1916

by Bennitt Gardiner

> No woman is dead to the flattering influence of a great man's passion. (Lady Ottoline Morrell in her memoir, *Ottoline at Garsington: Summer Months of 1916*)

IT IS GENERALLY assumed as a tenet of faith that the "sexual emancipation" of Bertrand Russell began in 1911, with his consuming passion for Lady Ottoline. Alys Russell, in her plain Quaker way, has described the intolerable tension experienced by "Bertie" even at the sight of a postman, lest his postbag should contain a letter from the beloved; and there is no doubt that that all-engulfing passion destroyed his first marriage, broke Alys's heart, and in its egomania overpowered Ottoline's fidelity to her husband—a noble and generous, as well as handsome, man. According to her own testimony she became Russell's mistress *malgré elle*, if not absolutely against her will.

Robert Gathorne-Hardy, in an Appendix to the Memoir, avers that "she was never, it would seem, what can be called in love with him". The lady herself speaks of her ardent lover's fascination; of the compassion aroused in her for his mental and spiritual torment of frustration; and admits that the force of his passion conquered her resistance. But she declares unequivocally that she was not attracted to him physically; was deeply reluctant to betray her husband, much less abandon him at Russell's behest, although Philip Morrell actually insisted that she should be "free"—that holiest word in the twentieth-century litany; and that profound sympathy moved her to become the legendary mistress who inspired some of the great love letters of the century. "But to my shame, however much I was thrilled by the beauty and transcendence of his thoughts, I could hardly bear the lack of physical attraction" (p. 273).

In *The Times*, after near-scurrilous reviews of *The Life of Bertrand*

Russell (see *Russell*, 20 [winter 1975-6], Michael Burn commented:

> It seems that our national mythology is about to adopt as its archetype of libertines a man who slept with no one till, at the age of 22, he married, then for about seven years only with his wife, then for about nine years till he was nearly 40, with no one. . . .

To which Conrad Russell, speaking of Philip Toynbee's review, "The Sage and the Satyr", added a few days later:

> Normally, qualities, even qualities so stimulating to public discussion as those of a "satyr", which make their first appearance in a man's life when he is over 40, and has recently suffered a disastrous marriage, an unhappy love affair, the loss of his job and social ostracism, may be thought to be the result of overwhelming stress . . . rather than essential to a man's nature.

And another *Times* correspondent, Jose Cutileiro, concluded: "It seems to me that to pass moral judgments of any kind on his amorous behaviour is to misunderstand him."

Russell's own account of his love for Lady Ottoline (*Autobiography*, I, pp. 203-5), while subtly different from her own, does not contradict her:

> Making timid approaches, I found them to my surprise not repulsed . . . I found to my amazement that I loved her deeply and that she returned my feeling. Until this moment I had never had complete relations with any woman except Alys. For external and accidental reasons I did not have full relations with Ottoline that evening, but we agreed to become lovers as soon as possible. The nine years of self-denial had come to an end, and for the time being I was done with self-denial. However, there was not time to settle future plans during that one evening. It was already late when we first kissed, and after that, although we stayed up till 4 in the morning the conversation was intermittent. . . .
>
> We were both earnest and unconventional, both aristocratic by tradition but deliberately not so in our present environment, both hating the cruelty, the caste insolence, and the narrow-mindedness of aristocrats. . . . All the complicated feelings resulting from this situation we shared. There was a deep sympathy between us which never ceased as long as she lived. Although we ceased to be lovers in 1916, we remained always close friends.

The union lasted five years, that is, until the year he met Lady Constance Malleson. Yet throughout Lady Ottoline's book, the emphasis is on sympathy and understanding, not sexual love. "B.R. attracted, frightened me; but everything he said had an intense, piercing, convincing quality". A year later she reflected: "It is indeed a great pity that we who had so much in common, and who had both felt life so passionately, should not have been able to preserve our great intimacy. . . . What he needed, in fact, was a wife and children to calm him and occupy his thoughts" (*Ottoline at Garsington*, p. 178).

