

Obituary of Lady Dorothy Heber Percy

by Mark Amory

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Lady Dorothy Heber-Percy

Dorothy Lygon: born 22 February 1912; married 1985 Robert Heber-Percy (died 1987); died Oxford 13 November 2001.

Lady Dorothy Heber-Percy owed her modest degree of fame to her friendship with Evelyn Waugh. When he said "I fell in love with a family", it was hers to which he referred and he put bits of some of them and their house into his most popular and famous novel, *Brideshead Revisited*.

She had been born in 1912 Lady Dorothy Lygon, fourth child of the rich, aristocratic and altogether grand seventh Earl of Beauchamp of Madresfield Court, in Worcestershire. Waugh had met two of her brothers at Oxford, the younger, Hugh, being charming, weak and already drinking rather a lot. Later their father was involved in a scandal. His homosexuality had never been a secret – the fingers of the footmen serving dinner were said to have been glittering with diamonds. His wife's resentful brother, Bendor, the second Duke of Westminster, constantly referred to him as "my bugger-in-law" and so forced the situation that he had to flee the country to avoid prosecution in 1931.

Although it was explained to her at great length, Lady Beauchamp never quite understood what all the trouble was about. She retired with her youngest boy, leaving the house to the other children, who therefore had an unusual degree of freedom.

Waugh became a constant visitor and lifelong friend, particularly with the girls. He wrote them smutty, childlike letters full of private slang and jokes and gave them nicknames: Lady Mary, "Maimie" to others, was "Blondy"; Lady Dorothy, who had generally kept her nursery name of "Coote", became "Poll", "Little Poll" or "Pollen".

It was not long after his painful divorce and Waugh was happy at Madresfield. Years later, when his nostalgic book *Brideshead* was about to come out in 1945, he wrote to Lady Dorothy, It's all about a family, whose father lives abroad, as it might be Boom [Beauchamp] – but it's not Boom – and a younger son, people will say he's like Hughie but you'll see he's not really Hughie – and there's a house as it might be Mad, but it isn't really Mad. So in the same way, Lady Dorothy was not really the younger sister, Cordelia. Later still, Waugh's second wife, Laura, was to describe Lady Dorothy as "the nicest of all your friends".

Lady Mary, two years older, was a powerful, almost Wagnerian, blonde with many admirers. Lady Dorothy was plainer and quieter. When they signed joke names in a visitor's book Lady Mary wrote "Sporting Hostess" and Lady Dorothy "ADC to Sporting Hostess".

In 1932 Waugh dedicated *Black Mischief* to them both. When the Second World War came Lady Dorothy joined the Waafs and went to Italy, where she worked on photographic interpretation. Afterwards she farmed in Gloucestershire, rode keenly and was one of the last women in England to hunt side-saddle.

She worked as social secretary to the British Ambassador in Athens and in 1956 went as a governess to Istanbul, where she slept under a table. After a spell on a Greek island she returned and put an advertisement in a magazine, "Woman wants work".

Not as a direct result, she became an archivist for Christie's. The visitor's book the sisters signed had been at Faringdon, then in Berkshire, now in Oxfordshire, home of the eccentric peer Gerald, 14th Baron Berners and his companion, Robert Heber-Percy. Berners definitely did appear in a novel, as Lord Merlin, in Nancy Mitford's *The Pursuit of Love* (1945) and the whole atmosphere was fantastic, perhaps reminiscent of some of the work of Iris Murdoch but with jokes. Bisexuality made complications: when Heber-Percy married and there was a child, all remained. There was also a constant flow of smart or artistic guests, John and Penelope Betjeman were neighbours, Salvador Dali looked in, Frederick Ashton came down. Lady Dorothy was a constant visitor.

Berners, ugly and talented, was painfully shy and she found that, even when she had succeeded in making him relax, at the next meeting she had to start all over again. Heber-Percy, who had swiftly earned his nickname of "The Mad Boy", was dashingly attractive and created an atmosphere of excitement. After Berners's death in 1950 he continued to run the house and estate with an efficiency that surprised many but also consciously in the style of its late owner, so that it now seemed haunted as well. Lady Mary was often there with a pekinese but now also a faded air, Lady Dorothy was a small beacon of sense and kindness. For it was possible to tell at a glance across a crowded room that she was a good person. When there was a fancy dress ball and both she and Lady Diana Cooper went as nuns, Heber-Percy commented, "Diana looked like an actress, Coote looked like a nun." Generous as she was and tolerant, there was never any doubt that, whatever raffish society she might find herself in, she had high standards of behaviour herself and kept to them.

Heber-Percy, a thoughtful friend, arranged a small house for her near by but he was not always easy with those closest to him. He drove a friend of many years from his house and then he and Lady Dorothy astonished most of their acquaintance by, in 1985, getting married. (He had been divorced from his first wife, Jennifer, later Mrs Alan Ross, in 1947.)

Perhaps she had always loved him and it seemed like a happy ending but it was not a success. There was a devoted cook, open in her hostility, who gave them an uncharacteristically disgusting wedding lunch. When they returned from the honeymoon, she had left with the dog but not done the washing up. Lady Dorothy was blamed for this and for other things.

Soon she retreated back to the small house. When Heber-Percy died in 1987 she became Berners's executor and was a conscientious and successful one. All his music is now available on CD, all his books have been reprinted, a biography was commissioned and, eventually, appeared. Lady Dorothy continued to drive herself to the South of France or Greece and was greatly looking forward to her 90th birthday party, which was to be held at Madresfield in February. The invitations had been printed but now they will not be sent.

Mark Amory

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Letter to the Editor, The Independent, 16/2/02

In the obituary Mark Amory mentioned " devoted cook, open in her hostility, who gave them an uncharacteristically disgusting wedding lunch. When they returned from their honeymoon, she had left with the dog and not done the washing up."

This 'devoted cook' is still living in Faringdon and is deeply offended by these words, which are quite untrue.

All who are acquainted with her know she would never behave in such a manner. She has always had a reputation for hard work, and scrupulous devotion to whomever she has worked.

The driver who attended Lady Dorothy's wedding and witnessed the ceremony took them back to Faringdon House can testify that Mark Amory's description is libellous. I am surprised he needed to go to such unnecessary lengths to embellish an obituary.

He may be interested to know that after Lady Dorothy left Faringdon House, the lady who Mark Amory vilified returned and nursed Mr Heber-Percy through his last difficult years. During that time he was entirely dependant on her.

As a long time friend, I think the least she deserves is a written apology from Mr Amory.

Reply from Mark Amory, 25/2/02

I am so sorry that your friend has been upset by the obituary. The last thing I or the Independent intended was any offence. Please do convey our apologies.

Her loyalty to the late Robert Heber-Percy is a matter of public record.