her hostess:

> Graham said to me in the train 'You were extremely brilliant at Stanway Mother'. And I said to him 'That is because I am always so extraordinarily happy at Stanway'. … It was a *delicious* time, and I can't tell you how much I enjoyed it. One of the most delicious things was you looking so LOVELY on Tuesday night in your wine-coloured gown with the shell pink scarf and the golden shawl. You must always wear that dress till it falls to pieces.

It was such fun having Guy and Violet [Lady Wemyss's brother and sister-in-law] there and Graham fell for Violet tremendously.[24]

Recalling the visit thirty-three years later, Graham remembered feeling exasperated at travelling to Stanway in a second-class railway carriage, because Angela had bought their tickets. First class was a waste of money, she thought; Graham would have to pay if he wanted to travel in first. Graham remained silent but, in something of a contradiction, ostentatiously flourished his copy of the *New Statesman*.

They were met at the station by an ancient Daimler. At Stanway a footman showed Graham to his room, after which:

> We dined at an endless table with candlelight reflected on the gleamingly polished oak. The hall in which we dined was so tall that you couldn't see the roof, only the hammer beams that supported it. A canopied fireplace as big as a suburban railway station gaped at us. Pikes and spears, chainmail, hauberks and breast plates flickered in the evening light. All the accoutrements of the English weekend in the grand style were there: gentle tennis; smoked salmon sandwiches in the rose garden; word games and dumb crambo in the evening to keep the mind well limbered up; sedate walks in the Cotswold glades; and over all the charming absent-minded hospitable kindness of Lady Wemyss. With her full skirts sweeping the ground, her multitudinous veils, her elusive key ring and housewife [a small case for sewing items], her aristocratic beak and her shrewd kindly eyes, she has been forever enshrined as Lady Emily Leslie in Mother's book *Wild Strawberries*.[25]

Wild Strawberries received very favourable reviews – one described the novel as light as a soufflé – and its humorous portrait of Lady Emily Leslie was widely appreciated. From the opening pages there is also a discreet nod to Cousin Rud's herd of cows at his estate Bateman's, via the motif of Mr Leslie's bulls at his estate, Rushwater: 'All had the praenomen Rushwater, and each had a second name which had to begin with an R.'

Trooper to the Southern Cross, based on Angela's voyage to Australia, came out in September 1934. It was published by Faber & Faber and under a pseudonym. For once Kipling approved, although – or perhaps because – he never knew Angela was the author. In a letter to his daughter he enquired:

> *Have* you read a book by Leslie Parker called *Trooper to the Southern Cross*? It's worth reading and to my mind is one of the most promising indications of a genuine Aussie literature. Artistically it's really well done – a sort of cross-section of the Aussie character all through. Get it, if you can and tell me what you think.[26]

As Angela's only 'Australian' novel appeared, set in the very early days of her second marriage, unexpected events caused her thoughts to return to her first husband and she began her only novel on that subject.

Before leaving Canada for London, Graham invited his father to come back to Europe to visit his two sons. Jim accepted the invitation and spent a month in the summer of 1934 in London and Brussels. Graham and Colin heard their father sing for the first time in their adult lives in Brussels, at the home of Colin's friends Mayou and Victor Iserentant. They were very impressed, and Graham remembers that 'I wished irrationally, among the chintz-covered pouffes and studio couches, with the cottage piano and the salmon coloured walls hung with Mayou's paintings, that Mother could hear him. Impulsively and perhaps rashly I sent her a postcard next day describing the occasion.'

On his return to London, Jim telephoned Angela at Pembroke Gardens: she rang off immediately. Graham learned of the call from his father, leading to the following exchange with Angela:

> 'He said you hung up on him.'
> 'So I did.'
> 'Why?'
> 'I didn't want to speak to him.'
> 'Why not?'
> 'Because I didn't. That sweater you're wearing has a hole in it, better let me darn it for you before you take off for Hogarth Road.'

Graham and a friend had taken a flat in Earl's Court. He had realised his welcome at Pembroke Gardens was wearing thin the day he read in his grandfather's diary: 'Graham brought an Australian friend to dinner. Afterwards they both went out *without saying good evening!*'[27]

At the same time that Angela was beginning *O, These Men, These Men!* in response to her first husband's brief re-emergence in her life, she was also dealing with the fallout from the success of her 'strawberry soufflé'. In letters to Lady Wemyss, she gave varying accounts of whether or not she had caricatured her beloved friend:

> I have been perfectly *horrified* to learn from Papa that you felt a character in my last book to be a kind of caricature of you. If I could do such a thing I would deserve anything you could say. I read it all aloud

> to Mother and Papa before it ever went to the publisher and if anyone would have been up in arms, they would.[28]

Angela went on to list various readers' suggestions of other models for Lady Emily – sometimes figures completely unknown to her – in order to demonstrate how absurd these identifications were.

She returned to the subject a few days later, in reply to a letter from Lady Wemyss:

> I only say again that if a book which was only meant for a summer folly made any kind of unhappiness for you or seemed like a want of affection, *I am as sorry as I can be.* …
>
> *How* much I wish one could live and die in complete obscurity with a kind sheltering husband. But husbands go bad in my hands, and my star (not a very nice star, rather gloomy and spiky) makes me have to write, which at once exposes me to the glare of publicity and everything is exaggerated by the number of copies one sells. I sometimes wish I had taken an alias, when one could have had a lot of the fun without the *hateful* limelight. In my next life may I be a Private Person.[29]

In the absence of 'a kind sheltering husband', Angela felt that she *had* to write in order to support herself. She also acknowledged that, at least in this period of her life, she was enjoying writing.

Her Cousin Ruddy's published letters express his disapproval of her use of family material, and Angela had initially feared her parents' reaction to her family memoir *Three Houses*, and then to their fictionalised portraits in *Ankle Deep*. The Mackails must have been confident of Angela's underlying affection for them and made no objection. *High Rising* was less problematic since, aside from 'Miss Grey', based on Angela's former 'lady help' in Melbourne, the most obvious caricatures or semi-caricatures were of Angela herself, her young son Lance and her publisher Jamie, who presumably did not mind. *Trooper to the Southern Cross* was very closely based on Angela's experience and her dedication cited the initials of those most prominently portrayed, but since she published the book under a pseudonym, no one could object.

Wild Strawberries was the most successful of Angela's first books, and in this case the long-time family friend affectionately portrayed was a widely admired member of a socially prominent family. For anyone who knew – or knew of – the Wemyss family, the resemblance was fairly easy to spot. Stanway had beds of wild strawberries. For the first twenty-four years of Angela's life, Mary Wemyss was known as Mary Elcho. She signed letters

'M. Elcho': the initial syllables are phonetically equivalent to 'Em' and 'L', which apparently inspired the made-up name 'Emily Leslie'. Mary and Hugo's eldest son had been killed in the First World War, leaving behind his own two sons David and Martin. In the novel Lady Emily has also lost her eldest son in the war and he has left a son called Martin, fairly close in age to her own youngest son David. Mary Wemyss's secretary and companion Wilkie (Miss Wilkinson) inspired Lady Emily's companion Merry (Miss Merriman).

Lady Emily's daughter Agnes, fondly described by her favourite brother as 'a divine idiot', is also a recurring Barsetshire character. Agnes Graham is emphatically not based on the Wemyss's daughter Cynthia Asquith, a lifelong friend of Angela's. As mentioned in Part Three, Cynthia included Angela's letter from Melbourne in her biography of the Duchess of York, and Cynthia opened *The Silver Ship* – her collection of stories, poems and pictures for children – with Angela's story *FOST*, her very first piece of published fiction. (Other contributors included J.B. Priestley, Denis Mackail, George Moore, Walter de la Mare, G.K. Chesterton, Compton Mackenzie, Susan Buchan, John Buchan and Elizabeth Bowen, as well as Cynthia herself).


THE TATLER

SEEING "STARS" AT SUSSEX LODGE

MISS SONIA CONVERSE AND LADY CYNTHIA ASQUITH

LADY CYNTHIA ELSSMOR, THE HON. EILEEN BROUGHAM, AND LADY JOAN VILLIERS

MRS. PERCY BENNETT AND HER DAUGHTER

Lady Cynthia Asquith and other guests at a garden party, *The Tatler*

Although Agnes Graham is not Cynthia, there would appear to be a very discreet nod to Cynthia's beauty in a brief passage of *Wild Strawberries*. It concerns a photograph worshipped by teenage Pierre Boulle, whose family are visiting Rushwater: 'It was a cutting from the Tatler representing

Mrs Robert Graham chatting to a friend at the Buckingham Palace garden party. Agnes's beauty was of that rare kind that can survive even a Press camera. The delicate proportion of her features, her lovely, all-embracing smile, her exquisite figure, to all these the Tatler's photographer did full justice.'

Perhaps Angela's fictional return to the end of her first marriage and the upset surrounding her portrayal of Lady Emily combined to give her cause to retreat temporarily from novel writing. Between *Trooper to the Southern Cross* and *O, These Men* she published *The Demon in the House* – 'short stories about little boys' as she described it – which mentions Barchester for the first time. The tone of the stories is light and amusing, with the exception of a brief conversation between Laura and Adrian Coates, her publisher. During a picnic at Paradise Pool, Laura confesses:

> Tony is my only key to things. Of course, I am very fond of you and George and a few other people, but your lives are going on: mine isn't. It went on very hard while the boys were all little. Then it got slower and slower. Now that three of them are independent, it is only about a quarter of what it was. When Tony is on his own it will stop. I don't mean that I'll put my head in the gas oven, but I'll be a dull hermit, less and less wanting to make any effort. I'll go on writing for you if you still want my books, because I feel a sense of responsibility toward you, but I shall hardly be there.

Laura's assertion that she will 'go on writing' but 'hardly be there' is literally true. For after Laura's central role in *High Rising* and *The Demon in the House*, in Angela's subsequent Barsetshire novels her alter ego would be no more than a sympathetic but minor recurring character. Laura's statement also seems to anticipate something that Colin wrote about his mother after her death: 'the whole of her writing years were those when she had ceased to love the world'.[30]

The Demon in the House was followed by *The Grateful Sparrow and other Tales*, a children's book, and *The Fortunes of Harriette*, a biography of the Regency courtesan Harriette Wilson. Angela invented the five tales in *The Grateful Sparrow*, described as 'taken from the German', based on the wood engravings of Ludwig Richter that Burne-Jones had also admired. The book is dedicated 'To the memory of the Brothers Grimm, Hans Christian Andersen, Berthold Auerbach, and their translators, known and unknown'. It may also owe something to Angela's awareness of the project her grandmother Georgiana and her friend Elizabeth Siddal – the writer, artist and artist's model – had once had of writing and illustrating a collection of tales (today only a scrapbook survives).[31]

After Graham had been in London for almost a year, his father sent word of a possible newspaper job in Toronto. He recalls:

> I was jubilant. A new country, a new job, almost a new personality. Mother received the news calmly and gave me a handsome going-away present. I think she would somehow have liked me to stay on in England and enter into the heritage which in her imagination was reserved for her sons, if only they'd been correctly brought up: a sort of Barsetshire life as an impecunious but attractive and above all biddable young country writer or interior decorator or estate agent. But alas – and it was in part her responsibility – I'd been raised in Australia and had the wrong set of values.[32]

Just before Graham left for Canada, Angela and he attended a party at Kipling's daughter's home in Hampstead and he met Cousin Ruddy for the first time. 'Good luck my boy,' were the famous author's parting words to Graham. A year later, Kipling was dead. Angela commented in a letter that 'Ruddy's death, though not unexpected, has shattered my poor mother very much and she looks strained and wretched.'[33]

In 1925, Virginia Woolf had written a brief article on the Regency courtesan Harriette Wilson. She began it with the observation:

> Across the broad continent of a woman's life falls the shadow of a sword. On one side all is correct, definite, orderly; the paths are strait [sic], the trees regular, the sun shaded; escorted by gentlemen, protected by policemen, wedded and buried by clergymen, she has only to walk demurely from cradle to grave and no one will touch a hair of her head. But on the other side all is confusion. Nothing follows a regular course.[34]

The fact that Harriette Wilson lived her life on the shady side of the sword, and wrote an amusing and unapologetic memoir about it, gave her story a certain appeal to both Virginia and Angela. The two novelists' own lives were very far from Harriette's, yet neither one could be said to have walked 'demurely from cradle to grave'.

According to Angela's biography, once Harriette faced 'the fact that her days as a successful courtesan were over', she began writing a kiss-and-tell memoir. She then sent the first part to a publisher:

> Stockdale at once saw a very lucrative *succès de scandale*. He and Harriette put their heads together and decided on a plan of campaign. Communications were sent to various people whose names figured in

> the book, telling them that they would find themselves unmercifully quizzed in a forthcoming work by Miss Wilson, and suggesting that a cash payment would prevent unpleasantness.[35]

The Duke of Wellington was one of those whose names figured in the book and, famously, he is reputed to have said, 'Publish and be damned' (according to Harriette's memoir, however, he threatened prosecution).



Henry Heath, 'The Rat Catcher, or Symptoms of Love', an illustration of Harriette Wilson's *Memoirs*

Angela herself only began writing after her divorce, whose circumstances were deemed scandalous at the time: one might say dramatically that 'the shadow of a sword' had fallen across her life. Yet the heroines and anti-heroines who people her Barsetshire novels essentially all live on the 'correct' side of the sword, to the extent that the brief passage toward the end of her semi-autobiographical *O, These Men* that integrates the Danvers family into Barsetshire, via their acquaintance with Mrs Morland and George Knox, seems rather incongruous.

A holiday that Angela and Lance spent in West Hoathly led eventually to *August Folly*, another Barsetshire novel. West Hoathly is only a few miles from a town called Horsted Keynes. The town's name inspired the pun 'Worsted Skeynes', which is where John Galsworthy set his 1907

'divorce novel' *The Country House*, a sort of harbinger of *The Forsyte Saga*. *The Country House* also vaguely anticipates both *Ankle Deep* and *O, These Men*. All three narratives revolve around triangles made up of an unhappily married or recently separated woman, the man she no longer loves and a new suitor.

Galsworthy's characters are Helen Bellew – who is separated from her violent alcoholic husband Jaspar – and George Pendyce – whose parents' country seat is Worsted Skeynes. Yet the focus of *The Country House* is not primarily on the Jaspar-Helen-George triangle itself, but rather on its effects on George's family, who are said to suffer from 'Pendycitis'. The love affair stalls when Helen decides she no longer loves George, and Mrs Pendyce persuades Jaspar to drop the divorce suit that names her son: a peculiar ending but a happy one for the very conventional Pendyces.

As *August Folly* opens, a London train alights in the little village of Worsted, and the novel also borrows the motif of talking animals from *The Country House*, but Angela's novel completely eschews the prickly themes of adultery and divorce. She took inspiration instead from the inhabitants she found living in and around West Hoathly. According to Lance:

> Arundell and Kitty Esdaile, the latter of *English Church Monuments* fame, were perhaps not best pleased to see themselves reappear in the book as Mr and Mrs Tebben. [West Hoathly] was also a station on the former Southern Railway branch line from East Grinstead, well known locally for the old white horse which leisurely shunted individual goods trucks between the high and low level lines, to Horsted Keynes, which reappears in my mother's Barsetshire as 'Worsted Skeynes' and was immortalized by her some considerable time before it gained greater fame as the Bluebell Line.[36]

Galsworthy's pun transforming Horsted Keynes into Worsted Skeynes clearly inspired Angela. In *August Folly*, to reach Worsted one changes at Winter Overcotes on the Shearings line, stopping at Underclose, Lambton and Fleece. The local river is the Woolram and the local pub is the Woolpack. The Esdailes' home, Leams End, becomes the Tebbens's home Lamb's Piece.

