

# The wisdom of Colette

by *Bennett Gardiner*

THERE IS AN elusive impression, half implied in Lady Ottoline Morrell's memoirs, and not discouraged by Bertrand Russell's final, June 1920 letter from the Volga, on page 107 of *Autobiography II*. (London, 1968) that his continuing devotion to Constance Malleon was inspired by her youth, devastating early beauty, democratic freedom from convention, and ardent pacifism, but took little account of her mental or intellectual calibre.

A friend who knew her well once surprised me by saying, almost as if echoing Colette herself: "Of course, Russell loved her with his heart, but he had no opinion of her mind or character"—presumably unaware of the rock-like strength of their early wartime encounters, which Russell has immortalized, and the early letters. Nor was the great philosopher very much interested in the struggling actress, her professionalism, ambition, or artistic integrity.

That their love was meteoric, based on instantaneous attraction, dynamic feeling—especially about the 1914 war—temperamental clashes of Irish willpower and Russellian egotism; spiritual affinity ("my soul's companion", he called her); and equality of birth and breeding, none will deny. That it was no less stormy than other celebrated high-bohemian liaisons—those of Byron, Nelson, Berlioz, Chopin, Gaudier-Breszka, Wagner and the King, for example—is history; with years of silence after passionate recrimination, impetuous reconciliations, haunting remorse, and epistolary harmony in old age.

The implied dérogation of Colette's intellectual stature baffled and disturbed me at the time, for I owe much intellectual awareness, spiritual insight, and human understanding to the clairvoyant passion of her acting, the penetrating power of her presence—and, later, the clarity, wisdom and frankness of her published writing—and it still seems to be a surprising judgment, based on a fundamental

fallacy, or perhaps wilful refusal on Russell's part to brook any degree of mental parity or intellectual intelligence in a worldly young woman of his own caste who chose to be an actress, impulsively married a second rate actor-playwright, refused to have children, and spent most of her working life shoddily on tour in third-rate towns.

The success of three printings of *After Ten Years* in 1931, when she was thirty-five, is one answer. It is evidence enough of mental creativity, if not intellectual achievement. I quote from early reviews printed by Cape in *The Times Literary Supplement* of July 2nd of that year:

A puzzled, searching distinction ... a lovely humanity. It is a book of great merit, courageous and inspiring. I beg you to read it.—Harold Nicolson in the *Evening Standard*.

Courageous ... honest ... generous ... sensitive. As little afraid of the comic as the tragic. Deliberately unsentimental.—Gerald Gould in the *News Chronicle*.

Vivid and just. Singularly keen sense of natural beauty. Rare power of description.—Henry W. Nevinson, in the *West End Review*.

Candid and intimate. Informed by the twin angels of generosity and courage.—*The Observer*.

I like the book extremely. The beginning is brilliant. I warmly recommend it.—Vita Sackville-West, in a BBC talk.

Another unidentified critic wrote:

Unlike most autobiographies, which consist of giving away the writer's best friends, Lady Constance gives away nobody—except herself.

The emphasis, as always, is on her courage and generosity rather than intellectual distinction; but her intellectual references throughout are impeccable. And, as she says, "The Wisdom of Herakleitos, of Ephesus, I had learnt from the wisdom of BR, and from his learning." Her intellectual quotient came from him.

That she was a public enchantress, tragic heroine, classic comedienne, character actress and good trouser, is confirmed by her theatre record; and by certain reviews, one comparing her (idly, I think) to Mrs. Patrick Campbell; another to a portrait by Sickert or Sargent; and others, too numerous to mention, preserved in the files of the London *Daily Telegraph* for October 1925. That she was a richly gifted writer of rare penetration and stylistic perfection, any-

one may read in her books. (No one has analysed Bertrand Russell with the perspicuity of her early disowned novel, *The Coming Back*—as the *TLS* acknowledged in a review of Clark's *Life* in 1975.) Did she bear the stigmata of secular sainthood? A question not too difficult to answer.

