
Opening Extract from...

That Woman:

The Life of Wallis Simpson
Duchess of Windsor

Written by Anne Sebba

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For Mark . . . Your turn again at last.

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Preface

In 1973 I was invited to spend a weekend as the guest of a minor Austrian aristocrat at a magnificent castle just outside Vienna – Schloss Enzesfeld.

The name was resonant but I was twenty-one and unprepared for how deeply the emotional history of the castle would seep into me. I was greeted on arrival by an array of liveried servants who, over the next three days, provided for my every demand, as well as several I could never have anticipated. Dinner was elaborately – and terrifyingly – formal, served in a baronial dining hall for a handful of guests, who included the ageing German actor Kurt Jürgens. The waiters stood stiffly in the corners of the room as I played with my *foie gras*. The rest of the meal passed in a haze. Then I was led along a cold stone passageway to my bedroom, a ten-minute walk away. The next morning the man who had invited me, my own small-scale Princeling, drove me around the estate and gave me a detailed history. I had entered an unknown and hitherto unknowable world. Although I had just started working as a journalist for Reuters, this was not a story for the wires. I could not find words to write about what I had seen and was experiencing. I lacked both the context and the emotional maturity. But I knew instinctively that I was playing with fire, how smoothly such luxury – and we are talking here about Hermès scarves not Cartier jewels – could permeate the pores of my life. I have thought about those three days many times since and never once regretted my decision not to see my Prince Charming again.

Less than forty years before, this castle had been the refuge for a former British monarch, henceforth known as the Duke of Windsor,

immediately after his abdication from the British throne. Eugène de Rothschild and his wife Kitty had offered it to him as he waited, bored and with mounting nervous tension, for the woman he loved to become his wife.

He had left his country plunged into a deep constitutional crisis. No one knew what the outcome would be as Europe bristled with threats of war. Yet his concern, as he paced the corridors of the castle at Enzesfeld, was to fill his bedroom with dozens of photographs of this woman. He telephoned her several times a day, at considerable expense, to the château in France where she was similarly imprisoned. Phone lines were primitive, so they had to shout at each other, and many people were close enough to be listening, as well as some who were paid to listen in. Lawyers insisted they must not meet or the divorce might be jeopardized. He passed the hours knitting a sweater for his love. She, in turn, sent him dozens of letters lamenting the situation in which she found herself and longing for the time when she had the protection of his name. This was, unquestionably, not a scenario she had foreseen. Christmas came and went and the Duke, the increasingly heavy bags under his eyes telling the world that he was hardly sleeping, morosely attended church in the village of Enzesfeld. When his hostess, Kitty de Rothschild, left the castle the Duke failed even to say goodbye. He was still without the woman he had told the world he loved, the woman for whom he had given up a kingdom, the woman who still had two living husbands, the woman for whom he had sent himself into this hellish exile.

Forty years later the scenery of the castle remains as sharply engraved in my brain as ever. Those who know only one thing about British history in the 1930s know about the king who abdicated because he could not continue without the help and support of 'the woman I love'. Yet many people cannot imagine who such a woman could be, one who could exert such a powerful magnetic force on a man groomed from birth to do his duty as head not just of Britain but of a great empire that stretched from India to Canada and Australia – the Dominions, as they were then known.

Because they cannot imagine such a woman they have invented an image of her, a process which began in 1936 and which gathered

pace in the ensuing half-century. In the pages that follow I want to examine whether that picture is still valid in the twenty-first century. I want to let her own voice speak wherever possible, however 'rasping', as her detractors insist it was. It may not always be a sympathetic voice but it will, I hope, help readers understand what it was in her background or make-up that caused her to act or speak as she did. I hope to humanize rather than demonize the woman known as Wallis Simpson, to see her within her own social, historical and geographical context. Very simply, I want to start by understanding what sort of woman she was and then look at the crisis in which she was embroiled.

Money is often an important part of this story, but in the text I have always quoted the actual, contemporary amounts. As a very rough guide these figures can be multiplied by fifty to give an idea of the value today.

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Becoming Wallis

'She has the Warfield look'

Choosing your own name is the supreme act of self-creation. Wallis, the androgynous and unusual name she insisted on for herself, is a bold statement of identity. 'Wallis' is saying not only this is who I am but you will know no one else like me. Take me on my own terms. It was a credo she lived by.