But the wife and children did not arrive until 1921. And it seems almost certain that the predestined sexual emancipation of this great but frustrated man of genius did not occur, in fact, until 1916, when he and Lady Constance became lovers. Another aristocrat, now an actress of twenty-one, married to a charming if physically unprepossessing dramatist who believed profoundly in pacifism, tolerance and perceptive insight through sexual congress, Colette O'Niel, as she was already known, was proud, passionate, gay, life-enhancing, avid for admiration—especially from men of worth—liked fast cars, rebelled against convention, was herself an active and commited pacifist, a socialist of sorts, and trod the byways of freedom to their utmost limit, with the full connivance of a complaisant, tender-hearted, wise but theatrical husband.

In Gilbert Cannan's novel, *Pugs and Peacocks*, in which Colette figures fitfully, we read of "Matty's" strong will, independent nature, and uncompromising stance around that time; her teutonic aloofness and Nietzschean resolution; her power of attracting (or rejecting) men and compelling their attention. As she is said to have been extremely beautiful in 1916—although the famous Hoppé portrait (No. 1) in *Autobiography*, II, reveals flaws, and a later one, reproduced in Ronald W. Clark's *Life*, suggests certain witchlike attributes—it is hardly surprising that Russell found her alluring, even at first sight in Lavender Hill police station.

With the self-knowledge and technique derived from four years' intimate communion with Lady Ottoline, there can be little doubt that Bertrand Russell swept Colette off her feet in her attic home, as he did at the preliminary public lecture where no doubt she, too, observed that "everything he said had an intense, piercing, convincing quality"—for she acquired that very quality in her own acting technique. To anyone recalling her stage performances, it is possible to imagine that his ardour (physical, spiritual, or both) would be eagerly returned, and in full.

Colette was a child of her time: in 1916, a classic creature-victim of the First World War. Long before the death in action of a beloved nephew (or half-brother) caused her to faint with grief at dress fittings for *Abraham Lincoln*, she was stoically involved with Clifford Allen and her husband in the No-Conscription Fellowship, whose office she attended daily as filing clerk, in addition to her theatre activity.

In this year of disgrace, 1979, there is much nonsense written and spoken about female emancipation; but all of it was achieved by Colette's generation in 1916, when most of her contemporaries were liberated by *war*, as conscripted Land Girls, munition workers, VAD nurses, ambulance drivers, canteen workers, at home and at the Front, with an ever-increasing toll of war widows on the home front. That World War I was unmitigated Hell for millions of fighting men and deprived women is history—the Mallesons did their best to record it—and those millions forged a ramshackle new morality. The West End theatre—focus of Colette's ambition—was frivolous and escapist; for troops on short leave wanted girls and ragtime, fun, and (in those days, still) sentiment. Little revues with titles such as *Bubbly*, *Tails Up!*, *Watch Your Step*, proliferated; and even Lady Ottoline in a party descended on *The Bing Boys* at the Alhambra, to hear George Robey and Vi Loraine sing "If You Were the Only Girl in the World".

In 1921 a sensational novel, *Simon Called Peter*, outsold Ethel M. Dell and Ruby M. Ayres, and was the first of its prolix kind to replace romance with sex, impure and unadulterated, as experienced in 1916 West End hotel bedrooms by countless officers on leave with women who were not their wives. This tale of the wartime West End could hardly fail to send its heroes to the theatre, where illicit couples thrilled to *Carminetta*—or it may have been *Going Up!*—with the regal epitome of sexual magnetism, Alice Delysia, imperiously in the lead; an incandescent lady whose husky French timbre was soon to immortalise a song beginning:

> Ev—er—y woman thinks she wants to wander,
> And be a naughty girl with someone new....

The atmosphere of London was permeated by gritty war strain, shortages, rationing, loneliness, insecurity, the Zeppelin, and the breakdown of sexual taboos. Mlle. d'Armentières left her Gallic imprint on the British tommy, and permanently emancipated *him*. The theatre, ever quick to mirror social change, temporarily abandoned intimate revue for the sensational, spectacular, sensually

raffish and mockingly romantic extravanganza. At His Majesty's in August 1916—where Tree had produced Shakespeare grandiosely and historically less than a decade before—Oscar Asche and Lily Brayton mounted a preposterous "musical tale of the East" of such splendour, beauty and glamour, and unabashed sex appeal, such voluptuous music, passionate dancing and oriental eroticism, such fabulous costumes and unprecedented nudity, that it took London by storm and ran for five years—breaking all West End records until Agatha Christie arrived with her *Mousetrap* in 1952.