Winifred Tebben is completely unlike Angela's earlier creation Lady Emily, but both characters were inspired by women who made a strong impression on the novelist, earning their fictional counterparts a place in Barsetshire. Both women also inspired other writers as well. Stanway, the home of the Earl and Countess of Wemyss, became Thoresway, the home of the Earl and Countess of Beveridge, in D.H. Lawrence's 1922 novella *The Ladybird*. The architectural historian James Lees-Milne's diary for 1948

contains a brief but memorable description of Mrs Esdaile.[37]

The Manor House where the Palmers live is based on the estate of Stonelands that belonged to John Godwin King, a Justice of Peace like Mr Palmer, and his wife Charlotte. The Oxford Professor of Greek, Gilbert Murray, a long-time friend of the Mackail family, translated many Greek plays for relaxation and occasionally became involved in productions of his translations. According to his biographer, 'The occasions to which Murray devoted most personal attention were the annual performances organized by Mrs Charlotte King, at her house in Stonelands, near West Hoathly in Sussex, with casts drawn from the local villages.'[38]

Angela had enjoyed researching *The Fortunes of Harriette* (published as *Tribute For Harriette* in the US) and since King George V had died while she was writing the biography, another coronation was imminent. For her last non-Barsetshire novel Angela invented a narrator, Fanny Harcourt, who writes an account of her six-week visit to London for the coronation of Queen Victoria.

Fanny, her father and her friend Emily stay in apartments on Harriette Wilson's street. 'It was the fatal word "propinquity" that was responsible for Harriette's first step from virtue,' and, looking out of the window on Queen Street, Fanny's gaze is attracted by a gentleman whom she takes for one of the famous dandies. The gentleman is novelist DeLacey Vavasour and Fanny also acquires another suitor, Hal Darnley, a friend of her brother's. (Curiously, 'Hal' has a bashed-in nose like Hamilton, Angela's publisher, and, also like Hamilton, he belongs to a rowing club.)

One day the conversation turns to the Prime Minister, and the fact that Lord Melbourne has recently been the defendant in a criminal conversation (adultery) case brought by the Honourable George Norton, the husband of poet and society beauty Caroline Norton. One of the party remarks, 'I never can tell which is Mrs Norton and which Miss Landon. They both write, do they not?' Mr Darnley explains:

> Mrs Norton may have genius – it runs in her family – but she is a woman who has suffered her reputation to become a by-word. Whether guilty or not guilty, she is none the less to be blamed, and is indeed hardly a fit subject for a conversation where ladies are in question. As for Miss Landon, her character is unstained and she has lately married the governor of Cape Coast Castle. There can be no possible comparison between the two.[39]

Fanny's sensitive reaction to Miss Landon's poem, 'The Zegri Ladye', seals her increasingly close friendship with Mr Darnley.



Portrait of Letitia Landon

Angela was surely aware that there was in fact every reason to compare the two female writers, for Miss Landon's character was perhaps even more 'stained' than Mrs Norton's, although more hidden from the general public. In literary circles it was an open secret that for fifteen years prior to her marriage the author Letitia Landon had been the mistress of her 'Svengali', the married publisher William Jerdan, and had given birth to several illegitimate children. When her husband, the Governor of Cape Coast Castle, discovered her past, she committed suicide, only a few months after her marriage and the coronation.

Fanny and Emily witness the festivities of Coronation Day on the stand of the Athenæum Club as the guests of Mr Vavasour, who suggests his aunt can introduce them to 'two of the most interesting of the stars in our literary galaxy': Mr Bulwer and Mrs Norton. Fanny recalls Mr Darnley's



Portrait of the Hon. Mrs Caroline Norton, after Hayter

objection to Mrs Norton, but shares Emily's desire to meet the celebrities. Emily makes 'a *dead set* at Mr Bulwer', allowing Fanny to have a brief *tête-à-tête* with Mrs Norton. Fanny expresses her admiration for the love poem 'I do not love thee!' in Caroline Norton's volume *The Sorrows of Rosalie*. This gives Mrs Norton the opportunity to warn Fanny that 'If it is Vavasour, I pity you indeed. He would be another Norton. He would brush the bloom from the flower and leave it, broken, to face a cold world. Look at me, Miss Harcourt, and take warning.'

Fanny apparently heeds Caroline Norton's warning: in the novel's Barsetshire-style ending, she marries Mr Darnley, and her friend Emily marries Fanny's brother. Despite their brief stay on Harriette's street, Fanny and Emily both manage to avoid its 'shady side'. However, Angela's choice of the name 'Caroline' for the heroine of *O, These Men*, her only novel

about her first marriage, her brief reference to 'the celebrated Mrs Norton' in *The Fortunes of Harriette*, and Fanny's direct exchange with Mrs Norton in *Coronation Summer* suggest a sort of hesitation on her part, when settling on a recurring fictional alter ego in the early years of her career, to abandon the 'broken' Caroline for Laura Morland. After Laura's brief moment of introspection in *The Demon in the House*, she became a light and amusing inhabitant of Barsetshire. Answering a letter from Gilbert Murray praising *High Rising*, Angela remarked that 'Laura is, I suppose, what Freudians would call my wish fulfilment: that is, the placid, successful, middle-aged woman I should like to be.'[40]

Before Colin left his job in Brussels at the end of 1936, Angela and Lance spent two holidays in Belgium. Both times, Lance remembered, they visited Colin's friends the Iserentants and Mayou Iserentant's parents, the Halkins. Two years earlier Angela had written to Sir William Rothenstein on behalf of Mayou, enclosing a reproduction of one of her paintings. Angela described Mayou as

> a charming Belgian friend of Colin's. She has a delightful husband and two children … and without any studio or special hours of work manages to do a great deal of work always interesting, sometimes lovely. She is highly thought of in Belgium. She is coming to England in the spring and wants to stay with an artist's family. … You will be charmed by her I know.

In this period Colin painted as well, and Angela suggested he visit Sir William: 'I shall be very much interested to hear later what you thought of [Colin's] painting. It seems to me, ignorant, that there is great talent – but whether of a nature to justify it as a career I don't know.'[41] In June 1938, Angela wrote: 'I am letting Colin paint me, because he has exhausted all his other friends, but though I have few illusions about myself I tremble at the outcome.'[42] Later that year he left the Chelsea Polytechnic School of Art for the Euston Road School of Drawing and Painting, whose social realist approach appealed to him.

According to Lance, Mayou eventually 'became [Colin's] wife, lover, mother and inspirer all rolled into one'. For his part, while on holiday Lance 'fell in love with [the Halkins'] younger daughter Madeleine, who … must have been about seventeen or eighteen … at the time'.[43] Two brothers in love with two sisters, the elder sister already a wife and mother: it almost sounds like Barsetshire. Angela must have been aware of her sons' flirtations, yet she was probably expressing her own opinion when Mrs Morland says of her son Tony in *The Brandons*: 'I think we shall go on

getting on well so long as he doesn't tell me anything. Confidences between people are such a mistake and if he does what he wants to do and doesn't tell me, it's all right … .'

When *Coronation Summer* appeared in March 1937, Angela was in the middle of her first trip to North America. In New York she met with her American publishers, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, and stayed in Boston with Elizabeth Gaskell Norton, the daughter of family friend Charles Eliot Norton. In Canada, Angela visited Graham as well as the Tweedsmuirs: the novelist John Buchan, 1st Baron Tweedsmuir was Governor-General of Canada from 1935–40.

At the end of April, Lady Wemyss died, age seventy-four. In his biography of J.M. Barrie, who over a period of twelve years had rented Stanway from Lady Wemyss for a month in the summer, Denis Mackail wrote the following tribute:

> The end of more kindness, and more courage, and more suffering, than any mere words can express. Her own era had been swept aside and dashed to pieces more than twenty years ago, yet still she had always been the youngest and bravest, and when one thought of her it was never – and she would have wished this – as the invalid that she had become. Peace now for one whose place no one can ever take. No more of that inimitable flavour, of that steadfast inheritance from the golden age, in the hospitality at Stanway.[44]

Dr Mackail was one of the mourners at her funeral in Stanway Church.

The coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth took place on 12 May 1937, and on 19 June J.M. Barrie died: Angela's parents and her brother and sister-in-law attended the memorial service in Westminster Abbey.

Angela's next novel was *Summer Half*, which is peopled by the boys and masters at Southbridge School and their families. The novel's opening pages include a reference to *Young Woodley*, a 1925 play by John Van Druten about a prep school boy who falls in love with the housemaster's wife. Nothing so scandalous happens to Tony or his friends in *Summer Half*, although among the masters various couples are formed and unformed, but the setting and theme of the book acknowledge that Angela's youngest son Lance, the model for 'Tony', was growing up.

Two months after publication, Angela was one of several invited authors at the second Edinburgh Book Exhibition. The writer E.V. Lucas, an old friend of the Mackails, was deputised to open the exhibition, standing in for the humourist, novelist and member of parliament A.P. Herbert. Lucas's

opening speech recorded in *The Scotsman* sounds very much like the George Knox of Angela's novels. A brief extract:

> [H]ere I am, a poor substitute for what you were looking forward to and what I was looking forward to; for in my dreams I was to be merely a secluded but satisfied listener to what APH would say.
>
> I can assure you we are missing some first-class entertainment, for I know Mr Herbert well. I am familiar with those gay boyish enthusiasms, which Anno Domini cannot tarnish and no legislative responsibility depress or tame. Hearing him speak, watching the animation of those radiant features, I have rejoiced in his candours and loyalties, his trenchancies, and his wit.[45]

In its coverage of the exhibition a few days later, *The Scotsman* published an article headed 'Buying Books. Limitations of Shelf Space. Suggestion by Authoress.'

The authoress was Ann Bridge. She argued in her talk that while a hundred years ago 'the book reading public was limited to a very small section' of the British public, now a great many people read. Yet they have nowhere to keep books. She therefore suggested that publishers and booksellers try to convince the housing authorities 'that in all slum clearance schemes and workmen's dwellings there should be a legal minimum cubic space for books'.

Unsurprisingly, *The Scotsman* devoted twice the space to Angela's 'lively and entertaining talk' two days later. Her topic was 'Dear and Hateful Boys'. She expressed her admiration of the portraits of boys in fiction by Mark Twain, Edith Nesbit, Henry Kingsley and Charles Dickens, and in poetry by Mary Lamb. Angela had first written on the subject of boys in her Australian journalism with 'Children at Sea: What parents suffer' and 'In which a Modern Mother talks of The Modern Boy'. In this talk she mentioned that Tony Morland in *High Rising* 'was meant to be only incidental, but he insisted on dominating the book'. This 'made her love and hate him so much that she had to write a book of short stories about him before he was satisfied': *The Demon in the House*. Tony Morland was no longer a child, but Angela's novels would continue to feature other 'dear and hateful boys'.

In a 1938 letter to Jamie Hamilton, Angela mentioned having met Mrs O'Malley (aka Ann Bridge) at a luncheon three or four years earlier. The fact that the two novelists' paths crossed at the Edinburgh Book Exhibition in the autumn of 1937 may have provided further material for the comical



Angela Thirkell, taken by Howard Coster

portrait of Hermione Rivers in *Pomfret Towers*, which came out the following spring. Writing to her publisher from Gregories in Beaconsfield, where she was staying with her friends Viola and J.L. Garvin, Angela noted proudly that '[the novelist] Rose Macaulay told Viola to read *Pomfret Towers*'.[46]

Lance was now at St Paul's School, which he adored, and in July Angela was one of the guests of honour at the forty-eighth anniversary 'Debate Dinner' of the Chesterton Society, 'founded by G.K. Chesterton with the object of encouraging the art of debate among Old Paulines'. The subject

was 'The Young Generation is an improvement on its parents'. Angela made a speech in favour of the motion. She also mentioned having recently seen Chesterton's widow Frances at Beaconsfield.[47] That summer, Angela and Lance took a month's holiday in Varengeville-sur-Mer near Dieppe.

On 10 September 1938, *The Times* published a letter signed by Stanley Baldwin, J.W. Mackail and other 'distinguished men' stating that 'the real need of the day is moral and spiritual rearmament'. The Mackails had celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary the week before, and Margaret received the following telegram signed 'Frank' (Buchman):

> MAY YOUR GOLDEN WEDDING BRING A GOLDEN AGE STOP GRATEFUL YOUR HOME YOUR PEN YOUR LOVE FOR BRITAIN STOP OUR THANKS ARE DUE TO YOU FOR YOUR PIONEER THINKING STOP YOU WILL BE INTERESTED THAT PARLIAMENTARY LETTER WHICH YOU HELPED FRAME RELEASED SIMULTANEOUSLY MOST LEADING PAPERS EUROPE WAS SUBJECT OF TWENTY MINUTES CALL EXPLAINING ITS SIGNIFICANCE BETWEEN GERMAN EXPERT IN LONDON AND AUTHORITATIVE CIRCLES GERMANY STOP ALSO HAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED JAPAN THROUGH KASAI JAPANESE REPRESENTATIVE PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE WHO SAYS IF THIS IS ENGLANDS PROGRAMME WE MUST RECONSIDER OUR OWN STOP THIS IS BEGINNING GOLDEN AGE

Margaret's response to Buchman's telegram follows:

> It came to me this morning that among my thank-offerings for our fifty years happy marriage, I should send a penny to you, & here it is with my love, but before I could get it sent off to you comes your miracle telegram, for which our united love & thanks … & wonder! How can you have heard of our Day! & who but you would, in the midst of all you are doing, have sent a long, kind, interesting message! Deep thanks.

Margaret concluded her letter, surely untruthfully, with the assurance that 'All the Family here think of you constantly, & pray that the Holy Spirit may be unceasingly amongst you. God bless you.'[48]

At the end of September, Angela's three sons were all with her. Graham had come from Canada and his fiancée Joan Burke had come from Australia in order to marry in London. They had first met several years earlier during their studies at the University of Melbourne. Joan stayed with friends and

planned to spend a month visiting England before the wedding. As Graham tells the story:

> … [T]hat afternoon we were all summoned to the post office in Kensington High Street to receive grotesque but apparently necessary objects: gasmasks. We stared at them in more than a wild surmise. And that evening Neville Chamberlain was on the air speaking about a 'faraway country'. Hitler was mobilizing. I spent an uneasy night. Right after breakfast the phone rang.
> 'I think we'd better be bombed together rather than separately, don't you?'
> 'I'll get a special licence right away.'[49]

Graham and Joan were married in Kensington and the very next day Neville Chamberlain returned from Munich and made his speech about peace for our time. According to Graham, the pre-Munich scare led to an exodus of tourists from central London, and Joan and he were able to begin their married life in a London hotel before travelling to their new home in Canada.

By Christmas, Angela had finished *The Brandons*. The main character, Lavinia Brandon, is a widow like Laura Morland, and the cast of characters also includes a third widow, Felicia Grant. A comic high point early in the novel is a sort of aria of the three widows, in which their respective comments about their sons are partially superimposed.

Mrs Grant, who lives in Italy, remarks that Hilary 'is a devoted son, *mio figlio*, but I do not wish him to be tied to my apron strings'. Mrs Morland makes the point that 'Boys *always* ought to get away from their mothers. I hardly ever see my three eldest, whom I adore … .' And Mrs Brandon states that 'I am really very lucky with Francis … because he tells me nothing at all ever and is never rude. If my husband had lived I am sure he would have wanted to be a father to Francis, and that wouldn't have done at all.'