From the start this woman fashioned herself as something strong, intriguing, distinctive. In taking such a name she was constructing an identity, giving herself from a young age freedom that women of her era could not take for granted. She was displaying a contempt for tradition and the ordinary which would be so crucial to her destiny. Having chosen her own name she had to work hard to live up to it, to create a strong relationship with it. Although her surname changed many times, this name was one of the few constants in her life. 'Hi, I'm Wallis,' she would say when she entered a room.

The name her parents chose for her was 'Bessiewallis', to honour both her mother's beloved sister Bessie and her grandfather's illustrious friend Severn Teackle Wallis, an author and legislator and, in Baltimore, an important man. The latter had been imprisoned for a time during the Civil War, along with Wallis's grandfather, for supporting a call for secession from the Union, but was later appointed provost at the University of Maryland. Her own father, too, bore this man's name. His statue stands today at one end of Mount Vernon Square, the city's main plaza, overshadowed though it is by the imposing 178-foot-high monument of George Washington in the centre, the first erected in the first President's honour. But she soon jettisoned 'Bessie', describing it as a name fit only for cows.

'Wallis', however, was a man's name for a woman who could hold her own with men.

Wallis was never a woman's woman. She wanted to be something out of the ordinary for a woman. She was funny, clever, smart – in both the English and American uses of the term. She wanted to pit her wits not against other women but against men in a man's world. With her sharp understanding of appearances, she always knew the importance of a name. Of course she had seen her mother change from 'Alys' to 'Alice'. But that was subtle, gentle, barely noticeable. Choosing Wallis in her youth was as much part of her armour as the carefully selected designer clothes and decor of her middle years. When inviting friends to her third wedding, her husband-to-be, the ex-King, a man with even more names to accommodate, suddenly started referring to her as 'Mrs Warfield'. This was a name she had never owned, nor could claim any right to. She encouraged it to shield the man she had dragged along in her wake.

Defining herself by her name was one of the first acts of a young girl intent on controlling a cold and often unfriendly world. Whenever Wallis succeeded, she felt most at peace. But for much of her life she was dependent on the charity of others and this led to long bouts of unhappiness to which she responded in a variety of ways.

There is no birth certificate for Wallis. It was not a legal requirement at the time to have one in Pennsylvania, where she was born amid some secrecy and scandal probably on 19 June 1896. Nor was there a newspaper announcement of her birth. The place where she was born, however, is not in doubt: a small wooden building known as Square Cottage at the back of the Monterey Inn in the summer resort of Blue Ridge Summit. The Blue Ridge Summit community, at the top of the South Mountain at Monterey Pass, was in its heyday as a fashionable spa and holiday area at the beginning of the twentieth century, after the introduction of the railroad in 1872. Blue Ridge Summit strays into four counties – two on the Pennsylvania side of the line and two on the Maryland side – and straddles the historic Mason–Dixon line, significantly giving Wallis aspects of both the

South and North of the United States in her make-up. This was something she was to make much of later.

Her parents had gone there ostensibly to escape the heat of a Baltimore summer and in the hope of improving her father's health, but also because they were in flight from disapproving families. In her memoirs, Wallis is vague about the marriage of her parents, the consumptive Teackle Wallis Warfield and the spirited if flighty Alice Montague, a marriage neither family wanted.

'Without taking their families into their confidence, they slipped away and were married, according to one story in a church in Washington, according to another in a church in Baltimore,' Wallis wrote sixty years later. She would have us believe that Teackle and Alice were married in June 1895 when both were twenty-six years old. But, more likely, the marriage had been solemnized just seven months before her birth on 19 November 1895, as a monograph on the Church of St Michael and All Angels in Baltimore states. According to this account, Dr C. Ernest Smith, the Rector, was called upon to officiate at a quiet marriage which attracted little attention at the time. 'On that day Teackle Wallis Warfield took as his bride Miss Alice M. Montague, a communicant of the parish. The ceremony took place not in the main church itself but in the rectory at 1929 St Paul Street in the presence of several friends.'

This version makes it seem that the marriage was arranged as soon as Alice realized she was pregnant, that the first and only child of the union was most probably conceived out of wedlock and that neither family attended. Perhaps, more significantly, it also indicates there was never a time in Wallis's life when she did not have to harbour secrets.

Wallis, with an attempt at insouciance, wrote later in her own account of how she once asked her mother for the date and time of her birth 'and she answered impatiently that she had been far too busy at the time to consult the calendar let alone the clock'. But the child may also have arrived prematurely, as the family doctor was not available and the twenty-two-year-old, newly qualified Dr Lewis Miles Allen received an emergency call from the Monterey Inn and delivered the baby in Alice's hotel bedroom.

