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Chin Up, Girls!

A Book of Women's Obituaries
from The Daily Telegraph

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Introduction

When Australian Red Cross nurse Vivian Bullwinkel and her little band of fellow nurses awaited their execution by Japanese soldiers, her obituary records that their matron sought to encourage her young charges: 'Chin up, girls,' she said, 'I'm proud of you and I love you all.' Few of the stories in this collection are as harrowing as Nurse Bullwinkel's, yet Matron's exhortation seems a suitable title for a book of women's obituaries. 'Chin up, Girls' suggests a doughty quality – courage in the face of adversity – which they all share. There are no shrinking violets here.

Ever since Hugh Massingberd took over the *Daily Telegraph*'s 'obits' page in 1986 and turned it into a glorious celebration of human oddity and idiosyncrasy, women's obituaries, though in a minority for obvious reasons of history, have stood in a class of their own. Where men can be intrepid, resourceful, comic, depraved or slightly dotty, women often push the boundaries a bit further. There is a special quality to women's obituaries which sets them apart. Never formulaic and enlivened by unexpected twists and turns, they tend to be more vividly colourful, more heedless of convention than their male counterparts.

It is impossible to conceive of a masculine equivalent of that confection of tulle and pancake, Dame Barbara Cartland. Her obituary records that she once circulated to newspaper editors a folder tied with pink ribbon labelled: 'The History of Barbara Cartland and How I Want to be Remembered'. It included the fact that 'In 1981, I was chosen as Achiever of the Year by the National Home Furnishing Association of Colorado Springs.' A love of shameless self-publicity is not exclusive to either sex, but Dame Barbara took it to new extremes.

When the writer Simon Sebag-Montefiore set much of his

fictional university memoir *King's Parade* (1991) at the house of his old Cambridge landlady, Sadie Barnett, his publishers are said to have found the character based on Mrs Barnett beyond belief, and she was duly excised.

And not even the most imaginative novelist would conceive of so improbable a character as Bapsy, Marchioness of Winchester, the Indian-born third wife of the nonagenarian 16th Marquess and an early example of the 'bunny boiler'. During their well-publicised marital disputes, she stalked her husband and his friend Eve Fleming, raging in vitriolic letters: 'May a viper's fangs be forever round your throat. And may you stew in a pit of your own juice.'

Most of those whose lives are celebrated in this book reached their prime at a uniquely exciting time – between universal suffrage and the Sex Discrimination Act – between women gaining a right to be heard and women being accepted as having a right to equal opportunities. This was the generation of women who made it possible.

They had a lot to put up with. Dame Sheila Sherlock, liver specialist and first woman professor of medicine, graduated top in her year from Edinburgh University but was prevented from holding a house job in a hospital because she was female. The obituary of Violet Webb, Britain's first woman Olympic medal winner, records that women athletes who entered the 1928 Olympics, were told that 'at the Olympic games [the woman's] primary role should be like in the ancient tournaments – the crowning of the [male] victors with laurel.' In 1955, Baroness Wootton of Abinger was inspired to write *The Social Foundation of Wages Policy* by her discovery that her salary as a female don was the same as the money earned by an elephant giving children rides at Whipsnade Zoo.

That many who achieved something in their own right developed a tough carapace is hardly surprising. The formidable Dame Sheila, her obituary records, had a short way with Fleet

Street hacks, who no doubt formed a substantial percentage of her clientele: 'How much do you drink,' she would demand brusquely. 'We all know that journalists drink a lot, but how many do you have before breakfast?' Hermione, Countess of Ranfurly recalled that she was forced to contend, as a child, with the fact that 'I started life as a disappointment because I wasn't a boy. I continued being a disappointment because I was ugly. Instead of minding, I determined to ride better, run faster, be funnier and give more generous presents than the rest of my family.'

Many who left their mark had private means, and of those some also enjoyed the inestimable advantage (at least as far as their obituaries are concerned) of being born into the aristocracy, certain sections of which have never played by the rules which govern the lives of lesser mortals. The daughters of such characters as the 7th Earl Beauchamp KG 'who after acts unpardonable was obliged to leave the country and settle on the Continent', could hardly be expected to lead a regular life.

Nor is it an accident that many of the women in this book were unmarried. Some decided that marriage would hold them back from what they wanted to do. Marjorie Courtenay-Latimer, the local museum curator who discovered that the coelacanth – a prehistoric fish thought to be extinct – was still alive, broke off an early engagement when she found her fiancé 'didn't like my madness in collecting plants and climbing trees after birds'. For some, tragic circumstances deprived them of a happy married life, but spurred them on in other directions. Baroness Wootton's husband was killed in action five weeks after their marriage. She went on to become an academic, a governor of the BBC, a peeress and the first woman to sit on the Woolsack.

War was liberating in other ways too. Susan Travers, who was to become the first female member of the French Foreign Legion, abandoned a vapid and somewhat superficial youth to

drive officers and nurse the wounded in France and Italy: 'I had become', she later wrote, 'the person I always wanted to be.' The author Mary Wesley described the effect of war on many women: 'They'd escaped from home, got jobs, lived absolutely for the moment, slept with their lovers – because the next day they might be dead.'