Perhaps the most frequently commented section of the novel is the roundabout scene at the village fête that begins with Francis's remark, 'I bag the cock, but if you don't like the ostrich you and Delia can go in an aeroplane.' Critic Hermione Lee writes that the scene suggests 'Thirkell's blithe lack of awareness of a language of sexuality.'[50] This interpretation strikes me as highly unlikely, given the language-conscious family in which Angela was raised, beginning with the ritual of 'reading aloud' and continuing with the 'Funny Drawer' in the drawing-room of Pembroke Gardens. As discussed in Part One, it contained some 'astonishingly bawdy items', such as 'a massive list of all the English family names [the Mackails] could discover which are indecent'.[51]

Then, too, as an adult Angela was renowned for what her friend, the author Rachel Ferguson, described as her 'misleadingly demure and saintly' appearance.[52] In letters already cited, Graham Robertson, who had known Angela since childhood, emphasised her diabolical quality. Angela may have assumed some of her readers would miss the 'language of sexuality' in *The Brandons*, but she almost certainly used it advisedly.

In July, Jamie Hamilton informed Angela that with *The Brandons* she had made her bow on the American bestseller list, and by the beginning of August her next novel, *Before Lunch*, was finished. The characters are somewhat reminiscent of those in *The Brandons*, yet the overall mood is more sombre than soufflé-light. *Before Lunch* features two middle-aged women, sisters-in-law who are on good terms but who do not know each other well. Lilian Stonor is a widow who brings her two almost grown-up stepchildren to spend the summer near the Middletons: her much older brother and his wife Catherine.

> Catherine Middleton was often alone, or lonely, she wasn't sure which word to use. Her masterful husband leaned so heavily on her for strength that though she grudged nothing she felt from time to time a weariness of the spirit. It might be more blessed to give than to receive, but there had been times when she would have given a year's life to be the receiver and not the giver.

In the end Lilian becomes engaged to Alister, her brother's colleague and Catherine's friend. Catherine and Lilian's stepson Denis regretfully renounce their *amitié amoureuse*. Caroline Lejeune, who reviewed films for Garvin's paper the *Observer* and was a friend of Angela's, recorded her frequent thought that the novelist 'based the character of Mr Middleton … on [Garvin]'.[53]

In early August 1939 Angela wrote to Hamilton with her literary news:

> I hear from Patience Ross (after a very pleasant night spent with les girls in their new home near Henfield, in no room of which can Louise Porter stand upright so antique is it, and I do *wish* they didn't sleep in a double bed, *en tout bien et tout honneur* [in all honour] I doubt it not, *mais cela me fait frémir* [but it makes me shudder]) that Bernice Baumgarten of Brandt & Brandt [a transatlantic literary agency] very much wants to see my new book ASAP, with a view to serialising.[54]

Patience Ross, born Patience Ropes, was the daughter of Arthur Reed Ropes or 'Adrian Ross', a one-time University of Cambridge don who

became a prominent lyricist of the British stage, and the former Ethel Wood, an actress.

Ross had published two volumes of poetry and the libretto for an opera, and was employed as a literary agent for A.M. Heath. Ross's companion, Louise Hoyt Porter, was a Vassar College graduate from a very wealthy American family, and they lived in a cottage called Lipride in West Sussex. Little information is available about the couple; Ross was quoted in a newspaper as saying, 'I have no photographs of myself at all.' They may have been part of the inspiration for Angela's memorable characters Hampton and Bent, who first appeared in *Cheerfulness Breaks In* (1940). Angela remained friendly with 'les girls' as she called them, who were somewhat younger than she was, for the rest of her life.

In her letter to Hamilton, Angela mentioned that she and Lance were about to leave for St Jean de Luz in southwestern France. It turned out to be a 'twilight holiday', Lance recalled:

> … shortly after our arrival, the Russians and the Germans signed a non-aggression pact, and my mother immediately grasped its significance, although I did not. We made a slow journey home in trains full of sad and resigned French reservists recalled to the colours, and we arrived in London in time to pack my grandparents off to a hotel in the Cotswolds, whose daily routine my grandmother promptly and sweetly mucked up to no mean degree, and we also got their builders so to fortify the basement of Six Pembroke Gardens as to make it proof against anything short of a direct hit.
>
> Graham had already managed to side-step both the crisis and the war by emigrating to Canada, but Colin joined us and we were once again a family instead of just mother and son. At eleven o'clock on the morning of the third of September, Mr Chamberlain informed us that we were once again at war with Germany and a few moments later, as if on cue, the air-raid sirens sounded.[55]

PART FIVE

War and So-called Peace

When I think of it I sometimes wish the war had gone on for ever. We *were* so happy with Mr Churchill and Lord Woolton.

Mrs Morland in *County Chronicle* (1950)

Writing to a friend from a hotel in Chipping Campden, Margaret Mackail gave an account of her 'evacuation' from Pembroke Gardens:

> We have been here nearly three weeks: we were 'evacuated' quite suddenly by Angela's earnest desire, and left at a few hours' notice, under the impression that if we left *she* would go, which was obviously necessary as she had just had to return from a much-needed rest in the Basses-Pyrénées at the end of a week etc. etc. We intended to return to London when she had gone somewhere: but what did happen was that Colin arrived from Belgium and had to give up his lodgings and hold himself in readiness, so he went to PG and joined Lance and Angela: they all three worked furiously at preparing the house for emergencies: went through the first bogus air raid warnings twice in twenty-four hours, and then her sons evacuated *her*, and she arrived here five days after we did and at last began the deeply needed rest of body – if not of spirit. It looks as if Lance would be allowed to go to Oxford: but it won't be much like Oxford, many of the colleges not functioning at all.[1]

At the end of September 1939 the Mackails' son Denis and his wife Diana were living at Bishopstone House in Seaford, Sussex, and their younger daughter Clare was with friends in a house called Four Winds in Surrey. Colin alone was still at Pembroke Gardens and Lance was with family friend Gerald Carr at the Old Vicarage, Tirley, near Gloucester. The 'well-known

author' Angela was at The Gregories in Beaconsfield with her friends Viola and J.L. Garvin, the long-time editor of the *Observer*.

From The Gregories, Angela wrote to Jamie Hamilton that she would soon be moving to the late G.K. Chesterton's home Top Meadow in Beaconsfield to be a paying guest of Dorothy Collins, Chesterton's secretary. She comments that it is a '*milieu très catholique*, a funny place for the *anima naturaliter pagana* to find itself'.

'Naturally pagan soul': the Latin phrase would have been familiar to Hamilton, as Angela had used it in her first novel, *Ankle Deep*, to characterise Mr Howard's view of his daughter Aurea. Once she arrived at Top Meadow, Angela described it to a friend as 'a very queer milieu for me as [Miss Collins] and all her friends are rabid Catholic converts and the house is one mass of rosaries, Madonnas, framed telegrams from the Pope and scenes from the life of Sir Thomas More in poker work'.[2]

Angela informed Jamie: 'My parents are stopping my allowance; I have to pay for board and lodging as from next week; I have to find £180 a year for Lance till the army want him – so heaven send more dollars.' She also gave news of her friends, the Barkers, at Stanlake Park in Twyford: 'Mrs Barker is better, but as it is thought to have been a very slight stroke … it is a frightful anxiety. It all sounds like Hell with the refugee children and masters, servants resentful and impossible. Effie is occupied daily at a [Voluntary Aid Detachment] hospital, but not much use at home.'[3]

Gilbert and Effie Barker, born in 1906 and 1912, respectively, were the youngest children of Colonel F.G. Barker and his wife Lucile, who was French. When Angela was researching Harriette Wilson, Gilbert – a self-described dilettante with an interest in art history – was researching a book on the painter Antoine Watteau, and the two writers became friends. Many years later Effie Barker gave an account of Stanlake's evacuees in a talk at a local history society:

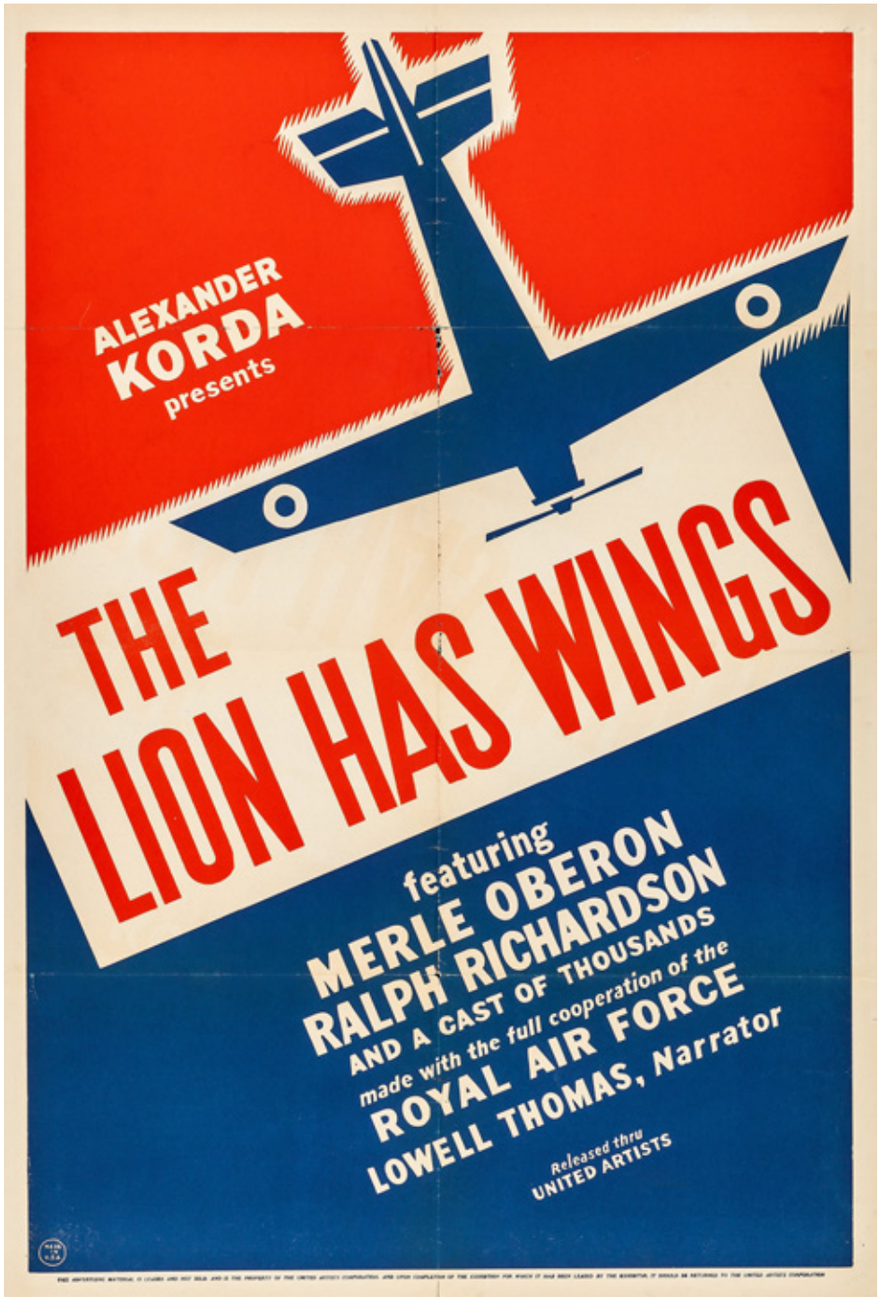
> One famous morning we went to Twyford station with the waggon and horses to meet the evacuees allocated to Stanlake. Fifteen children and five staff arrived and I don't think I have ever in my life looked with such horror on anything. The whole idea was that we were going to prevent them from being bombed to death but of course they were just *bored* to death. It was a problem for everybody in those days and people who didn't go through that time of evacuees missed something. I remember very well that we had no mattresses for fifteen or twenty people so the chaff sacks were brought out and [one of the servants] had the job of cutting the chaff and filling these things up to make mattresses. A very good idea except it was chaff and most of them were bed-wetters. They had never eaten anything except fish and chips and baked beans so Mother's ideas of beautiful stews and lovely suet puddings were not a success. It was a most difficult time. The children did not know that milk came from cows so of course, when they found out they used to try and milk them. They let out the horses and the chickens. They wrung the chickens' necks and it was a desperate time. My job was to try to amuse them so I used to get the horse and cart and take them out hunting in it. They thoroughly enjoyed it but it didn't last long because they all went back to London. It was a traumatic experience while it lasted and poor Mother was never the same again … .[4]

Angela drew on the Barkers' experience at Stanlake Park, as well as what she herself saw in Beaconsfield, for her comic portrayal of the evacuee children in *Cheerfulness Breaks In*. During the war Haines Hill House, minutes away from Stanlake Park, accommodated masters and boys evacuated from Eaton House School in London.

For her 'Great War Novel', as Angela jokingly called it, she managed to concoct what a reviewer described as 'all completely *soufflé*, so to speak, but … mixed and cooked by an expert. And that is no bad quality in wartime, when most meals are, metaphorically speaking, too much like increasing the dead weight of an indigestible dish.'[5] The novel introduces Angela's popular 'camp' couple Hampton and Bent.

Critic L.P. Hartley liked the book, although he felt that 'the Warburys, the only really black sheep in the book, are almost too black'.[6] Alfred Knopf, Angela's American publisher, had made a similar objection to the typescript, commenting that 'the Warburgs [as she originally called them] are really laid on too thick – they aren't real people but caricatures, particularly as you put them in the film business with which we over here are pretty familiar'. He also alerted her to the existence of a prominent Warburg family in the United States.

Angela agreed to change her characters' surname to Warbury, but insisted in a letter to Hamilton's associate P.P. Howe that her Warburys 'are alas! only too true and the things they say not overstated in the least'.[7] Her reaction suggests that Oscar, Gloria and their son Fritz Warbury, like Angela's previous creations Lady Emily Leslie, Winifred Tebben and Hermione Rivers, were at least initially based on people with whom she was familiar at the time she introduced them into Barsetshire. But who in, or near, Beaconsfield in 1939 would have owned a company like 'Dante-Technifilms' and have driven 'a kind of super Daimler-Rolls about ten yards long'? *The Lion Turns Tail* – the title of Fritz Warbury's book – is a strong hint to the 'real people' who inspired the Warburys.



There is no record of *The Lion Turns Tail*, but *The Lion Has Wings* (1939) is the title of the first major propaganda film of the war. It was produced and directed by Alexander Korda at his extravagant Denham Film Studios, within 10 miles of Beaconsfield.[8] In late 1939 the renowned Hungarian-born producer-director was living at Hills House in Denham, along with his student son Peter, his art director brother Vincent, and his sisters-in-law, the British actresses Gertrude Musgrove (Vincent's wife) and Joan Gardner (the wife of Alexander and Vincent's brother Zoltan). *The Lion Has Wings* was reviewed in the *Observer* by film critic Caroline Lejeune, a friend of Angela's, who knew Alexander and Zoltan Korda professionally.

Alexander Korda married the actress Merle Oberon in June 1939 on the French Riviera, but the mother of his son Peter was his first wife Maria, who was also Hungarian and who had been a silent film star. When the couple were living and working in Hollywood in 1930, Korda divorced Maria and he went on to remarry twice. However, Maria kept a sort of permanent hold over her ex-husband, said to be due to the fact that in Hungary, in the early years of their marriage, she had saved his life when Europe's first anti-Semitic dictator had imprisoned him. Immediately following Korda's arrest Maria managed to find out where he was being kept and to contact an intermediary to the dictator. She then used her notoriety at the time to threaten an international scandal, which led to her husband's release. The 1939 Register placed Maria Korda at the Riviera Hotel in Maidenhead, also within 10 miles of Beaconsfield, so it is plausible that her path crossed Angela's in some capacity.