The Warfields and the Montagues, although both shared impeccable Southern credentials and both were supporters of the Confederacy during the Civil War, did not get on. Both came from ancient and respected stock and traced their arrival in America to the seventeenth century. There is a much trumpeted mention of the Warfields in the Domesday Book and one of Wallis's ancestors, Pagan de Warfield, is said to have accompanied William the Conqueror from France and fought in the Battle of Hastings. The Montagues, similarly, hailed from an old English aristocratic family that arrived in America in 1621 when one Peter Montague left Buckinghamshire and settled on land in Virginia granted him by King Charles I. Wallis always felt proud of her ancestry and had reason to. 'For those who are prepared to accept that there can be class distinctions of any kind in the United States,' wrote the social commentator Alastair Forbes in the mid-1970s, 'she can be said to come from a far higher stratum than say Princess Grace of Monaco, Jacqueline Bouvier or the Jerome or Vanderbilt ladies of the nineteenth century. By present English standards of birth she might rank rather below two recent royal duchesses and rather above two others.' But the Montagues, whatever their past prosperity as landowners, were no longer prosperous. They were much livelier than the politically and commercially active Warfields, whom they considered to be nouveau. They believed that their beautiful and vivacious Alice could have held out for a much better match than marriage to Teackle Wallis. The solemn Warfield clan in their turn not only looked down on the Montagues, they worried that Teackle Wallis would never be strong enough to support a wife and therefore should not seek one.

T. Wallis, as he styled himself, was the youngest of four brothers (the first, Daniel, had died young) and two daughters born to Henry Mactier Warfield and his wife Anna Emory. The Emorys were physicians and, like so many upper-class Marylanders, slave owners whose sympathies were Southern. Dr Emory joined the Confederate army as a surgeon and was stationed in Richmond, Virginia until the end of the war. The eldest surviving son, Solomon Davies Warfield, was a successful and prominent banker, president of the Continental Trust company (the premier investment

company in Baltimore in that era), and a millionaire bachelor who kept an apartment on New York's Fifth Avenue where he was said to entertain his mistresses. The second son, Richard Emory Warfield, lived in Philadelphia and was thriving in the insurance business, while the fourth, Henry Warfield, had a farm at Timonium in Baltimore County.

Teackle was always frail but at eighteen, when he fell ill with consumption (tuberculosis), it was decided that, instead of sending him to recuperate at a sanatorium or in a more favourable climate, he should work as a lowly clerk in his uncle's Continental Trust in Baltimore, an environment not chosen to assuage his illness but which the family presumably hoped would draw attention away from such embarrassing debility. Little was known in the nineteenth century about cures for or reasons for contracting consumption, although its bacterial cause was eventually isolated in 1882. There was no definitive treatment for the disease until the mid-twentieth century. At the time of Wallis's birth, it was not only widespread but considered shameful, partly since it was thought to be a disease of poverty. Death was the likely outcome for at least 80 per cent of patients. Usually, after a horrific period of night sweats, chills and paroxysmal coughing, the disease spread to other organs of the body, leading to the wasting away which gave the disease its name. It was not surprising therefore that Teackle Wallis, a charmingly sensitive but melancholy consumptive, should have appeared a disastrous prospect for the Montague parents – William, who worked in insurance, and his wife, Mary Anne. Indeed medical advice at the time, which must surely have been offered by the Warfield doctor, was to avoid cohabiting with women for fear of spreading the disease. Those around TB patients were exposed to danger with each breath, as the bacillus is spread by droplet infection, mainly by coughing and sneezing, and inhaled droplets lodge in and infect the lungs.

Yet something powerfully attractive about T. Wallis Warfield must have appealed to the courageous and headstrong young Alice Montague. According to their only daughter, the deep-set staring eyes suggested a handsome poet, but they may instead have been indi-

cative of the far-gone ravages of his disease. By the end of the summer of 1896, Teackle was a deeply sick and weak man. But he decided to move his family back to the centre of Baltimore and installed them in a residential hotel, the Brexton,[1] where he hoped if the worst happened they might be able to fend for themselves. This red-brick building containing eight small apartments was the only home Wallis ever shared with her father and mother.

As a frail, wheelchair invalid Teackle was allowed one photograph with his child. He died five months after her birth on 15 November 1896. According to family lore his last words were 'I'm afraid, Alice, she has the Warfield look. Let us hope that in spirit she'll be like you.' Her penetrating blue eyes, always said to be her best feature, came from her mother, and perhaps her spirit did too. From her father she inherited dark hair but no capital and an embedded fear of insecurity.