As they explored new opportunities, some women went a little over the top in their efforts to prove that they could be as good as their male counterparts. The obituary of Beatrice 'Tilly' Shilling, inventor of Miss Shilling's Orifice, a device which enabled Spitfire pilots to dive without stalling their engines, records that 'she could braze a butt joint with the skill of a fitter' and that visitors to her house were 'astonished by the variety of motorcycle parts scattered around'. Elsie Widdowson, the nutritionist who helped develop the wartime diet, injected herself with all manner of unpleasant substances at great risk to her own health, in order to discover their effects on the body.

The sex war is only a small part of the story. With one or two exceptions (notably the splendid battling feminist Bella Abzug) few of these women had much time for 60s-style Women's Lib. The fearsome Rear-Admiral Grace Hopper, who helped develop the computer language Cobol and coined the term 'bug', was delighted to be named the first Computer Sciences Man of the Year in 1969. 'I'm thoroughly in the doghouse with the women's liberation people,' she remarked. 'They once asked me if I had ever met prejudice and I said I've always been too busy to look for it.'

Almost to a woman our subjects would have been horrified by today's 'victim culture' and would have taken a dim view of introspection. Whether they are enduring torture by the Gestapo (Mary Lindell) or getting the 'fuzzy end of the lollipop' in love (too many to list), there is never a tremor of self-pity. 'Don't bring me flowers,' snaps the Labour *grande dame* Olive Gibb as she nears her end, 'I'm not dead yet.' Nor is there any

whingeing about male chauvinism, though most of them faced it to a degree that would be almost unimaginable now.

Much more striking is the puppyish sense of excitement of women who found themselves free at last to follow their own star. 'Cheerio, Mummy,' calls Peggy Salaman as she sets off in her single-engine Puss Moth to beat the London to Cape Town light aeroplane record: 'I'm determined to do or die and, believe me, I'm going to do.' And she does. Her obituary records that, not content with breaking the record, she picked up a couple of lion cubs *en route*, bottle fed them in mid air and brought them back to the family home in Bayswater where 'there were disagreeable odours – despite unsparing applications of eau-de-Cologne – and ineradicable scratches on the parquet floor.'

But this collection is not some worthy litany of women's achievements played out to the accompaniment of shattering glass ceilings. In these post-feminist days we can welcome the fact that freedom for women means not only freedom to be good, brave or clever, but freedom to be mad, bad or dangerous to know – sometimes all three.

What are we to make of Eileen Fox, the rotund and talkative 'Queen of Soho', who was given to removing her clothes in public when she felt she was being paid insufficient attention and sued British Airways after being bitten on the bottom by a flea? 'A patriot,' her obituarist notes, 'she could seldom hear *Rule Britannia* without loosening her bra straps.' Or Shoe Taylor, the butcher's daughter from Oldham who was inspired to adopt an alternative lifestyle by *The Sound of Music*. Her obituary records that before becoming the devoted mistress of right-wing toff Jonathan Guinness, she spent ten years as a wandering hippy, doing drugs, sex and alternative therapies, before ending up 'a bulimic recluse living in a stone hut in the foothills of the Pyrenees, reduced to scrounging around restaurants and guzzling leftovers which she would then immediately vomit'.

None of the women whose lives are chronicled here had their careers mapped out for them. They could not follow their fathers into the family regiment – or inherit a title. No rich uncle would take them to his club to introduce them to his contacts in the City. As a consequence their stories often have a free-wheeling, anarchic quality, full of surprises and sudden changes of direction. Muriel Walker, alias K'tut Tantri, alias Surabaya Sue, began her career in Hollywood writing about film stars for magazines, ditched her husband, upped sticks and moved to Bali to become a painter, fell in love with a Balinese prince, became a hotelier and then an Indonesian freedom fighter in the war against the Dutch.

Choosing the obituaries to include has not been easy. The 'long list' we assembled after several months of trawling through the archives would have filled many volumes. With one or two exceptions, we have tried to avoid the too obviously famous. The great strength of the *Daily Telegraph*'s obituaries page (and a source of immense pleasure for those who work on it) is its concern with the little-known figures whose stories, untainted by familiarity or made tedious by repetition, can bring an era vividly to light. Some obituaries have appeared in previous collections (although we have attempted to keep the numbers down). We make no apology for this, as it would be odd, in this sort of compendium, to omit the best.

We have sought to include as wide a spectrum as possible but this book does not pretend to be remotely comprehensive or even representative. Our selection is highly subjective, our main demand being that they should be good stories written well and in a way which should provoke a strong response in the reader. If you don't cry at the harrowing story of Nurse Bullwinkel, or laugh out loud when reading the obituary of Fanny Cradock, the 'irascible *grande dame* of the kitchen', then there's no hope for you.

Georgia Powell and Katharine Ramsay