The identification of 'Mrs Warbury' with the first Mrs Korda accounts for an otherwise obscure line in *Cheerfulness Breaks In.* In the run-up to the Christmas party, Mrs Warbury rings Mrs Birkett, who explains: 'She seems to think it is a fancy-dress party and wanted to know if she is to come as a Red Cross nurse or as a visiting royalty.' Merle Oberon – the second Mrs Korda – played a Red Cross nurse in *The Lion Has Wings*, but was more famous for having played Anne Boleyn in Korda's first British success, *The Private Life of Henry VIII* (1933). Throughout Korda's life his first wife sought to overturn their Californian divorce. She must have viewed his second wife as an intruder like Miss Grey, the character known as the Incubus in *High Rising*. But in *Cheerfulness Breaks In* Angela showed little sympathy for any of the Warburys, even though Alexander Korda had been linked to Churchill since the early 1930s. Korda bought the rights for Churchill's *Life of Marlborough* and employed him to advise on a series of historical movies; he later served as the Prime Minister's 'man in

Opposite: Poster for the Alexander Korda film, *The Lion Has Wings*



Wedding photograph of Captain James Hamilton and Countess Yvonne Pallavicino

Hollywood' and he was knighted by Churchill in 1942. For once, Angela's opinion diverged from Mr Churchill's.

In late 1939, Angela informed Hamilton that the *anima naturaliter pagana* was moving from Miss Collins's home to lodgings elsewhere in Beaconsfield. She explained in a letter to Gilbert Murray:

> I am living in Beaconsfield because a) Pembroke Gardens is shut, with only a charwoman, b) my old friends the Garvins are here and I am in and out a great deal, c) I always wanted a year in the country, though I didn't mean to create a World War to bring it about.[9]

Mrs Villars, the central character of Angela's next novel, *Northbridge Rectory*, is a sort of spiritual sister to Mrs Brandon in *The Brandons* and Mrs Middleton in *Before Lunch*. Mrs Villars is more happily married than Mrs Middleton, and less flirtatious than Mrs Brandon, that very engaging widow.

The character's name and the narrator's assertion that 'if there was one thing in the world [Verena Villars] liked it was people called Gregory' suggests she may be a kind of 'homage' to Angela's lifelong friend Viola Garvin of The Gregories, one of the reasons for her wartime residence in Beaconsfield. Angela recalled: 'During the war Gregories became a kind of



Viola Garvin at The Gregories

sewing centre and all through the week the ladies sat and knitted or sewed for the forces. [Viola] managed her peculiar team delightfully and everyone mixed without being conscious of the mixer's power.'[10]

Early in 1940, Angela's sister Clare and Bertha Orton, a Dutch-born osteopath and the owner of Four Winds in Farnham, Surrey, made a three-month trip to America. Travel documents give their address as 43 York Terrace, London and state that the purpose of the trip was to see Dr E.M. Cosgrove of Van Nuys, California. Eugene Milne Cosgrove was a Unitarian minister who was born in Rothesay on the Isle of Bute, by coincidence

about a mile from Dr Mackail's birthplace. A classified advertisement in a publication called *Light on Spiritualism and Psychical Research* describes Bertha Orton as a 'biotheratic practitioner' providing spiritual healing, astrological health analysis and colour-ray treatment, and an experienced lecturer on survival, world peace and colour-ray healing. She was also the leader of the Group for Sacrifice and Service, the British branch of a Californian sect.

The London Blitz began in September 1940. On the 20th Angela informed her publisher that her parents' house had been bombed twice, but only glass was broken. *Cheerfulness Breaks In* came out in October. A biography of Clement Attlee reveals that the cabinet member and future Labour Prime Minister became acquainted with one of Angela's novels in a bomb shelter during the Blitz, while reading to his wife: 'I've just been reading to [Violet] a book by Angela Thirkell whom I had not previously encountered, uncommonly good in the description of a typical English family,' he wrote to his brother.[11]

The last and most devastating raid of the London Blitz took place on the night of 10–11 May 1941. Bertha Orton and ninety-nine members of the Group for Sacrifice and Service were praying for peace at 43 York Terrace – beneath a naked glass roof – when the building was struck by a German bomb. Rescuers found a bizarre sight:

> … a bewildering mixture of rich and poor; women with chased-silver, diamond-studded brooches; men in shabby, unpressed suits; the secretary, an elegant, imposing woman explaining that she could identify many of the dead by the rings and brooches which established their place in the hierarchy.[12]

Bertha Orton and two other women from the Four Winds household in Surrey were among the fifteen dead. Margaret Mackail wrote in a letter that her daughter Clare was buried alive: '"This one's dead" said a voice, but she had just strength to say "No I'm not" and they got her out with a broken back and leg.'[13] Bertha Orton's will left her interest in Four Winds to some of the women living there for 'the furtherance of the work in which we are interested': only one – Hilda Roberts – survived the raid. Clare spent most of the rest of her life at Four Winds. Angela described her sister's home as a 'large country house where she lives with a lot of females who have some queer American religion with "Full-Moon Service" every month (Astarte?)'.[14]

Several times before the war Angela had been the guest of Ian Robertson, an art historian, and Archie Balfour, the director of an insurance company,

at their home in Oxfordshire. When the war came, Robertson, born in 1910, joined the navy, and Balfour, who was fourteen years older, went to stay at Bere Court House near Pangbourne with his first cousin, Lady Helen Smith, and her family. Lady Helen's husband, the Hon. David John Smith, was a grandson of the entrepreneur W.H. Smith.

Bere Court was not far from Stanlake Park, where Angela often visited the Barkers, and at Robertson's suggestion, in the autumn of 1941 she was invited to spend a weekend at Bere Court. Afterwards Angela wrote to thank Ian for 'the most delightful weekend at Bere. … Lady Helen is such a delicious mixture of kindness, bonhomie and pretty manners that I was enchanted.' She mentions Lady Helen's 'nice brood of babies', and concludes that 'Lady H. said she would ask me again and I hope she will, for it is a very happy house and again I am more grateful to you than I can say for suggesting the visit originally.'[15]

It is not known whether Lady Helen did ask Angela again, because the preceding thank you letter concludes the novelist's surviving correspondence with her friends Ian and Archie. According to biographer Margot Strickland, when Angela's next book *Marling Hall* was published a year after her stay at Bere Court, Lady Helen was so disturbed by the portrait of Miss Bunting that she bought up all copies of the book for sale in her area. Apparently, Miss Bunting was an obvious caricature of the retired governess who lived with the Smiths, and Lady Helen did not want her to see the book.

Angela based the character of Miss Bunting on Norah Punnett, who was living at Bere Court in 1939. Born in Maidstone in 1874, Miss Punnett obtained a board of education certificate at the Home and Colonial Training College in London. She retired as headmistress in 1925, after twenty-three years at the Butts Council Girls' School in Milton Regis near Sittingbourne. Like Lady Wemyss, Kitty Esdaile and the Kordas, Norah Punnett was a remarkable character of whom a few written traces survive, in addition to her fictionalised metamorphosis in Barsetshire.

On the occasion of Miss Punnett's retirement, her goodbye letter to 'My dear Girls' was published in the *East Kent Gazette*:

> As I am unable to see you again at school, this is to wish you a very happy holiday now, and to those who are leaving soon, a useful, contented, happy time in the future. I shall be thinking very much of you all, as you are still 'My' Girls to me and when I hear of you or meet you in the future I hope it will be as girls striving to make others happy. You know how much we liked the word 'sympathetic'. It seems to embrace all that is good and true in a girl, and as sympathetic girls I should like to think

> of you – for in helping others you will find great happiness in life. Now, I do not want to preach, but before I wish you good-bye in this letter, I should like to remind you of our School text. Do you remember it? 'Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it, with thy might' – and if you try to live up to that, you will make the world all the better for having lived in it, and so my Milton Girls I will wish you to have all the good things of life. May God be with you always. With love, from – Yours affectionately, N. Punnett – P.S. – If any girls would like to write me I shall always be pleased to hear from them.[16]

Presumably Miss Punnett became a governess after her retirement as headmistress, which was attributed to delayed after-effects of shock from the bombs dropping in the First World War.

If Lady Helen identified Miss Bunting as a caricature of Miss Punnett and took offence, it is unfortunate because Angela's portrayal of her, like her portrayal of Lady Emily, is essentially a tribute to a woman she respected and admired. A recent critic has described *Marling Hall* as 'an astringent novel' in which a group of characters brought together by the war 'do not understand each other'. Miss Bunting is a factor of harmony and stability who harks back to happier pre-war times.[17]

Angela's son Colin had initially joined the Wiltshire Regiment, and then transferred to an infantry division in Yorkshire. When his division was sent to Winchester for further training, he applied to be sent to Gibraltar. Colin's biographer cites 'Now that I find I love my Mother', the surprisingly sentimental three-verse poem he wrote for Angela before he left:

> I
> It seems that a beloved flower,
> Though tillage none, has sprung.
> As if our Nature would forbid
> An arid earth should keep it hid,
> And from untended ground has wrung
> Our blessing in this later hour.
>
> II
> Did I, a babe, lean to your breast?
> Did we in later years
> Depart each other, led this wise
> By temperament and family ties
> Which discord brought, or by our fears
> And wants opposed, and all the rest?

> III
> These longings rule us yet;
> You yours, and I still mine.
> Yet, though the night consume the day
> And day blind night, night after day,
> This strife gives birth to passing Time.
> So too, strife past, our hearts have met.[18]

Writing to Graham and Colin's former nanny in June 1943, Angela gave news of all three sons:

> Graham and his delightful wife are in Canada where they have been living ever since they were married in 1938 and have a lovely little boy, Michael, who is nearly 2. Graham does some important work for the Canadian Govt. and has done very well, as he started there quite on his own, with no one to help him. Of course I have not seen my Michael, and don't know when I shall, but the photographs of him are beautiful. Colin has been in the army almost since the beginning of the war. He has been at Gibraltar for nearly two years now, but as he is in Intelligence he cannot tell me anything in his letters, but he seems to be well and goes on with his painting. Lance has been in the army for two years in the Artillery and is now a first lieutenant. He is in Somerset at present and has some friends there and it is lovely country. He comes here for leave sometimes and looks very well. He is not as tall as the other boys, but very strong and 'tough'.[19]

In April 1944 Angela commented to her publisher: 'I saw Colin yesterday and gave him lunch – *very* large and handsome in battle dress. He has a friend called Robert Waller who is a poet and a great friend of T.S. Eliot who won't however publish his work.'[20] Angela was not a fan of Eliot's recently published poem 'Little Gidding', the fourth of his *Four Quartets*. She concluded her very brief *Books of the Month* review of the poem with a pastiche of Milton: 'this hungry sheep looks up and is not fed'.[21]

The peace between Colin and Angela was only temporary. When James Campbell McInnes died in Canada in February 1945, his companion sent Colin a telegram in care of Angela. Colin did not appreciate the fact that instead of immediately forwarding the telegram, she simply enclosed it in her next letter. Angela discussed her ex-husband's 'estate' in a letter to Hamilton: 'I hear from Graham that there may be about £200 each for him and Colin when their father's affairs are settled (at least $1,000) – all the "estate" except the cash goes to a young man who lived

with him. I am surprised that he ever did so much for them.'[22]

The Headmistress, which introduces two new recurring characters – the ungainly Heather Adams and her ironmaster father Sam, who is wealthy but 'not a gentleman' – came out in December 1944. Angela commented that 'Viola – as always – thinks the whole book is about Beaconsfield and complains that the working party is not quite like!'[23]

After *Growing Up* (1943) and *The Headmistress* (1944), Miss Bunting returned and gave her name to T1945, as Angela referred to the novel that would appear in 1945. Near the end of the book, Miss Bunting dies at the climax of her recurring dream that Hitler has dared to touch David Leslie, her favourite pupil. This last time she dreams that she makes good on her threat to kill Hitler: all her old pupils then come running up to her, causing a fatal heart attack. Angela wrote: 'Nearly everything for which Miss Bunting had stood was disintegrating in the great upheaval of civilisation.' (By contrast, Norah Punnett, the real-life model for Maud Bunting, outlived the novelist and died in 1965, at age ninety.)

Miss Bunting also introduces the 'half widow' Jane Gresham, Admiral Palliser's daughter, whose husband is missing in the Far East. Her young son Frank shares the maddening and endearing qualities of Tony Morland when he was Frank's age. Angela portrays Jane's plight sensitively, and also makes her the 'real' widow Mrs Morland's interlocutor in a comical yet revealing after-dinner exchange.

Mrs Morland has been having trouble with her eyes, and 'got an infinite amount of innocent pleasure out of her armoury of glasses'. As her face-à-main becomes entangled in her hair, she explains that she feels 'splendidly snobbish' about her three grandchildren, whom she has not yet seen. Putting on a pair of spectacles, she adds that it is a good thing that her husband died a long time ago,

> … because I do not think he would have understood my grandchildren in the *least*. He did not really understand his own boys – not that I do either, but that is so different – and I used to think it would really have been far better if he had died before the boys were born instead of after, because it would have simplified everything.

Jane makes the obvious point that 'if Mr Morland had died before his boys were born, he might not have had any.'

Removing her spectacles, Mrs Morland concedes the point but adds that she never thinks of her husband, and never thought of him when he was alive either. Jane is taken aback: 'In common with most of Mrs Morland's friends she had come to look upon the young Morlands as

somehow the peculiar and unaided product of their mother.' Jane, on the other hand, very much needs Sam Adams's aid: first he handily fixes the Pallisers' plumbing with a curious device called a 'spang rod', and then manages to discover that her missing husband Commander Gresham is not only alive but soon to return from a prisoner of war camp.

In Angela's next novel *Peace Breaks Out* (1946), Martin Leslie agrees to name his new-born bull-calf Rushwater Churchill, in honour of 'a great Prime Minister whose party, so the omens foretold, would probably be swept from power by the millions of tired, impatient and mostly irresponsible people whom he had served'. The *New York Times* reviewer Orville Prescott observed that the novelist expresses her preference for the Conservative party 'with a waspish melancholy which I find amusing'.[24] Elizabeth Bowen wrote that after the Labour landside victory 'cantankerousness was to infect [Angela's] work and begin to chill her admirers'.[25] Personal circumstances coinciding with the peace surely also played a role.

At the end of *Peace Breaks Out* Robin's elderly father Dr Dale dies; in real life it was Angela's father who was dying. After suffering a stroke, Dr Mackail was sent to a nursing home in High Wycombe, while Mrs Mackail went to stay temporarily with Clare in Surrey. In April, Angela wrote to Hamilton that she had decided to reopen Pembroke Gardens in order to have her father under her eye; her mother later joined them there.

Bergen-Belsen concentration camp had been recently liberated and its horrors revealed in the press. Disturbingly from today's viewpoint but perhaps understandable at the time, in postcards to her long-time friends Jamie Hamilton and Eric George Millar of the British Museum, whom she had known since childhood, Angela habitually scored through the words 'Red Brae, Beaconsfield' – her previous address – and replaced them with 'Pembroke-Belsen Concentration Camp' or more simply, 'Belsen'.[26] On 6 December she commented to Millar: 'Papa bed-ridden and mostly in coma: Mother back as semi-invalid. Sister and cook rushing at me to say how they hate each other. My doctor says I *must* get away – but How? Lovely Peace.'[27] She was trying to get on with *Peace Breaks Out* but informed her publisher that 'now I have both old parents in an advanced state of decay and it is PLAIN HELL'.[28]

Nancy Mitford's new novel *The Pursuit of Love* offered a brief escape, she told Jamie:

> Was the Nancy Mitford a birthday present? Thank you *very* much. It passed an hour *most* amusingly and she is a very funny fellow and knows her world. I *adored* the Living in Sin which is just what us Elderly Girls

> imagine as Dream-Fulfilment. Why have we not *all* got a rich French Duke (still the French are *awful* really, so perhaps it is all for the best). Please tell her I am *most* grateful for the amusing and *civilized* 'escape' she gave me.[29]

Meanwhile at home, she added, 'Belsen is in full swing and I see no end at all to anything – it is HELL.'