Chu Chin Chow contained one song which Colette and her famous academic lover must have heard played often by restaurant orchestras, or when they visited His Majesty's Theatre, for Colette would be conscious of the show's colossal success, and romantic daring.[1] It was called—characteristically in 1916—"Any Time's Kissing Time", and was sung by a harem girl to her ageing Ali Baba:

> People have slandered our love serene,
> Laughed at your penchant for me,
> Said you were too old to love—
> A mean Li-bel on thy belle and thee.
> Still we're alone,
> You are my own,
> Bone of contention to be!
>
> Youth is the time for loving,
> So poets always say;
> The contrary we're proving,
> Look at us two to-day!
> Love has no charm, no meaning,
> Till man has reached his prime.
> Surely 'tis so—
> You ought to know—
> Any time's kissing time.

Katharine Tait has described her father's feeling for Colette as "an intense romantic passion". Comparing his two aristocratic mistresses, Russell once wrote:

> Colette was so much younger, so much less of a personage, so

[1] For years I owned a copy of Oscar Wilde's *Salome*, given to me by her friend, the critic, poet and novelist Hubert Nicholson, which formerly belonged to Colette, and contained her signature and bookmark, as well as a rare photograph of Aino Akté, a Finnish soprano who sang the part in Richard Strauss's opera at Covent Garden in 1913, and had been heard there by Colette as a young débutante. It should be said, *en passant*, that Colette was entirely unmusical, and probably tone deaf.

> much more capable of frivolous pleasures, that I could not believe in my own feelings. . . . There are those who say that one should be prudent, but I do not agree with them. We scarcely knew each other, and yet in that moment there began for both of us a relation profoundly serious and profoundly important, sometimes happy, sometimes painful, but never trivial and never unworthy to be placed alongside of the great public emotions connected with the War. Indeed, the War was bound into the texture of this love from first to last. The harshness and horror of the war world overcame me, but I clung to Colette. In a world of hate she preserved love, love in every sense of the word from the most ordinary to the most profound, and she had a quality of rock-like immovability, which in those days was invaluable. . . . I did not know in the first days how serious was my love for Colette. I had got used to thinking that all my serious feelings were given to Ottoline.

But the new love distilled "an ecstasy that seemed almost more than human".

He remarks elsewhere that life before 1910 and after 1914 was as sharply differentiated for him as was Faust's before and after he met Mephistopheles. He lost old friends and made new ones; moved in new directions; began to write a new kind of book—between 1916 and 1921, three of his finest. His whole conception of human nature changed. And with it, no doubt, his concept of sexual emancipation.

According to Lady Ottoline, who found her beautiful, courageous and generous, Russell "spent a good deal on Lady Connie", and was in financial straits as a result. It seems clear that at this time Colette, for all her ambition, high seriousness, rebellion, intellect, and active pacifism ("Clifford Allen and Bertie were great friends with the Mallesons, indeed they made in London 'a centre for the courageous free pacifist group'", says Lady Ottoline), was something of a siren.

In a recent biography of Clare Sheridan, the sculptress, Anita Leslie writes of Colette's mother:

> Priscilla, Countess Annesley, was a famous Edwardian beauty much admired by other ladies' husbands while suffering an odious one herself.[2]

Colette may have been ill-starred. We know that she *chose* to be educated for three years in Dresden and Paris (where she was soon to be followed in the street); fell in love with a dynamic Italian, Emilio

[2] *Cousin Clare* (Hutchinson, 1976), p. 85.

Reggio, on board ship; and at nineteen married Miles Malleson because she thought he was a genius.

By 1916 she would be aware of the ever-growing influence of Hollywood on popular entertainment (she appeared in Maurice Elvey's British film of *Hindle Wakes* in 1918); and, more especially, of the startling success of the sophisticated female vampire. The "beautiful vamp" had come to stay in Hollywood (and Germany, Italy and Sweden) for twenty years; but was then in a transitional stage, between the early crudities of Theda Bara and the astonishing rise to fame of an actress from St. Petersburg, Alla Nazimova, who fled Russia after the 1905 uprising and established herself in such Californian silent films as *Salome*, *Cleopatra* and *La Dame aux Camélias* with world-wide success. In Petersburg Nazimova had distinguished herself in Tolstoy, Strindberg and Ibsen; but Hollywood like the leopard changed her spots, and she became the world's most potent sex symbol, contemporaneous with Chaplin, Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and Gloria Swanson. She was not averse to nudity; but more important, perhaps, than her psychological implications—which were inseparable from the *Zeitgeist*—was the influence of the beautiful vamp on fashion and society. Nazimova's rivals, Barbara la Marr, Mae Murray, and especially the stunningly beautiful Irish-Italian Nita Naldi, set the style for turbans, long cigarette-holders, earrings, mascara, diamonds and décolleté black velvet as essential *chic* for smart women the world over, including the West End.