Baltimore at the time of Wallis's childhood was one of the fastest-growing, most economically vibrant cities in the United States. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, northern Baltimore attracted many wealthy families who lived in substantial three- or even four-storey houses that were being built around Mount Vernon when this was still a relatively rural fashionable residential district. As a port city, located on the northern Chesapeake Bay, Baltimore was well positioned to make a rapid recovery from the physical and economic damage inflicted by the Civil War, embarking during the reconstruction era on the period of its greatest prosperity. The city, attractive to both immigrants and investors between the 1880s and 1914, was home to large and complex populations of Italian, Polish, German, Irish and Chinese immigrants, as well as many thousands of East European Jews fleeing pogroms, political turmoil and poverty. Most Jews settled in East Baltimore, especially the Lombard Street area, and remained economically marginalized for at least one generation. Here, among

1 In 2009 this newly restored building reopened, trading on its connections with Wallis Warfield but refurbished in a splendid style which she would not have recognized.

the dozens of chicken coops with live chickens on the street, the aroma of pickling spices and the noise of clanking buckets, Yiddish greetings and kosher butchers, the Warfields and Montagues would have been most unlikely to venture.

But living in a city where at least one-third of the residents are foreign born reinforces notions of separation, especially among those who see themselves as poor relations, which Wallis and her mother clearly were. In addition during Wallis's childhood, forty or so years after the abolition of slavery, racial segregation was still practised in Baltimore, as it was in many Southern American cities. So deciding where young Wallis Warfield would live and would go to school was a matter of deep concern to her wider family.

Within a few weeks Anna Emory Warfield, the sixty-year-old matriarch of the family, invited her daughter-in-law and granddaughter to live with her at 34 East Preston Street, a large and solid four-storey brownstone in the centre of the old part of the city, near the Monument. This staid and peaceful house of adults became home for the next four or five years. Wallis recognized later what a disturbing influence she must have been there. Her grandmother, whom she loved, took her shopping every Saturday to Richmond Market, 'as exciting as a trip to the moon'. Going to market was an important outing for the rich matrons of Baltimore. They dressed up for it and wore white gloves – after all they would not be touching anything. The servants who walked a discreet distance behind them carried out the purchasing.

Her grandmother – 'a solitary figure in a vast, awesomely darkened room, rocking evenly to and fro . . . and so erect that her back never seemed to touch the chair' – was, as Wallis recalled, in mourning and wore black dresses with high collars and a tiny white linen cap on which were stitched three small bows of black ribbon. '"Bessiewallis," my grandmother would say severely, "how will you ever grow up to be a lady unless you learn to keep your back straight?" Or "Bessiewallis, can't you be still for just a minute?"'

But her uncle Sol, a more terrifying presence for the young and not so young child, lived there too. Solomon Davies Warfield, the financier and politician whose hopes to become mayor of Baltimore

were not realized, had to make do with the locally prestigious but lesser position as postmaster. He funded Wallis's childhood but in a cruelly controlling manner, the lessons of which cannot have been lost on this young girl given that she took the trouble to report his behaviour in her memoirs. Every month he deposited a sum of money in his sister-in-law's account at his bank. 'The trouble was that the amount was almost never the same. One month it might be quite enough to take care of the important bills, the next month barely enough to cover the rent.'

Uncle Sol's bedroom was at the back of the third floor with a private bath. Alice had a room on the same floor at the front, and connecting with it was a small room for Wallis. The arrangement was awkward for Alice and her daughter, who had to use her grandmother's bathroom on the floor below. But the idyll, if idyll it was, did not last. 'A subtly disturbing situation seems to have helped precipitate the separation,' Wallis wrote. She speculates that her uncle fell in love with her mother. 'She was young and attractive, living under the same roof, and she and uncle Sol were inevitably thrown much together.' At all events he must have made overtures that either Alice or old Mrs Warfield considered inappropriate.

