

Obituary. The Telegraph November 2001 Lady Dorothy Heber-Percy

LADY Dorothy Heber Percy, known to her friends as "Coote", who has died aged 89, was the youngest and cosiest of the Lygon sisters.

She was born Lady Dorothy Lygon on February 22 1912, the fourth daughter of the 7th Earl Beauchamp, KG, who, after acts unpardonable, was obliged to leave the country and settled on the Continent.

The story goes that Lady Beauchamp received a visit from her brother, the Duke of Westminster, who explained the reason for this precipitate departure, the full horror of which she did not entirely digest. "Bend'Or tells me that Beauchamp is a bugler," she said.

While Lord Beauchamp was still at Madresfield, the family seat near Malvern, his daughters used to urge the male house guests to lock their doors at night against the nocturnal prowlings of their father. One morning the peer told his third daughter, Mary: "He's a nice young man, your friend, but he's damned uncivil."

Evelyn Waugh's novel *Brideshead Revisited* clearly owed much inspiration to the Lygon family, though in conversation with Lady Dorothy, Waugh went to some pains to claim that they were only partly the inspiration and that all the ages and details were different.

Nevertheless, Lord Beauchamp was, in certain respects, the model for Waugh's Lord Marchmain, living in exile in Venice with his mistress, and Madresfield was the inspiration for *Brideshead*. Lady Dorothy claimed that the only connection between *Brideshead* and Madresfield was the art nouveau chapel, while Waugh's biographer Christopher Sykes saw some parallels with the much grander Castle Howard, which was used in the Granada television film.

"Coote", or "Pollen" or even "Poll" as she was called, was an early friend of Evelyn Waugh and, according to Waugh's wife Laura, "the nicest of all your friends". It is tempting to suggest that she might have been, in part, the inspiration for Lady Cordelia Flyte, the precocious, but devoutly Roman Catholic younger sister in *Brideshead Revisited*. Waugh had met her brothers at Oxford, and was soon a frequent visitor to Madresfield.

After Lord Beauchamp left England in 1931, the family was divided, Lady Beauchamp departing with one son, while Coote's eldest brother, Lord Elmley, and Hugh Lygon (the more wayward brother to whom Waugh's character Lord Sebastian Flyte owed much) took over the house with the three unmarried sisters, Sibell, Mary ("Maimie") and Dorothy. Of these sisters, the elder two were beauties, particularly the blonde Maimie, while Coote had, in the words of Selina Hastings, another of Waugh's biographers, "a large, plain face and wore spectacles", a look she carried into grown-up life.

Evelyn Waugh was a welcome diversion in the household. He would often be writing while staying with them, though the sisters frequently dragged him from his desk to partake in some amusement. Despite this, he dedicated *Black Mischief* jointly to Mary and Dorothy in 1932. Waugh once ran across Coote's childish diary and could not resist adding pornographic passages

about participation in orgies to the young girl's script, and he appended to her innocent drawing of a cart horse a giant penis. "It was like having Puck as a member of the household," she recalled later.

In the Second World War, Coote served as a Flight Officer in the WAAF, and was posted to Italy working on photographic interpretation. After the war she took up farming in Gloucestershire. In the 1950s, she worked as social secretary at the British Embassy in Athens, and in 1956 spent six months in Istanbul, working as a governess, before going to live on the Greek island of Hydra. She returned to England in the 1960s and for many years worked as an archivist at Christie's.

She settled near Faringdon, the eccentric Oxfordshire home of Lord Berners, the inspiration for Nancy Mitford's "Lord Merlin". Berners dyed his doves a variety of colours and summoned guests to dinner with a music box. Penelope Betjeman once rode her horse into the drawing room for tea.

Coote - who all this time had remained a spinster - knew Lord Berners well and was a witness to his tempestuous relationship with Robert Heber Percy, the young man, nicknamed "Mad Boy", who lived there with him. Berners died in 1950, and Heber Percy inherited the estate, which he ran with supreme efficiency, maintaining the Berners eccentricities, and adding follies of his own, most notably two enormous griffins that presided over a swimming pool.

A wild and pugnacious character, Robert Heber Percy also enjoyed running an undertakers' business, and relished their annual conferences, which invariably provided him with a fund of good stories. He had married Jennifer Fry for a time and produced a beautiful daughter, Victoria. But more usually his stable-mate was Hugh Cruddas ("The Captain"), though eventually they fell out.

Evelyn Waugh wrote to Diana Mosley: "The Mad Boy has installed a Mad Boy of his own. Has there ever been a property in history that has devolved from catamite to catamite for any length of time?" Coote and her sister Maimie were regular visitors over the years. While Coote remained alert, brisk, and full of stories, Maimie, her beauty faded and her spirit dimmed by drink, would sit gazing mute into space, stroking her little dog.

As the years passed, and Robert Heber Percy became frailer, though no less volatile, Coote unwisely accepted a proposal of marriage from him, and, excited as any young bride, became the mistress of Faringdon in 1985. This caused a good deal of disruption in the domestic arrangements; the faithful Rosa, Heber Percy's cook, departing in high dudgeon, and there was antipathy from some of Heber Percy's regular lady guests who had come to treat Faringdon as their own patch. But this phase was of short duration and Coote soon retreated to a nearby bungalow, where she was much happier. Robert Heber Percy died in 1987, leaving Faringdon to his daughter.

Lately, Lady Dorothy assisted John Byrne in a stylish re-issue of Lord Berners's most elusive book, *The Girls of Radcliff Hall* (by the Cygnet Press in 2000), a mischievous fictional evocation of life at Faringdon, in which all the boys (including Heber Percy) become girls at a boarding school, with Lord Berners as the headmistress.