Dr Mackail died the following week. Angela wrote to thank Eric for the note he sent:

> The last two months have been a nightmare – the two nurses and myself nearly worn out. You can understand more than most people what it is to live with a childish mind – at the end [Father's] had quite gone. … Mother is remarkably well – very 'difficult', and wished to put an announcement in the *Times* saying we won't answer any letters! *So* gracious – and I offered to do them all for her. I am really *terrified* that I may have to look after *her* now. What a world.[30]

Several years later, after her mother's death, Angela made a brief comment on her parents' relationship in a letter to her son Graham: 'It is extraordinary how Ba [Father] was almost buried by Maany's [Mother's] always being on a pedestal. It would have been a good thing if he had ever put himself forward, but he went into blinkers from the first moment he saw her and never took them off.'[31]

In her correspondence, Angela continued to apply her violent metaphor to her life at PG. In May she wrote:

> What with life in Belsen where Mother has a fine Nuisance-Value and criticises everything and everybody, and Lance's engagement (a *very* nice one and I am very fond of Kate and like her people whom I've known off and on for a long time) with its concomitants of emotion, excitement, Henley, job-hunting, etc., I am worn to a frazzle.[32]

To Eric Millar: 'be it ever so humble there's no place like Belsen'.

Lance's marriage to Kate Lowinsky provided some distraction. Angela wore black at their wedding and, unusually, accompanied them on part of their honeymoon to Switzerland. On her return, however, she informed Hamilton, 'The Gates of Belsen have now closed on me.'[33] When Angela suggested temporarily storing some of Eric Millar's belongings at PG, her mother was not pleased:

> One would have thought the drawing-room was the shrine of the Holy-Grail and your goods 6,000 devils. So I then said, for the Nth time, how very *nice* it would be if [Mother] would have the piano back, which has been in the country for years. But I had said the wrong thing again and got a good snub. Her selfishness is most trying and so *aimless*. I *would* like to play a piano again.[34]

In early January 1947, Angela wrote that 'Belsen is super-Belsen, and I am really doing all the work for three old women, I being the youngest.'[35]

Also in January, J.L. Garvin died at The Gregories in Beaconsfield. His widow Viola was one of Angela's oldest and closest friends, and she saved the novelist's letter of condolence, marking it 'For Oliver [her son] alone' and 'Very valuable light on Garve'.[36] The letter also sheds a different light on Angela:

> Darling – Your message was given to me when I got back just now. Thank you for letting me know. Dear Garve. Never has anything been more tender and deeply loving than the looks he gave you the length of the table. The most remote stranger seeing them could not but feel the intensity of his love for you. I suppose I have seen as much of the Devilish side of him as any *outsider* could see: it was cruel beyond words to you at times and your closest and most loving friends could not help: but the deep love was under it all the time I am certain. *How* he adored you. It was a sad fate that made him try to hurt what he most loved and you took Good and Evil *magnificently*, and were his Rock, his fortress and his might at all times. Bless him and his large-small, generous-petty, cruel-kind, immensely gifted yet fatally cursed nature. To me he never gave anything but the best – I was not close enough to be hurt. I have memories of a thousand and one nights at Gregories with Garve booming, conversing, ranting, sparkling, pontificating, theorising, brilliantly overbearing, throwing out 'mots' each of which would have made the fortune of a lesser man, never admitting he was wrong, gloriously oblivious of the comfort or convenience of others, as kind as he could be, a faithful friend, an incorruptible servant of England. You know all this better than I but I saw more than many during the exile which his hospitality helped to lighten. *Never* did I feel – though he may have felt it – that I was one too many at his table. No one can write a *public* article about him which will show the whole man.
>
> I am thankful that he did not live to be an invalid.
>
> You had [your son] with you, who will do all that has to be done

with discretion. Let me know later what if anything I can do to help. If a bed (not very warm or comfortable) is needed at any time, here it is. Later you will let me know if I can help in any way.

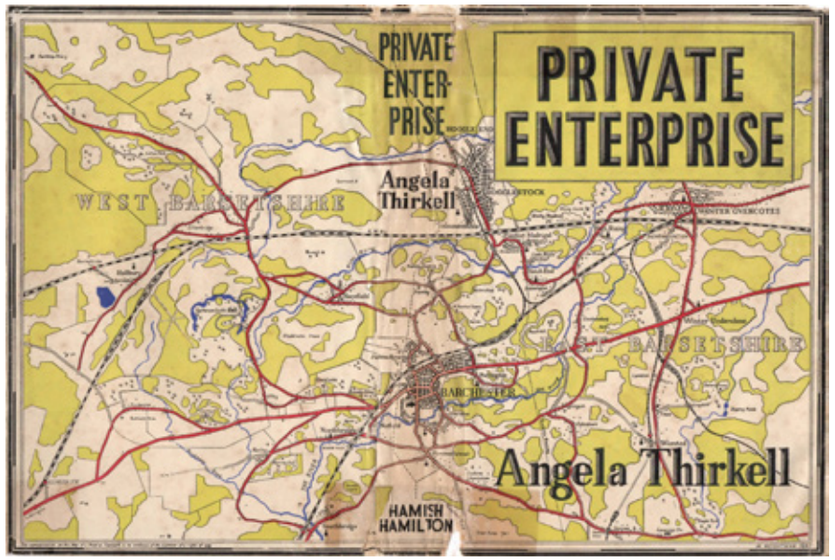
Darling, you will miss him – the padded slippers, the smell of cigars and the essence of Garve. You are blessed with friends who will do all they can but they cannot restore the familiar presence. I confess that I feel anxious about you, not for your heart or mind which are your own, but for the money side and shall be thankful when you know something of your position. I haven't told Mother yet, but she will not mind – very little touches her now. She will go back to days when Garve used to come here just to talk about YOU. You may not have been a 'grande amoureuse', but you were bien-aimée by your incalculable husband – up to the hilt. Bless you darling – I think much of you and the emptiness that must be: and also of a new life for you to which the old friends will bring all they can. Loving (and almost oldest of friends) A.

A few months later Angela wrote to Viola from Canada where she was visiting her son Graham and his wife Joan, now the parents of two children, Michael and Susan. In her last paragraph 'Old Mrs T' gives news of herself and her family:

So far 'the change' hasn't done me much good as the weather has been filthy and I find I *cannot* stand the late nights. The parties we go to of *such* earnest young couples, all with small children, all believing in 'child psychology' while the children are entirely undisciplined. And never had I seen so much drinking. No one ever tight or anywhere near it, but they consume *incredible* amounts of liquor before (not during) and after dinner – glass after glass of 'long drinks' far into the night. No good for Old Mrs T. Joan has been quite delightful and kind. My grandchildren *such* good material, so mismanaged. Graham a dear father of a family and good son – but in terror of his children! A few good smackings are much needed – but Granny can't give them.

Angela returned to England on the *Mauretania* at the end of May and ten days later her sister Clare, now fifty, left for New York on board the same ship.

Clare was travelling with Hilda Roberts, sixty-four years old, a fellow resident of Four Winds in Surrey, and Lady Isobel Penrose Elphinstone, age seventy. Their destination was Journey's End in Bigfork, Montana, the summer home of Dr Cosgrove, the Unitarian minister whom Clare had previously visited in California.



Dust jacket of *Private Enterprise* showing Maurice Weightman's map of Barsetshire

Private Enterprise came out in October 1947 and Elizabeth Bowen proclaimed that Angela was 'at her very best'.[37] Orville Prescott of the *New York Times* was inspired to compose six stanzas of doggerel in praise of the book. The first two are as follows:

In Barchester all is not well.
The County People pine and sigh.
They wish the government in Hell
And long for happier days gone by
When the gloom did not obscure the sky.

At tennis parties, dinners, teas
They still keep stiff their upper lips.
Oppressed by petty tyrannies,
The lack of fun and food and ships,
They jibe at Attlee, Strachey and Cripps.[38]

Also in *Private Enterprise* Susan Dean is the first of several young, female librarians who staff the Barsetshire Red Cross Hospital Library and then marry, leaving room for another librarian in another book.

Angela's series of Red Cross librarians in Barsetshire constitutes a sort of nod to two 'real people'. The first was not a young woman at all but rather her friend Gilbert Barker. In addition to being a librarian, Gilbert edited the *Library Broadsheet*: an article he published there traced the history of 'The St John & British Red Cross Hospital Library'. According to Gilbert's research 'the spark [that created the institution] was struck' at the outbreak of the First World War by none other than '[Helen Mary] Gaskell, a remarkable and beautiful woman, friend of the Pre-Raphaelites, and of Sir Edward Burne-Jones in particular'.[39]



Mrs Harold Raymond and Mr Gilbert Barker of the Red Cross Hospital Library

On Clare's return from America, Angela wrote to Hamilton:

> Colin and Lance practically abducted me from 6 PG as I am taking Lance's house for a year from 31 October when he and Kate go to Budapest. It was high time, for I am *en train* [headed] for a really spectacular breakdown after two and a half years of dotty and dying parents. My wicked sister is taking over. *Que grand bien lui fasse* [Much good may it do her].[40]

In *Love Among the Ruins* (1948), Lance's fictional alter ego Tony Morland is also sent abroad. Mrs Morland explains that 'the Tape and Sealing Wax Office have sent [Tony] to Mixo-Lydia, although why I do not know, except that they are always sending people somewhere and much to my annoyance he has taken the baby with him'. In real life 'the baby' was Georgiana, Lance and Kate's first child, who accompanied her parents to Hungary.

Angela was pleased to receive an invitation to the royal wedding in November 1947, and planned to attend; a note from her publisher suggested they make the most of Princess Elizabeth's 'fanship' amongst the booksellers.[41] After demobilisation Colin became a freelance journalist and, for a short time, the art critic for the *Observer*. Angela later explained to a friend that Colin left 'because Ivor Brown [the editor] wanted him to praise *his friends* – how furious J.L. Garvin [the previous editor] would have been'.[42]

When Lance and his family returned from Budapest, Angela moved to a flat in Cheyne Walk, which she described in a letter to Lady Mary Murray: 'I have one floor of this lovely house where George Eliot died and where my grandmother who was a great friend may have been.' She added: 'I go on writing a book a year still to boil my pot.'[43]

In *Growing Up* (1943) the novelist had Mrs Morland assert that 'None of my sons read my books, because of course one *cannot* think one's mother can do anything.' Angela herself regularly had 'duty copies' of each new book sent to family members, including her sons. After the war she asked her publisher to send repeat books to Colin, whose library had been blitzed. Lance also requested a few replacements – *Ankle Deep*, *O, These Men* and *Marling Hall* – as well as the recent *Love Among the Ruins* (1948).

T1949, as Angela called her typescript, was *The Old Bank House*. Angela's heroine, Lady Emily, dies during a family gathering near the end of the book after hearing 'bits of news about Rushwater and how well Rushwater Churchill was doing'. For the benefit of newcomers to Barsetshire, Lady Emily's granddaughter Emmy explains about the bull who was called Churchill 'just to cheer Mr Churchill up after the General Election'. Her future husband Tom 'said if that was the idea he hoped the 1950 bull calf would be Rushwater Attlee, at which there was dead silence till the joke went home and a kind of applause rose from the party'.

In 1948 Graham and Joan had another son, Simon, and the following year, Lance and Kate had another daughter, Serena. Angela made her third trip to the United States and Canada in the late spring and early summer of 1949. Once again the change of scenery failed to please her. On her return she confided to Hamilton:

> Much as I love my family I really can't bear to visit Canada again for *years*. The dullness of Ottawa has to be seen to be believed and my

darling grandchildren, reared on child psychology and never 'thwarting' the darlings, are *insufferable* – except the baby who so far is a good, fat, placid angel, ready to laugh at anything and entertaining himself by the hour. I helped them with the move to a larger house with a big garden for the children and am *completely exhausted*. Next time I want a change I shall go to Clacton – it could hardly be duller and would be less expensive.[44]

Back in London Angela participated in the *Sunday Times* National Book Exhibition, speaking on 'Dumas' Trip to England'. She wrote to Hamilton that it 'was great fun and made me realise my real métier is Female Clown'.[45]

In June 1950, Angela spoke to over one hundred members of North Oxfordshire Women's Institutes at a Book Day organised by her friend Lady Tweedsmuir (the widow of novelist and diplomat John Buchan, and a writer herself). When asked what she read, Angela's reply surprised the audience: 'Novels of course, but I think the age of the novel may be coming to an end. The 19th century has been the great age of the novel and it is a question now whether this type of book as a form of art will go.'[46]

Seventy years later the novel is still here, but contemporary critics were beginning to reach the saturation-point with Angela's occasionally 'cantankerous' novels. Reviewing *County Chronicle* in *The London Illustrated News*, K. John cites a character's remark that 'One might write a book about how awful the government are and call it *They*.' The critic continues 'One might and does, and one evidently can't stop. And yet the grace, the gaiety of mind, the disconcerting and malicious eye would still enchant if they had not enchanted so long already.'[47]

On 21 October Angela was one of 400 guests at the inauguration of the William Morris Gallery in Walthamstow, and her path crossed that of one of her bêtes noires. In the speech he delivered for the occasion, Prime Minister Clement Attlee, the MP for West Walthamstow, explained that it was the contrast between the utopia of Morris's *News from Nowhere* and the reality of living conditions in Stepney, the borough he originally represented, that had inspired him to become a socialist.

Angela incorporated a reference to Attlee's speech into the conclusion of her next novel, *The Duke's Daughter* (1951). Mrs Morland tells Mr Belton an anecdote about 'the opening of something to do with William Morris':

'[The Prime Minister] thinks he was converted by Morris or something of the sort, though I think he can hardly have been born then,' said Mrs Morland with great dignity. 'Perhaps one ought to know that. I didn't. And after he had made a very long speech through a

loudspeaker, which always makes it impossible to hear anything, not to speak of the way he mumbled, he Misquoted.'

'What?' said Mr Belton.

'Misquoted,' said Mrs Morland.

'I mean *what*?' said Mr Belton.

'Oh, sorry,' said Mrs Morland. 'Well, I believe William Morris was a very good poet, though I must say I have read hardly any of him except his early ones, but there is one line that is quite well known and he said it, through the loudspeaker, and did it wrong.'

'What was it?' said Mr Belton, bored but courteous.

'He said: "The idle singer of an idle day",' said Mrs Morland in her most impressive voice.

'Don't know much about poetry myself,' said Mr Belton. 'It all sounds a bit like the Labour lot though.'

'Yes, but it was *wrong*,' said Mrs Morland, giving her hat a determined shove forwards. 'It ought to be "The idle singer of an *empty* day".'

'Ah yes, empty,' said Mr Belton, more bored than ever.

'So quite a lot of people said "empty" in a loud voice; and so did I,' said Mrs Morland.

'Charlotte Corday,' said Mr Belton, at which unexpected piece of wit Mrs Morland had the giggles.

In the joking spirit of Angela's self-mocking 'takedown' of the Prime Minister – based on his insignificant error – she might also have claimed that it worked. Within a month of the publication of *The Duke's Daughter* Labour lost the election and Churchill returned as Prime Minister.

PART SIX

A Place Called 'Stop'

[Mrs Morland] has been writing books for years because she had to educate four sons and now she can't stop ... .

Lydia Merton in *What did it mean?* (1954)

I feel rather like Tom in *The Water Babies* when he came during his travels to a place called 'STOP'.

Angela Thirkell, letter to Margaret Bird, 17 October 1958

Angela had enjoyed living in Cheyne Walk but when her lease came to an end in May 1951, she moved to a terraced house in Shawfield Street.