So the pair returned to the Brexton residential hotel. There followed a deeply unhappy period for Wallis of meals alone with her mother 'and rather forlorn afternoon excursions to the house on Preston Street about which had so suddenly descended a mysterious and disturbing barrier'. Funds were now sometimes so low that her mother sold embroidery at the local Women's Exchange shop. But her mother's newly widowed sister, Aunt Bessie Merryman, then stepped in and invited the pair to live with her. Her own husband, Uncle Buck, had also died young and, childless herself, it suited her to have company. Wallis grew to love Aunt Bessie as a mother. Yet, although the sisters got on, Alice was determined to make one last stab at independence. She moved into the Preston Apartment House, a less than sumptuous set of rooms in the shadow of her Warfield family, and this time tried to make money inviting the other tenants in the block to become paying dinner guests. It was a disastrous experiment in every

way. The prime sirloin steak, soft-shell crabs and elaborate pastries were never costed, but the damage this venture did to the reputation of mother and daughter, now branded as boarding-house keepers, was incalculable. These years of struggle and insecurity, when 'mother had the café and was forever working herself to death to give me things', were implanted so deeply in Wallis's psyche that she never entirely shed her worry and fear of what might lie around the corner. Once again it was her aunt Bessie who came to the rescue by insisting on disbanding the dubious operation.

Wallis went to her first school while living with Aunt Bessie. It was called Miss O'Donnell's after its founder, Miss Ada O'Donnell. Next, aged ten, she attended Arundell Girls School on nearby St Paul Street, neither the most exclusive nor the most expensive educational establishment, but a place of calm routine for girls of good backgrounds. There she would have learned, as every Baltimore school girl learned, the story of Elizabeth (Betsy) Patterson, a local girl from a wealthy family who married her prince but was not allowed to remain married to him. On a visit to America in 1803, Jérôme Bonaparte, brother of Napoleon Bonaparte, met and married Betsy. But Jérôme was a minor and his brother refused to recognize the marriage. When Jérôme returned to France in 1805, his wife was forbidden to land and went first to England, where her son, Jerome Napoleon Bonaparte, known as 'Bo', was born. In 1806 Napoleon issued a state decree of annulment to end his brother's marriage, and Betsy was given a large annual pension but, rather than return to 'what I hated most on earth – my Baltimore obscurity', she lived unhappily in exile in Paris for the rest of her life. Wallis never referred to the story in her memoirs.

Wallis had to take her monthly school reports to Uncle Sol for inspection – a further reminder that her dependence on his charity was not to be taken for granted. However, he did oblige with her next important request – that she be allowed to go to Oldfields for her final two years of education, the most expensive school in Maryland. Oldfields, just beyond the Gunpowder River in Glencoe County, was founded in 1867 in the hills beyond Timonium where Wallis had already spent many happy summers with her Warfield cousins. Although she had been parcelled out to all her cousins at various

times, Pot Spring, the home of her uncle Emory and her aunt Betty Warfield, not far from Oldfields, was a favourite summer refuge. The school's 200-acre site was beautiful and today remains largely undeveloped countryside. For many years, a handsome coach and horses took students back and forth from Glencoe station, past the *ante bellum* white clapboard mansions and large plantation houses which had once housed hundreds of slaves.

The legendary co-principal of Oldfields was Anna McCulloh, called Miss Nan by all the pupils, a woman not unlike Grandmother Warfield who rigidly upheld her notion of the correct way to behave. Wallis had become a keen and athletic basketball player in her teens, encouraged by a young teacher, Charlotte Noland, who offered afternoon basketball session three times a week in a rented Baltimore garage. Miss Noland was, for the young Wallis, an ideal woman, 'a mixture of gay, deft teasing and a drill sergeant's sternness . . . cultivated of manner, a marvellous horsewoman and a dashing figure in every setting'. Miss Noland's sister, Rosalie Noland, also taught at Oldfields, which was noted for its sporting and equestrian facilities, and Wallis, like Charlotte Noland, was a skilled horsewoman not afraid to tackle jumps nor to challenge others with whom she was riding. At Oldfields, basketball was deeply competitive, the girls keen to go out before breakfast to practise. Yet in these sports, as in everything else at the school, the competitive spirit was to some extent reined in by the simple expedient of dividing the girls into two teams, one named 'Gentleness' and the other 'Courtesy'. 'Gentleness and Courtesy' was the first rule in the Oldfields handbook, as the sign on the door of each child's room proclaimed. Wallis represented 'Gentleness', who flourished a white banner with green lettering; 'Courtesy' had a green banner with white lettering. In addition to sport and etiquette, acting and drama was encouraged and in one surviving photograph Wallis is dressed as a New Jersey mosquito, alongside a classmate impersonating Governor Woodrow Wilson, echoing a hot political issue of the day.[2]

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2 In 1912, Governor Woodrow Wilson signed the country's first mosquito-control law which declared malaria a reportable disease.