It must be stated—by me, who saw her in eight plays—that Colette's stage image, beautiful, bewitching, and aristocratic though it was, was not reassuring. She *did* look predatory, as her published profile photographs suggest; but nobility, intelligence, wisdom, wit, and humour prevailed until one felt only a spellbound charm, compounded of compassionate understanding and *unique* intellectual authority. When the curtain rose on her in a black and white dress in A. A. Milne's gay comedy *Belinda*, one was for a moment somehow reminded of the melodrama *East Lynne*, and its mid-Victorian villainess. The *rusé* young professional who engaged her for ten weeks as female lead at Hull would cast her, sometimes, in character or cameo roles, or even in no part at all. (She omits him altogether from her autobiography.) But she did not seem to mind; and when not playing would watch her colleagues from the audience. I am sure the producer's attitude was not because she could not act, but because she did not look quite right as a virtuous heroine. In the leads he let her play—and Bjørnsen's *Leonarda* would have been a superb climax—she was sublime; but they were all offbeat, intellectual, frustrated, or tragic women, one of them in love with a criminal. This *may* have been why she felt a provincial failure in Hull. Yet only five years later, one of the greatest actor-managers of his generation, Sir Frank Benson, chose her to act with him four of the most enchanting women in Shakespeare and Sheridan; while Lewis Casson and Sybil Thorndike cast her as a ruthless ultra-modern scientist in a part which won—in South Africa—the finest review of her career.

Another disadvantage Colette had on stage was a figure gracious without grace. Gesture and movement were fine. But the shoulders were round, her waist solid, and ankles strong. A touch of the German *Landgräfin*, masked by fashionable London or individually romantic clothes. Eva, in Rubinstein's *Peter and Paul*, a careworn, defiant Scandinavian wife or mistress, oddly suited her. As Benson's Lady Teazle—as in Ibsen's *Borkman*, or Ashley Dukes' *Man With a Load of Mischief*—she would look picturesque and alluring in the long period dresses; her Lydia Languish must have been as beguiling as the name; but hardly for a moment did she, or her acting, convey sexual attraction or desire, for all the impassioned voice and romantic *femme fatale* face. For this reason, and no other, I am always sceptical

of the legend of her promiscuity; especially as self-engendered. The men who caused her pregnancies remain unknown. One cannot imagine Bertrand Russell permitting even one abortion, had he been responsible, although she might have defied him. If she did abort a child, and he knew of it, she was miraculous indeed to retain his love for a day, let alone for over half a century. She wrote to him for fifty-four years, and letters now in the Archives prove that he responded. Yet *Autobiography II* drops her, arbitrarily and forever, in 1920, and one wonders why.

That she was capable of uncanny prescience and persuasive power is demonstrable. Not only did she influence Russell greatly in the 1916-17 war years, during a period of total disillusionment, when her passionate love and "rock-like immovability" gave him the moral support and reassurance he so badly needed. There is the curious engagement of Colin Clive to play the lead in *Journey's End*. The play's author, R. C. Sherriff, in his book *No Leading Lady*, tells a remarkable story. The part was created by Laurence Olivier for a Sunday night theatre club; but the first commercial-run Captain Stanhope proved unsatisfactory at rehearsal, and there was chaos. Suddenly the producer was telephoned by Jeanne de Casalis (then famous) to recommend an actor (almost unknown) whom she wanted to marry. She spoke with such conviction that the producer agreed to an audition. Clive was doubtfully engaged; and although nervous, and himself dubious, gave a first-night performance of such realism, virility, compassion and humanity, that audience and critics acclaimed him. Overnight he became a star, and was hailed as a great actor. The play swept the world, and after a long West End run he went to Hollywood to make the film, dying there in 1937.

Jeanne de Casalis had doubtless met Colin Clive through her old friend Colette, either in Hull or when Clive and Colette brought *Young Heaven* for a Sunday night to London. It would seem likely that Colette, remembering the Army captain in Malleson's play, first recommended him to de Casalis, whereupon the lady called the theatre and the rest is history.

The two near-cosmic figures with whom Colette can most closely be compared are both Austrian: Ludwig Wittgenstein, by the hazard of birth; and the German-born Empress Elisabeth of Austria and Queen of Hungary, by her marriage to Franz Josef. Wittgenstein, says Russell, had "fire and penetration and intellectual purity to a quite extraordinary degree". Colette shared those qualities. Her activities listed in *Who's Who* reveal her intellectual form, as well as its purity: "Howard League for Penal Reform; the Summerhill

Society; the Private Libraries Association; the Anti-Slavery Society; the Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings; the Suffolk Preservation Society; the National Trust; the Conservation Society; the National Council for Civil Liberties; worked for English Mental Hospital Reform, the British Army Blood Supply Depot (1939); in 1946 volunteered for service in Finland during the Russian invasion; and lectured in Sweden (1936-37) and Finland (1941 and 1946)"—whether in Swedish and Finnish one knows not, although she wrote in Finnish and contributed to Helsinki's *Helsingin Sanomat*. She translated Trygve Kielland's play, *Queen Margaret of Norway*, from Norwegian into English in 1954.