In November she wrote to family friend Gilbert Murray:

> Clare is looking after Mother splendidly and much better than I did; it nearly killed me and I shall never be glad confident morning [Angela pastiches a line of Browning's 'Lost Leader'] or anything else again. Clare and she have always been peculiarly dovetailed and Clare is repaying with interest all the years Mother gave to her when she had her thyroid and subsequent 'queerness'. At the moment Mother is staying with Clare in the house where Clare lives with her friends whom I have never met – they are all women called Peter and John which terrifies me.[1]

In the last decade of her life Angela's trouble with her siblings over their mother's estate combined with trouble with her son Colin to form a sort of perfect storm.

In a letter to Lady Milner, Angela mentioned 'a certain amount of worry from my young – blast them. How right are (a) animals who shove their young out of the nest or the lair and (b) the parents who get in first and prey upon the young.'[2] Angela had expressed mixed feelings about Colin ever since his return from the war. In 1948 she wrote to Hamilton that Colin was '*inabordable* [unapproachable] and … still not quite civilized, but in

about ten years he will be'.[3] The following year she told Lady Mary Murray that Colin was 'a strange and "difficult" man in many ways, though very gifted'.[4] In September 1950, Angela wrote to Jamie that she had 'helped Les Boutons [the Knopfs] to three new writers – new to USA I mean – Stella Bowen Webb (Gibbons to you), a Dickens great-grandson and Mr Colin MacInnes whose book is to be out here soon. You would have been amused to see Colin cornering Alfred [Knopf] and "telling him what".'[5]

To the Victors the Spoils was based on Colin's war experiences and dedicated to his brother Graham. In 1952, Angela commented to Lady Milner that the book was 'very good', but she then added:

> He is *utterly unscrupulous* and though he is now near forty begs frequently and unashamedly from me besides feeling himself entitled to criticise my whole life and outlook. I would be quite happy never to see or hear of him again – but one's child is one's child, however odious. It is his 'mission' to explain to me that I did not understand my first husband.[6]

June in her Spring, Colin's second novel, came out two years after *To the Victors*. Graham saved Colin's reply to a letter he wrote in which he apparently identified characters and events in the novel from their adolescent years in Australia, and in particular on their many stays 'up country' with Basil and Nell Hall. Colin also mentions having received 'a laconic letter of appreciation from Lance, and a fantastic one from our dear Mum saying it was filth, but maybe the Red Highbrows (her capital letters, not mine) would take it up. But she is so sad and silly she can no longer wound me.'[7]

Writing to Graham, who was now living in India, Angela tried to explain her reaction:

> Of *course* you entirely disagree with me about Colin's book. I continue to think that *To the Victors* was a better book, but of course one has to remember that so often people's first book is their best book. The later books may be more finished, more thought out, more understanding of life, BUT there is 'the first fine careless rapture' [a quote from Browning's 'Home-Thoughts, from Abroad'] – and that one can never get again. I did it myself and a great many of us do. I am sure you were right about his account of the life up country and of course I unfortunately saw very little of that except with Aunt Nell. I think that Colin has so many facets that every one of his books may be different in conception and method of writing from every other. But why pique? Goodness gracious no! What the hell would I have to be piqued about? I just think



Front cover of *June in her Spring*

> what I think, and one of the things that I think is that Colin is going to surprise us all by the *variety* of what he writes.[8]

The mother-son relationship is clearly fraught: Colin sums up Angela's verdict on his novel as 'filth' but denies being vulnerable to her; she tells Graham she just thinks what she thinks, and asks 'What the hell would I have to be piqued about?'

Angela confided her feelings about both Colin's book and her sister Clare in a letter to Roger Machell at her publisher's:

> I had sooner die than write a new book for your Mr Hamilton just now, with Mother's great awful, cold, deserted, overfull house having to be dealt with. I am just off for a morning there with my sister, who is in charge of Mother and quite unfit for two jobs. Mother can now never be left, but may go on indefinitely. I expect I shall be like that myself soon. … Have you seen my son Colin's really very unpleasant book? I am glad to hear that the Lit. Supp. gave it a very good notice, for he needs to sell and Boots, I gather, banned it on account of the subject and the language. I rather see their point. Oh dear, one's children! And that is what every generation says.[9]

At least Angela hopes the book sells, and rationalises her dismay about its contents by suggesting her critiques of Colin are typical of every generation of parents.

The novel is set in 'Ballantyne' which Colin, in his letter to Graham, likens imaginatively to the Forest of Arden. Ballantyne is modelled on Ballan, where Basil and Nell Hall lived at La Côte, and regularly invited Graham and Colin. A chapter of *The Road to Gundagai* (1965), the first volume of Graham's autobiography, describes the local families who made up the 'wool-growing aristocracy' of the region. Colin's heroine 'June Westley' was apparently based on Jean Rhodes, whose family lived at Bungeeltap. June's friend 'Cleopatra Canterbury' is recognisable as Maroa Molesworth, the daughter of an even wealthier family at Ballark. Colin's novel depicts the beginning of a love affair between sixteen-year-old June and seventeen-year-old Benjamin Bond, who is visiting his Uncle Henry. In reality Jean Rhodes was ten years older than Colin, as was his later Belgian friend Mayou Iserentant, to whom the novel is dedicated.

As the story unfolds, June learns that Benjamin's mother was a nurse who died in childbirth, while his father Alexander Murray was a prominent singer who ruined his career by drink, and was then killed at Gallipoli. Henry Bond was the singer's friend and accompanist: he is not in fact Benjamin's uncle at all. In one sense Angela may have been relieved to discover that Benjamin's mother is almost entirely absent from the novel. What she objected to, presumably, was Colin's fictionalised treatment of the relationship between his father James Campbell McInnes and Graham Peel.

Colin's method of 'killing off' his fictional alter-ego's parents is not unlike the one Angela herself had adopted in *O, These Men*, her semi-autobiographical novel about her first marriage. Angela's alter-ego Caroline

Danvers's parents were also dead. Angela had returned to live with her parents after leaving her first husband, and Caroline goes to live with her in-laws, whom she calls 'Mother' and 'Father', and who have several traits in common with the Mackails. 'James Danvers' in Angela's novel and 'Alexander Murray' in Colin's are either off-stage and then dead in the first case or already dead in the second, but they still dominate the narrative.

At the end of Colin's novel, June and Benny plan to go off together – June will learn how to be a nurse. Benny returns to Uncle Henry's for his bank book and a recording of his father singing the lullaby he wrote for him. Uncle Henry puts on the record and Benny hears once again 'the violent angelic voice like Lucifer's with its sickening power to pass through the mind and grasp the centre of the strongest, most intimate emotions'. But it is already too late for Benny and June: her father has just killed himself and 'Uncle Henry' admonishes his 'nephew': 'Some men are born … who are not fit for women… . You are so like your father, Benny… . Be true to your own nature… .'[10]

Colin's letter to Graham thanking him for recognising the people and places who inspired the novel also includes a brief reference to 'Lucifer': 'I was moved by your agreement over "Lucifer"— yes, odious, let's face it, in many essential ways. (Did I tell you, by the way, he was always trying to seduce me? Don't know if I mentioned this: a monster.)' Surely Angela would not have disagreed, if she had she been aware of these comments.

In late autumn 1952, according to a typewritten account by Angela now kept in her mother's estate papers:

> [Clare] told me that the lease of the house had come to an end and asked me to help her to clear it out. I was writing my next book (my only means of support), but gave it up at once to help her. After one day she wrote from the country to say that she did not feel well, and asked me to finish the clearing. This I did.[11]

After clearing out the house by herself, Angela went to a nursing home to recover. She wrote to Graham and Joan that 'Clare is staging some kind of breakdown and won't give any address',

> and your Uncle Denis has consistently refused to give any help at all beyond going to PG and taking every single EBJ also Poynter's picture of Maam [Georgiana Burne-Jones] and in general behaving as if he were the Marquis and Papa had been the Duke. So, much to my annoyance I am having to take steps to guard my (which really means all your) interests! HOW I hate it all … .[12]

Angela and her sons got Clare to agree that the Mackails' Steinway grand piano should go to Graham, who would have the most use for it.

Margaret had granted power of attorney to Clare, who loaned the piano to Susan Lushington, a now-elderly family friend who kept the piano in an awkward location: in an attic reached by a staircase with banisters. Since Graham had been posted to New Delhi and since Angela had become ill from clearing out her parents' home (in her letters she mentions her physical ailments, but it must also have cost her emotionally), he put Colin on to what she baptised 'the affair of the piano'. Angela assured him that 'If anyone can get it, Colin will be the man … .'[13]

In his Happy New Year 1953 letter to Graham, Colin summarised the problem facing his grandmother's heirs – Angela and her three sons, Denis and his two daughters, and Clare:

> The position is you see, that a decrepit old lady (Maany [Margaret Mackail]) has given complete powers to a formerly crazy daughter (Clare), who consults a pathologically selfish and dishonest brother (Denis) and a dithering old dear (Mother) about a property in which you Lance and I are involved to the extent of 1/5 of 1/3 each. … The trouble is with our crazy elders.[14]

Regarding the piano in particular, Colin explained to Graham: 'Getting the piano safely from all the crazy people involved is going to be like extracting a tooth from an elephant with a nail file, but no doubt we shall succeed.'[15]

In March, Angela wrote to Graham that she and Lance had visited her mother 'in the horrid little lower-middle class house where Clare has boarded her, with [her nurse] Miss Harden in attendance'. Margaret 'had gone miles downhill' since her last visit, and Angela was relieved that Clare had at last consented to transfer their mother to a nursing home, where she died a month later.[16] In India, Graham received accounts from both Angela and Colin of the funeral, which took place near the crematorium in Woking.

According to Angela there were about a dozen people there, in addition to children and grandchildren:

> Clare … came in with Denis and me of course in the front pew, bareheaded, her silver hair well-fiercely permed and rather a red face – no hat which I do NOT approve, one or two people I did know (Antonia Tuck who was Somervell; Ruth Howard, an old friend of Clare's; 'Miss Roberts' the Head Girlie, who turned out to be a pleasant mannered bustling stout little woman but looked as if she had a temper;

the little charwoman who worked at PG and was nearly killed by it), the rest I hadn't a clue to.[17]

Antonia Somervell Tuck and Ruth Howard were both aunts of the novelist Elizabeth Jane Howard, one on her mother's and the other on her father's side. The Somervells and the Howards had been friends of the Mackails in Kensington. Angela referred to the women living at Four Winds with Clare as 'girlies'; this was presumably the first time she met one of them. A few days later Colin sent his version:

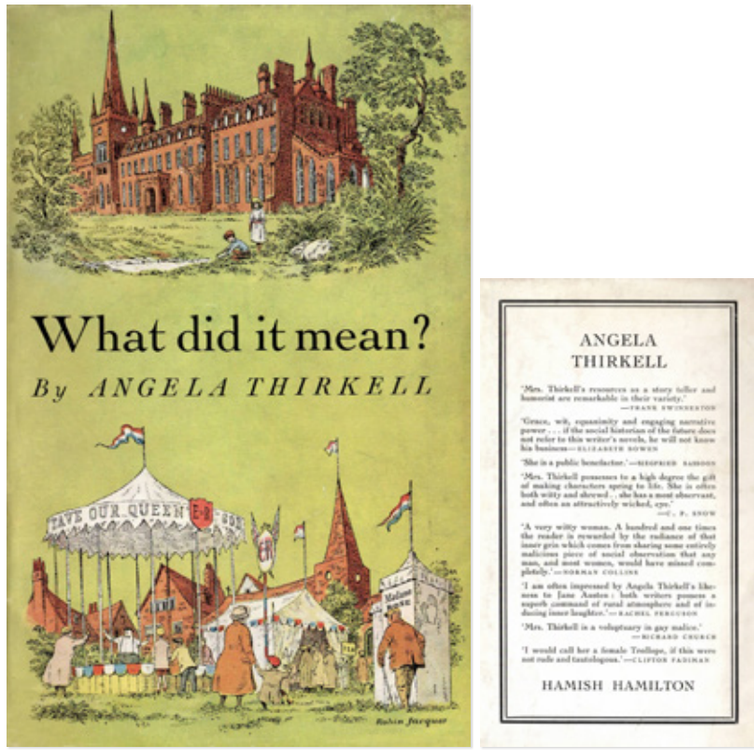
> Maany's funeral took place last Friday and anything more lugubrious, it would be impossible to imagine. …
>
> The only mourner who seemed sorry was Clare: looking like the President of the Ladies' Section of a Joy Club, she stood in the portico holding my and Lance's hands. Mother full of tasteless brightness, putting everyone uneasily at their ease. (She brought a bottle of champagne for us to drink afterwards. A good idea, but of course it wasn't champagne, it was a vicious *vin mousseux* [sparkling wine]). Denis like a Doppelgänger ….[18]

In July, Angela informed Graham that she went to Coutts and Co., her mother's bank and trustees, to obtain information about the estate:

> The question … arose of Mother's personal belongings and the division of her portable property and I had to tell them that to do the dividing 'by agreement among the children' would be very difficult, as Denis and Clare have hated my guts for years (I didn't put it like that) and will always be two to one. I don't look forward at all to the dividing with your Wicked Uncle and Dotty Aunt ganging up against us. Never mind.[19]

Angela's epithets for Denis and Clare stuck and she gradually modified them to WU and HWA: Wicked Uncle and Highly Wicked Aunt. She referred to Denis's removal of the paintings from their parents' home as 'the Rape of the Pictures'.

One of Angela's August letters to Graham began cheerfully, at least: 'Well, darling, We have won the Test Match and conquered Everest and put on the best pageant in the whole world, all in few months.'[20] The best pageant in the whole world was of course the coronation of Elizabeth II. Angela must have been pleased days later when one of Queen Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting wrote to thank her for sending the Queen a copy of *Jutland*



Front and back covers of *What did it mean?*

Cottage. (She received similar letters for *Enter Sir Robert* and *Never Too Late*.) The title *What did it mean?* (1954) refers to an 'obscure Barsetshire saying' about the year 1953, whose full meaning only emerges at the end of the novel. The saying refers to the coronation, the conquest of Everest and victory at the Ashes.

Angela spent Easter 1953 at Wilsford, as she mentioned to Jamie: 'When I next see you, you shall know ALL about my Easter at Wilsford with Stephen Tennant and how I made him and two other gentlemen (?) go to church on Easter Sunday.'[21] In another letter Angela noted the new fans she had acquired amongst fellow writers: 'I am much flattered by Dorothy L. [Sayers] being a fan. I should have thought I was far too lowbrow for her. I have always loved her thrillers but cannot manage her religious outbursts. We must meet one day. My newest fan is Violet Trefusis whom I had written about her enchanting, rambling memories of her past.'[22]

Angela enjoyed listening to Colin as art critic on the BBC radio programme *The Critics*, 'where he is always extremely good and far more intelligent than the others'.[23] On 23 August she noted he was to speak 'about Seaton Delaval, one of the beautiful old houses which is falling to ruin owing to taxes and the encroachments of open-cast mining. Alas, alas. His broadcasts are always so good; so unconceited (most announcers practically begin with saying they are the cat's whiskers) and so easy without being cheap.'