Colette, by nature, temperament and handsome face destined for such roles, abd ambitious at twenty-one, would be sharply alert to this manifestation. As late as 1925, when she was in Hull, the "vamp" appeal was still so rife on the West End stage that Colette's town clothes—rather more than on the stage—were perceptibly influenced by her former colleague in *Deburau*, Jeanne de Casalis (later wife of Colin Clive), who had just won national fame in *Fata Morgana*—a Hungarian classic about a Budapest aristocrat who seduces before the audience a virginal young landowner in his castle on the Puszta.

To Colette in March 1917, Russell wrote: "You are strong and brave and free, and filled with passion and love—the very substance of all my dreams come to life". His description of Wittgenstein, ". . . the most perfect example I have ever known of genius as traditionally conceived, passionate, profound, intense, and dominating"—would apply equally well to Colette in 1916.

"In 1914-1918 I became *for the first time* [my italics] deeply con-

vinced that Puritanism does not make for human happiness", wrote Russell. Even the French matinée idol Colette understudied, and later played for in *L'Enfant prodigue*, Yvonne Arnaud—who was essentially comic in appeal, albeit plumply attractive—had made her name in musicals with titles such as *The Naughty Princess*, and *Kissing Time*. Colette appeared in three French plays in the West End: *Le monde où l'on s'ennuie*, *L'Enfant prodigue*, and *Deburau*.

The potential genius of Colette O'Niel was always underrated by Bertrand Russell. True he helped her to publish "The End", and told her she could write. As she went on writing books, he must have wondered sometimes, especially about *The Coming Back*; but even Alys was impressed by *After Ten Years*. Yet he seems to have disliked, or been bored by, the theatre, penning an unforgivably abusive letter on the theme, of some six hundred words—which she duly forgave. And, surely, sexual emancipation was supplied by Colette in the matter of divorce; for it was she, not Lady Ottoline, who was the adultress in the West End hotel where she and Russell spent a Sunday night in order to fulfil legal requirements; Colette leaving early in the morning for Portsmouth to rehearse a new play—probably *The Woman in the Case*, in which she toured the number two theatres of Britain at that time.

It is a common error to suppose that Lady Ottoline "lost" Bertrand Russell to Constance Malleson ("What a pity your hair is turning grey, etc."). In fact, he declares he was turned against Ottoline by Katherine Mansfield, a difficult visitor to Garsington, and a mischievous one.

> The time during which I listened to Katherine was a time of dangerous transition. The War had brought me to the verge of utter cynicism, and I was having the greatest difficulty in believing that anything was worth doing. . . .

Then, in the spring of 1917,

> I found myself free of doubts and hesitations that had troubled me in relation to Colette.

Colette's creative, psychic and influential powers were strong and unique, and should never be underestimated.

A century earlier, Hector Berlioz was inspired to write his *Symphonie fantastique* by another Irish actress, Harriet Smithson. I knew little of this work, still less of Harriet Smithson, until a London first night of 1936, when Massine at Covent Garden created a spectacular symphonic ballet to the music, for Colonel de Basil's Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, which turned out by common consent to be a masterpiece.

The presiding genius, a *femme fatale*, was danced by the young Toumanova, who flitted like a will-o'-the-wisp through the quickly changing scenes, tortured dreams and macabre fantasies of the hero; but her moonlit, made-up face haunted by its eerie evocation of Colette, as I remembered her in an Ibsen play. When I learned later of the stormy liaison of Berlioz and Harriet Smithson—and especially of the latter's Munster provenance—I was not less than dumbfounded. That brilliant night was forty years ago. But never do I hear the *Symphonie fantastique*—still a favourite symphony—without recalling Toumanova's arabesques and jetées on that night, and her fascinating ectoplasm-portrait of Colette O'Niel—a very symbol of sexual emancipation in the life of genius, as transmuted by Massine and Terpsichore.

London, England