Lance and Kate's son, Robert, was born in 1953. Angela described him to Graham as 'a very good baby; rather the Simon type, fair and fat and placid'.[24] At the end of September Angela wrote:

> Endless confusion still goes on over Maany's [Margaret's] affairs. However I have now ackcherly [sic] got the beautiful portrait of Maam [Georgiana Burne-Jones] which used to hang in the dining-room at PG. The only real *portrait* he ever did; the rest were pictures. And he put more into Maam's face than he knew, to my mind. I think I am also getting an unfinished picture of Maany, pale blue, which was at one time in the hall at PG. These two and my Sargent will be for you three … .[25]

After the death of their mother, Angela's relationship with Denis seems to have improved slightly. In a May 1954 letter to Graham she mentioned Denis's daughter Mary's impending divorce:

> Denis is very silly not to 'come clean' about it, as blood is thicker than water (though also nastier sometimes) and I w[oul]d of course do anything I could for her. But as Denis is – or so he appears to think – of better birth than I am … poor old thing he IS a misery. I sometimes think of the Fairy Blackstick's gift to Prince Giglio [a reference to Thackeray's *Rose and the Ring*] 'a little misfortune' and what a good thing it is in some ways. It does help one a bit to understand other people when they are in trouble – as which of us isn't at some time or another?[26]

She sent Denis a card for his birthday, and received in reply a letter from him, enquiring whether she had received the works of art she wanted.[27]

However, Angela remained alienated from her sister. Commenting to Graham that Lance and Kate were having a fourth child so that Robert 'shall not be a spoilt youngest I gather', Angela added: 'But on that principle, where does one stop? Pity there wasn't one after your Aunt Clare



Edward Burne-Jones, portrait of Georgiana Burne-Jones

– or instead of her! Lord! How that woman has wasted her gifts and real talents, not to say genius!'[28]

In May Angela mentioned:

> The Lady Cynthia Asquith has gone off to Scotland & most of England personally conducting a tour for five ONLY very rich American ladies. The tour has been arranged by an agent, and her Ladyship goes with them, tries to keep them happy and contented in a country where no



Edward Burne-Jones, portrait of Margaret Burne-Jones

> hotel has private bathrooms, and takes them to tea with owners of some of the historic mansions, including Stanway. I should like to know what she gets for it! She IS a one-er![29]

The advertising brochure billed Cynthia as being 'on intimate terms with the owners of many of the great houses of Britain'. In addition to Stanway the tour included Bath, Chirk, Kirriemuir, Haddon Hall, Stratford, Oxford, Pulborough and Brighton. According to her biographer, Cynthia 'was paid

£900 for this jaunt and had to remind herself when the ladies became querulous that she was earning her living far more rapidly than by writing'.[30]

In the opening pages of *Happy Returns* (1952), Mr Macfadyen comments to young Lord Lufton that 'I had a mother myself, … and many's the time I could have hit her over the head. They are all the same, Lord Lufton.' Might the novelist have had her own sons' relationship to her in mind? Angela and her sons had been united in protesting over Denis's 'Rape of the Pictures', but as the decade wore on, Colin, and to some extent Graham, became increasingly divided from her. One source of division was Angela's views on her son's novels.

After publishing *A Short History of Canadian Art* in 1939, Graham's first novel came out in 1954. Angela wrote, 'I wait with GREAT excitement and interest for your BOOK; what will my peculiar offspring produce next?'[31] On reading *Lost Island: An Adventure,* however, she commented to her publisher:

> Graham has written a 'strangely beautiful' (*vide* publisher's blurb) novel of 'love and adventure' which, I regret to say, is so bad that you would not believe it – a mixture of Jules Verne and Breasts (cupped by gentlemen) and Ladies (some in Canada, some on desert island) the desires of whose bodies are ubiquitous and uncontrolled (Q[uer]y: how does one manage the *ubiquitous* desires? That bit is beyond me) – I can only hope for his sake that it will do very well. Published by the World Publishing Co. Cleveland and NY. Strongly Not Recommended by the Parents' Assoc., 1 Shawfield St. But I do hope it will sell, dreadful though it is.[32]

A few days later she added, 'I fear that Canada has been a Bad Thing as far as his artistic development is concerned. But if it sells and he is happy, *tant mieux* [so much the better].'[33] Avoiding a direct critique, however, Angela wrote to Graham in November: 'I have now got the English edition of your book, with many thanks. Very nicely got up and I hope it will do very well. If I see any reviews I will send them, but I expect Macmillan's are doing this for you. May it bring in lots of £'s while you are in N.Z. and afterwards.'[34]

In August, Angela mentioned to Graham that, along with many others she had just been interviewed for the *Picture Post* 'on the subject of "What things do you most dislike in men." A fairly large subject and I cannot say that I dislike them more than anyone else.'[35] This honest but unspectacular reply was not reported in the *Picture Post*. In *Never Too Late* (1956), Angela's alter ego Mrs Morland says explicitly to Lord Crosse, as she turns down what almost amounts to a marriage proposal, 'I like men very much.'

These assertions become retrospectively important because after Angela's death, reviewers of family biographies erroneously characterised her as a man-hater.

Later in the month Colin recorded an interview with Angela for the BBC. One thorny issue he raised briefly was the frequent reproach that her books are snobbish:

> Angela: … I think it's slightly snobbish to think they're snobbish.
> Colin: Everybody is – after all – about something, aren't they?
> Angela: … [P]eople are snobs about the Alps, or butterflies.
> Colin: Or about not being snobbish?
> Angela: Or deep-sea diving.

'Mrs Thirkell Remembers' was broadcast in December, and Angela felt that it went 'extremely well'. Long-time family friend Gilbert Murray got in touch, and she replied: 'I am overcome with remorse to think that you should have sat up late to hear Colin and me argle-bargling on the BBC. Yes, he does his job very well, though otherwise highly unsatisfactory.'[36]

One person who did not enjoy the broadcast was Uncle Denis. He wrote to Katie Lewis, another family friend, that '[Angela's] bit of publicity brought some shame and embarrassment on me, as it always does. I have a feeling that she should not mention my name without warning me (in which case I should always ask her not to).'[37] A few weeks later he mentioned Angela again:

> I believe she is now crossing the Atlantic, in a westerly direction. That makes us all feel much easier, for some reason or other. But even her famous book about Three Houses (which I had been hoping and planning to write myself when all invention petered out, but now of course I never shall) has inaccuracies in it. Let us talk of someone else. Or, perhaps, anyone else.[38]

Angela spent two months in the United States, where she saw her friends Lily Norton, Olivia Constable and the Coudert family. She visited her American publishers Alfred and Blanche Knopf at their home ('Château Knopf'), and attended a dinner in her honour at the Plaza Hotel.

On returning to London, Angela met Lance and Kate's one-day-old son Thomas. She noted that Colin was back from Kenya where he had been sent by the British Council. Also, 'Cynthia has just produced another book about Barrie; more desk-scrapings. I must say for Her Ladyship (of whom I am very fond, from old, old friendship) that she is industrious in her own way, but Lord! What you can get away with when you have a title. Long may it be so.'[39] At an Australia House meeting she saw Colin 'looking HUGE and almost FAT!! But he has vanished again.'[40] In her next letter to Graham, 'Colin is completely submerged since he returned from Africa and his telephone is mute; but he always turns up again.'[41]

Addressing the Kensington Townswomen's Guild in June, Angela spoke on 'Writing a Novel'. The *West London Observer* reported on the event: what the writer called the 'straight' novel 'had always concerned itself with the home, with the theme of "boy meets girl" in a thousand different varieties, and with the lives of the ordinary types of people we see around us'. Angela believed England led the world in this form of literature and made the point that Trollope's work still appeals to us today. Contemporary novels seemed to her to be written with some ulterior interest, such as crime, travel, a political viewpoint or exploitation of the sordid.[42]

At the end of November, Angela wrote to Roger Machell of Hamish Hamilton that 'I am not at all *en état* for anything as Colin, my second son, has got himself into a MOST unhappy mess with the police and I feel quite sick; not only for his idiocy but even more because I shall have to pay lawyers and everything.'[43] Angela wrote to Graham, now in Ottawa, that 'I have not said anything to you in my letters about the extremely disagreeable and serious affair in which Colin got himself and then came to me for help. It has been *very* worrying and expensive and I feel that I have "gone a step down" in consequence.'[44] Hoping Colin would write to Graham himself, she waited to go into details.

In the meantime, Angela spent a few days at the Royal Albion Hotel in Brighton for 'all the light' and 'good air'. She partially relented on her criticism of her bête noire Clement Attlee: 'we shall see who is to succeed Mr Atlee [sic] (whom everyone seems to like personally and respect). And Mr. Atlee [sic] is to be an earl – like everyone else. I am so glad Churchill didn't become Lord Chartwell and remains himself.' Cynthia Asquith happened to be staying at the same hotel and the two friends took their meals together.[45]

Finally, Angela heard from Graham about Colin, leading her to deliver her version of what had happened. Colin had been arrested in a CID raid for illicit drug traffic and borrowed £100 from her (a significant amount at the time). He already had a lawyer, but she wrote to her own lawyer, an old family friend, who also saw Colin. In the end Colin was entirely acquitted. Sometime later he went to see Angela again:

> When he came, far from being in the least grateful for my having tried to help, he burst into a terrifying state of rage and hatred (too like

> what I had been through so often many years ago, alas) and said quite appalling things about me. I simply held my tongue, for any answer would have made him coarser and louder. He abused me for about half an hour and I was physically terrified as well as horrified to find him like that. At last it ended and he went away.

Angela added that Colin 'also talked a great deal about "the only woman I ever loved" who is of course Mayou, who was in many ways a very bad influence on him, but a mother cannot and should not interfere with a grown-up son's loves and friends, and I have never done it'. She nonetheless invited Colin to supper on Boxing Day, with Lance and Kate and other friends, to 'give him this one more chance to behave like a human being'.[46]

The scene had left an indelible mark. A year later Angela wrote to Margaret Bird that 'one tries to shake off and forget these things, but the FOUL SUBCONSCIOUS then takes it out of your body or your mind. The worst one could wish to *any* parent is to have a child turn on it like a hyaena.'[47]

In late 1956 Angela attended an exhibition of Stephen Tennant's drawings at Gallery One, owned by Colin's friends Victor Musgrave and his wife Ida Kar, a photographer. Angela described the show as 'horrible'. For Angela, Stephen 'was a Golden Lad in youth (greatly spoiled by nanny and beloved Mother)', and she remarked 'on the stout red-faced country gentleman he has become. What his older brother Christopher has paid in the way of senseless debts for him I am glad I don't know.'[48] Then, early in the new year, she saw Stephen again in London. In her words, 'Stephen Tennant (always welcome as child and grandchild of old friends) blew in yesterday, *frais, rose et pimpant et un peu veau gras* [fresh, pink and dapper and a bit of a fatted calf] – but always affectionate with the three-generation background.'[49]

On the occasion of Tennant's Gallery One exhibition, Stephen Spender, the editor of the literary magazine *Encounter*, printed a selection of the artist's drawings and commissioned Colin to write about meeting him during the war. Colin began the article with a flashback to Malvern, Melbourne in 1928. He was fourteen then and a pupil at Scotch College, 'whose puritan tradition of healthy philistinism was even more vigorous than were those of the academies in Scotland from which it sprang'. He felt he was predisposed to profoundly disapprove of Stephen Tennant:

> For there arrived, in this year, a letter to my mother from Stephen, in which he described, with handwriting that spiralled over the leaves like the tendrils of a vine, the alterations he was making to his house,

> Wilsford Manor … . As my mother read this letter to me, her growing enchantment at his account of the gutting of an Edwardian mansion and its transformation into an oriental-southern-English dream, was matched by my deepening suspicion: for it was clear to me that none of the fantastic decorations with which Wilsford was being embellished was either necessary or useful in the least. When my mother ended her account, her voice saturated with nostalgia for England and for extravagance (in all senses of the word), she raised her enraptured eyes for my reaction. I gave it with the authority of a child of John Knox and of the Southern Cross: 'It's a waste of money,' I said, in flat, censorious tones.

When Colin was stationed at nearby Bulford in 1940, Stephen had invited him to Wilsford and the two 'sons of' met for the first time. What Angela called 'the three-generation background' made it seem to Colin 'highly likely that the representatives of the younger generations would loathe each other on sight', but he ultimately liked Stephen and he also liked his art: 'Stephen Tennant is a painter in love with banished, unattainable delights; and though he paints a vision of forbidden pleasures, the total impression which his pictures give is one of innocence.'[50]

Where Angela had once been enchanted by, and nostalgic for, Stephen's extravagance, she now found his pictures horrible. She pitied his elder brother, obliged to cover his debts. Where Colin, on the other hand, had once judged the extravagance at Wilsford unnecessary and useless, he now found that Stephen's art conveyed an impression of innocence. As with Angela's and Colin's novels that touch on their respective experiences with Campbell McInnes – *O, These Men* and *June in her Spring* – there is an obvious kinship between mother and son, yet they are also consistently out of step. By this time of course they were no longer speaking.

A few years on from her dramatic break with Colin, Angela informed Hamilton in 1958 that

> [a]fter a very disagreeable and even frightening scene made by my eldest son Graham (who is really old enough to know better and was *chef du protocole* for Her Majesty's visit to Ottawa) I am considerably wrecked, the more so as Colin made an appalling scene some time ago, as you may remember my telling you. Alas 'the sins of the fathers' … but they appear not to be visited on the children but on their unfortunate mother.[51]

In August, Angela's second cousin Oliver Baldwin died, and she commented in a letter to Lady Milner on what she saw as his 'wasted and unpleasant

life. We shall never know what Stan and Cissie [Oliver's parents] thought.' This led her to bring up Colin: 'I have an odious child (again, such *good* stuff wasted) and *I don't think of him at all*. When your own child has turned on you as if you were a street Arab there is nothing to do but to leave him to himself and *hope* never to see him.'[52]

Who should have eulogised Oliver Baldwin but Angela's bête noire 'Lord Atlee' (she consistently misspelled his name) as well as Colin (in print), as she informed Jamie Hamilton: 'My *very* peculiar cousin Oliver Baldwin is dead, with an *éloge* Lord Atlee [sic] pronounced at Golders Green – and that was the whole ceremony, not a prayer, not a nothing. I see my peculiar son Colin MacInnes (as he spells it) has written an *éloge* of him in the *Times*: as far as I know it is quite undeserved.'[53]

In September Angela mentioned Graham's 'Frightful Scene' to Margaret Bird:

> I have felt pretty queer since my eldest son (46, married with children, over here on a 'course' from Canada where he lives) chose to make a Frightful Scene to me – about what, or why, I shall never know. All one can do with an ANGRY MIDDLE-AGED MAN is to do *nothing*. His father, my first husband was the same.[54]

Graham's son Simon remembers this scene. His father and he were

> taking Angela for a walk at the Chelsea Barracks one Saturday. Angela mentioned to one of the veterans that … Graham … had a very important job at Canada House … . We were supposed to go to her house for tea. Instead, Graham took her to her home and lost his temper, flung a 10 bob note on her mantlepiece to pay for the tea sandwiches she had bought. Graham stormed out of her house, [with Simon] in tow, jumped into the car … , and sped off up the street with Angela running behind for a few feet calling his name. When we got home my mother … remonstrated with him and told him that even if his mother had behaved foolishly at the Barracks that that was no way to treat her. She made him phone her to apologize for his bad behaviour. The next weekend as usual she came for Sunday lunch.[55]

Graham's scene was less serious than Colin's, but in both cases Angela's sons' behaviour reminded her of their father. There was also an obvious pattern of animosity within her own family.

Discussing her Uncle Phil in *Three Houses*, Angela wrote that 'His was one of those unhappy dispositions that can rarely be at their best with

their own family.'[56] Graham Robertson, who knew the Burne-Joneses and the Mackails well, made a similar remark in relation to Angela's mother's 'Grouping': '… I gather that her family do not regard it as an unmixed blessing. But then her family have such very pronounced characters and dislike each other with such whole-hearted fervour that they could hardly be expected to group under any circumstances. The result would be disaster.'[57] A series of acid remarks come to mind: in letters to his daughter, Kipling referred to his once-favourite cousin Margaret's daughter as 'that damned Angela', while her son Denis was 'several sorts of pig-dog'. Angela herself wrote that her brother and sister had hated her guts for years; after Colin's scene she wished he 'were in Kensal Green [Cemetery]'; her second cousin Oliver Baldwin was 'a complete rotter if there ever was one', and so on.

Yet these last three remarks of Angela's were all made in the final few years of her life, when her health was seriously declining. Frequently she would repeat the same story, not only to different correspondents but to the same correspondent and sometimes in multiple letters to the same correspondent with the same date. In the last decade of her life her letters to her typist and friend Margaret Bird centred almost as much on her health as on her typescripts. In October 1958 she wrote to Margaret, applying the image to herself for the first time: 'I feel rather like Tom in *The Water Babies* when he came during his travels to a place called "STOP".' Writing was no longer a pleasure: 'At the moment B'shire isn't even Escape – just a horrible job that must be done.'[58]

Graham made peace with Angela, but there are no more letters because he and his family were now based in London. In December she complained to Hamilton:

> My Canadian family are still over here *en poste* and *more* exhausting than Lance and Kate I do find them, because they judge *everything* by Ottawa standards and think very poorly of us – especially of me because I live in a small house without central heating and haven't a car.[59]

In mentioning Graham and his family to Margaret Bird, Angela wrote – rather implausibly – 'we all suffer a good deal because they do so despise us for NOT living exactly as they do and not being "socialites"!'[60]

In Angela's last years she had lunch on alternate Sundays with Graham and his family, and Lance and his family.

George Thirkell died in Melbourne in February 1959. Angela's Australian friends helped her recuperate some of the possessions she had left behind so many years ago. Viola Garvin died in Oxford in October and Angela wrote her obituary in *The Times*. She concluded it as follows:

> Her kindness to the young and her understanding of them was unending, her gaiety unquenchable. One still cannot think of her except as very much alive and doing things for others and – as always – with deep understanding of and sympathy for the young. Some of one's friends when they die seem to vanish into smoke. Some remain though we may not see them. I should not be in the least surprised to find that Viola was in the room with some kind thought in her head. For her the words *Multum amavit* [she loved] are very true. And that love remains in the heart of all her surviving friends – for her.[61]

Cynthia Asquith, another lifelong friend of Angela's, also died in Oxford, in March 1960. But by then the novelist may have been too ill to take it in.

For her seventieth birthday in January 1960, Angela wrote that 'My family and my publisher are giving me respectively two dinners (my Canadian son & Lance) and one lunch (Hamish Hamilton).'[62] After that she went downhill rapidly. She was hospitalised in April, diagnosed with aplastic anaemia, and given her first blood transfusion at St Thomas's hospital near Godalming. From there she was transferred to Birtley House Nursing Home in Bramley where she had regular transfusions. Neither the nursing home staff nor Angela's sons nor indeed Angela herself were aware how serious her illness was.

Angela made a point of destroying the letters she received, but once she was ill Lance preserved her correspondence. From Wilsford Manor, Stephen Tennant wrote:

> Darling Angela, How good to know you are now better and resting in a *nice* home – and may soon be able to come to Wilsford. I'll send my Jaguar for you, if you wish? Do drink *cold milk* and rest a lot. The garden is longing for you. I lie in a hammock and watch lizards basking in the sun near a fountain with nenuphars and fish. I *love* all you say – I miss *Margaret* so, and Cynthia. Bless you, Stephen[63]

Birtley House was indeed 'a *nice* home', but Angela was bored and lonely there. She preferred the contact she had had with other patients and staff at St Thomas's.

In September, Angela was reading Proust's *Prisonnière*. Lance visited every week, and Angela also wrote to him: 'I am trying *not* to read too much because then I'll have nothing to read … . I would give sixpence to anyone who would rescue me.'[64] In another letter she commented that 'I shall invite Les Girls (Louise [Porter] and Patience [Ross]) if I can remember their address and ask if they feel like coming over. They'll give



Angela Thirkell, taken by Ida Kar

this refeened [sic] place a bit of a shake-up if they do. I couldn't be bothered to get anyone else.'[65]

The next month Angela heard from Patience Ross, who was travelling in the United States and unaware of her illness. Patience's letter ended with a Hampton-like remark: '*how* I wish Louise would get back from seeing her sister off so that we could DRINK'.[66] On 10 January, Stephen wrote again: 'Where are you darling Angela? At home now – are you better? Please write me, All Love to you, Stephen'.[67]

Angela died on 29 January 1961, the day before her seventy-first birthday. She left an estate worth over £80,000 to be divided between Graham and Lance, since she had disinherited Colin. His brothers offered to give him his third of the inheritance, but he asked only for a case of champagne.[68]

Graham had lived abroad for many years and Colin was estranged from his mother: Angela's very many friends, acquaintances and readers

addressed their condolences to Lance. Eric Millar wrote in part that 'For myself it means the loss, with one exception, of my oldest friend by many years. I remember my first meeting with her in the train from Guildford to Witley in what must have been 1896, and we never had a break of any kind in our friendship.'[69]

Patience Ross wrote:

> Your Mother showed Louise and myself a very special friendship and great kindness – and we had many happy times together. It's egotistical to say now, how bitterly ashamed I am not to have written to her since we got back from America – I was always going to – she knew that I was a dreadful procrastitute [sic], and approved the term.
>
> Your Mother, I believe, felt great hurt at the lack of appreciation she met with in all that she did for your grandmother. Thank goodness that this was so counteracted by the very different situation between you and her – because Givers (and your Mother was a prime one) do like sometimes to be Given-to's.

Colin also wrote: 'My dear Lance, Graham said to me, "he reminded me of George [Thirkell]: he has the same kindness". And that is very true indeed. Thoughts are with you. Please know I realize (even if at a distance) all you have done: and shall hope myself to be able to do something in other ways. Love, Colin.'[70]

Denis felt estranged from Angela; his letter focussed entirely on Lance's loss as opposed to his own:

> Dear Lance,
>
> This weather, and a tooth – or, rather, a non-tooth of mine, for it was yanked out yesterday – have kept me away from your mother's service today, and I hope Mary [his daughter] will have explained. And perhaps that would not have been a good occasion for expressing sympathy; so here comes a letter, even if you now regard it as overdue. I believe there was a special kind of link between Angela and you, and I know what it is like to see someone whom one loves going through an awful time before they are allowed to escape. So please chalk me up in a mental list of those who feel great sympathy for you, and sorrow that your mother had to suffer – as I fear she must have done – so much before there was what is called, and one always hopes is, a Release.
>
> Please give my love to Kate.
>
> Yours ever, Denis[71]

A very eloquent letter came from Jamie Hamilton:

> [Angela] was the most loyal and appreciative of authors, modestly claiming that she wrote the same book over and over again and expressing surprise that anyone read them. *Ars est celare artem* [It is art to conceal art]. In a world in which authors constantly complain of inadequate sales and advertising or of misleading blurbs or jacket designs, it was a joy, as well as a spur, to know that one had her complete confidence.
>
> It was also a joy to see her facing hostile criticism and hate-letters with equanimity – almost with enjoyment – and retaining the dignity and humour which characterised her whole life. She set high standards of manners and behaviour which naturally upset the 'nouvelle vague', and she has now left a world in which gracious living and breeding count far less than they did when she started to write. That there are many still who appreciate such things is shown by her devoted readers from several of whom we have had most touching letters.[72]

One such devoted reader was Angela's fellow novelist Elizabeth Bowen.

Elizabeth concluded her introduction to the omnibus edition with the observation that 'Leisure, gentleness, beauty were far from Angela Thirkell. That in her art she should dwell on them, bestowing them on the creatures of her fancy, was, I think, natural – and *is* moving. All honour to her.'[73]

AFTERWORD

Assassination of an Authoress

'I suppose, Laura,' said the Dean,
'that you get a very large fan mail?'

'Good gracious, no!' said Mrs Morland, nearly losing a hairpin in her surprise. 'It is only people like Mrs Rivers that get fan mail. She always tells me how many letters she gets, whenever I see her. But I have some very good hate letters,' said Mrs Morland with modest pride.

Angela Thirkell, *Love Among the Ruins* (1948)

In real life Angela seems to have received relatively few hostile letters from her readers. She saved one noteworthy one: in 1941 a Vera Telfer in Maida Vale suggested that Angela's novel *Cheerfulness Breaks In* ought instead to be called *Vulgarity Breaks Out*. The novelist was forced to apologise to Miss Telfer after incorporating a brief extract from the letter into *Love Among the Ruins*, attributing it to a 'V. Lefter'. Vera Telfer's letter was an exception, and Angela actually received a great deal of fan mail, to which she habitually responded.

Publisher Jamie Hamilton's letter of condolence after Angela's death acknowledged that her standards of manners and behaviour 'upset the "nouvelle vague"', and when Margot Strickland's *Portrait of a Lady Novelist* came out in 1977, almost all reviewers were very upset. Their reviews amounted to a stream of hate letters: not for the biography, but for the 'lady novelist' herself. Angela's sons Graham and Colin, who both wrote about their mother after her death, had died in 1970 and 1976 respectively. It was left to her youngest son Lance to respond to the hateful reviews, which he did in 1983 in a lecture called 'Assassination of an Authoress or How the critics took my mother to the laundry', whose title I have borrowed.[1]

In chronological order of publication, Maurice Richardson in 'The voice of Mrs Exeter' in the *TLS* wrote that Angela 'was not exactly a success as a mother. It was tactless and cruel of her to insist that George should beat his two stepsons really hard.' Biographer Margot Strickland based this information on Graham McInnes's *Road to Gundagai*, describing his

childhood in Australia. It should, however, also be noted that Graham's book is dedicated to the memory of Angela, and that the existence of these beatings was strongly contested by Lance. Then, concluding his review in a sort of festival of misogyny, Richardson asserted that '[Angela's] chief crony towards the end was Caroline Lejeune, with whom she used to lap rum, and who shared her Barsetshire fantasy. On one occasion, so Paul Dehn told me, they were joined by Dorothy Sayers: he described them as looking like "a trio of very cross hot-cross buns, formidable in the extreme".'[2]

In 'Deadly Angela' in the *Observer*, Hilary Spurling wrote that the biography 'depicts a monstrous egotist, snobbish, reactionary, shallow, irredeemably callous in private, mistress in public of the sour aside and the spiteful dig'.[3] For Patricia Beer in *The Listener*, Graham's autobiography 'gives such a brilliant picture of a monster in a landscape [i.e., Angela]'.[4] Francis King in *The Spectator* began by relating his first meeting with Angela, where she complained at length about 'her "char" (as she called her) … . A monster, I decided; and no subsequent meeting caused me to modify this initial view of her. The razor of her tongue was whetted on what had become, by her middle years, a stone of a heart.'[5] In 'A portrait of ghastly good taste' in the *Sunday Times*, Claire Tomalin concluded that 'whatever was good in [the English] way of life was hardly exemplified in the life of Mrs Thirkell herself. She appears to have been unblessed by either gentleness or charity.'[6]

Finally, in 'Beast in tweeds' in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Arthur Marshall described 'A cold-blooded mother who totally excluded one of her three sons from her substantial will, odious to her first husband who attempted a reconciliation, she sank sadly away into self-pity and loneliness.'[7] Can this be the same Arthur Marshall who, eleven years later, wrote the introduction to the Hogarth edition of *Summer Half*? This Arthur Marshall concluded, as follows: 'If I were asked to provide just one word with which to describe the novels of Angela Thirkell, I would supply the adjective "wholesome". In the field of fiction it is a word that is long since out of fashion, but none the worse for that.'[8]

In each case Lance complained to the editor of the publication and asked to have his own letter printed; in a few instances he succeeded. He also wrote to the editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography* about its description of Angela as 'a martinet' and 'not a motherly woman'. He eventually managed to have the offending paragraph rewritten. And yet, Lance concluded his speech, '[t]here is a depressing coda to this sad story'.

The coda came in 1983 when biographer Tony Gould published *Inside Outsider: The Life and Times of Colin MacInnes.* Once again reviewers had a field day with Angela. The *Sunday Telegraph* reviewer described her as 'a

man-hater'.[9] The same day the *Sunday Times* reviewer, describing Colin's character as 'quite horrid' at its worst, suggested that 'Perhaps it was his mother's fault: she was Angela Thirkell, the apologist of Victorian Values, Rudyard Kipling's cousin, a steely man-hater who divorced Colin's father.'[10] The *TLS* reviewer wrote that Angela's first husband, 'probably, killed her love for her children. … Her offhand treatment of her three sons shows her to have been a very selfish woman.'[11] For the anonymous reviewer in *The Economist*, 'The most immediate, and damaging, influence was [Colin's] mother, Angela Thirkell. She seems, by Mr Gould's account, to have projected her sexual frigidity into a larger inability to show affection … .'[12] In fact, Tony Gould's biography was based on careful research and many sources. He detailed the ups and many downs of the relationship between Colin and his mother, but phrases like 'steely man-hater' and 'sexual frigidity' appear nowhere in his book.

In the letter to Lady Milner extracted as an epigraph to Part One, Angela recalled that 27 Young Street where she was born was opposite the house 'where Charlotte Brontë had that deadly party with Thackeray at which she never spoke'.[13] The dinner at Thackeray's home took place on 12 June 1850. According to a Brontë biographer, Thackeray had invited 'a group of society women, mere dabblers in the world of literature', to meet Charlotte Brontë. Charlotte was timid and became prickly when Thackeray addressed her as 'Currer Bell'. Her ill-fitting hairpiece, bought specially for the occasion, was a source of amusement to the other guests. As soon as dinner was over Charlotte left and Thackeray retired 'to the masculine comforts of his club'. His guests had spent 'one of the dullest evenings of their lives', but 'made much capital out of relating the anecdote for years afterwards at Charlotte's expense'.[14]

Angela liked Charlotte Brontë, but she was not particularly like her.[15] The 'nouvelle vague' generation of book reviewers, however, expertly played the part of the society women at Thackeray's party. At least one of them had met Angela, and her 1977 biography allowed the rest of them to vicariously 'meet' her for the first time. They then used their column inches to relay anecdotes about the 'lady novelist's' bun, her tweeds, her use of the word 'char', her marriages, her sons' most damaging statements about her – to do anything but review the biography itself – very effectively initiating the assassination of an authoress.[16]

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25. Op. cit., C. MacInnes, 'A Pre-Raphaelite Memory', pp. 141-2.
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3. Op. cit., G. McInnes, *Finding a Father*, pp. 95-6.
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6. 'I First Saw', *Winnipeg Evening Tribune*, 28 July 1923.
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11. *The Weekly Dispatch*, 18 November 1917.
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Another Country

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67. S. Tennant to Angela Thirkell, 10 January 1961.
68. Op. cit., T. Gould, *Inside Outsider*, pp. 156-7.
69. E. Millar to Lance Thirkell, 30 January 1961.
70. C. MacInnes to Lance Thirkell, 31 January 1961.
71. D. Mackail to Lance Thirkell, 2 February 1961.
72. J. Hamilton to Lance Thirkell, 2 February 1961.
73. Although Colin never really appreciated his mother's Barsetshire novels, his last question, when he interviewed her for the BBC, made a similar point: 'Darling, you've had, in many ways, I think rather a hard life, haven't you – both materially and in other ways, but has it been on the whole a satisfactory life so far?'

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16. A notable exception is 'Passion in a lady novelist's life', published in the *Evening Standard* (3 February 1978). Reviewer Margaret Forster makes the point: 'There is absolutely everything wrong with this so-called biography.'

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Ankle Deep (Hamish Hamilton, 1933)
High Rising (Hamish Hamilton, 1933)
Wild Strawberries (Hamish Hamilton, 1934)
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Three Score and Ten, with C.A. Lejeune (Hamish Hamilton, 1961)

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