Membership of the Summerhill Society intrigues, and again recalls Elisabeth. Summerhill is the Irish country house where the equestrian Empress spent the most relaxed and joyous weeks of her lonely, reckless, wandering life, in the 1870s, when she visited England and Ireland six times for the hunting. At Summerhill, in Ireland, she met "Bay" Middleton, the gallant huntsman appointed to guide her, and who is said to have been in love with her until his death in a riding accident, ten years later.

Colette also rode, incidentally, if not to hounds; I have seen a snapshot of her astride a handsome mount in riding-breeches and dashing sombrero, around 1930.

She studied Swedish, Finnish and Norwegian. The Austrian Empress learned Hungarian in depth at twenty, and read Greek until the day before she died. It is recorded that she also translated *Hamlet*, *Lear* and *The Tempest* into Greek. "When the Hellenes speak, it is music", she said. Like Colette, the Empress (a mad Wittelsbach) took a nearly professional interest in mental welfare, visiting asylums in Vienna and Budapest, and even Bedlam during a hunting visit to Britain. Both talked to psychiatrists, and followed the subsequent destinies of certain patients. Colette, after leaving the stage in 1931—I am convinced, only because of increasing deafness—taught speech therapy at Eileen Thorndike's Swiss Cottage, London, school for the mentally retarded; and, as *Who's Who* confirms, worked for English mental hospital reform.

Both walked tirelessly and to excess, wherever destiny or impulse led: Elisabeth to Corfu, Greece, Hungary, Egypt, Switzerland, Madeira, but in Britain she was usually on horseback; Colette all over England, Ireland, Switzerland, Palestine, Rhodesia, South Africa and Scandinavia. Both were born to bewitch the public, love and to be loved—yet both stood incorrigibly alone. Sisters, in T. E. Lawrence's words, quoted by Colette in *After Ten Years*, of "every lonely

moving individual, son of the road, apart from the world as in the grave". The Empress disillusioned, betrayed impossibly soon after marriage by a weak if doting husband; the once ambitious actress-and-writer disappointed, doomed to await in vain the unconditional return of an all too normal but unpredictable world-famous, noble lover of genius, for over half a century.

A Hungarian, Countess Sztáray, who first met the Queen of Hungary when the monarch was nearly sixty, and was beside her when she was stabbed to death in Geneva, reports: "L'impératrice avait un charme inouï.... Pendant que son regard lumineux et triste se posait sur moi pour la première fois, je me sentais sous l'empire d'un être supraterrétre...." So one felt at the first glimpse of Colette O'Niel, on or off the stage. I remember the last time I saw her "supra-terrestrial" radiance, when she was still a young woman. This occurred not on the stage, but in the oppressive Guildhall at Hull, one autumn afternoon in 1930—five years after the famous Little Theatre season. She was now on tour with Benson, to whom the Lord Mayor of Hull and Corporation were giving a farewell tea-party in homage, for this was his last national tour. As leading lady she had to be present; especially as the Lord Mayor and certain aldermen would remember her from 1925, and the Little Theatre was now a highly successful, solidly professional repertory company.

At twenty-five minutes past four precisely Colette O'Niel swept into the town clerk's office, supremely elegant in flame-coloured turban, beige cape swinging, a cluster of yellow tea-roses at her shoulder, carrying a silver-topped Regency cane, and softly asking for direction to the Lord Mayor's parlour. The duty office-boy, a virile, handsome lad of character, football mad and unromantic as a goal post, accompanied her towards the mayoral sanctum. As he returned I observed him, slightly flushed, slipping a rose into his jacket pocket. He had not the faintest idea of the visitor's identity. I said, "Did she *give* you the rose you just put in your pocket?" "No. It fell off her shoulder, and I found it lying in the corridor." When I told him who the visitor was, with characteristic boyish cynicism he was unimpressed. But that young man became the Lord Mayor's secretary, and is to-day at the top of his chosen (non-mayoral) profession, a national figure, himself in *Who's Who*.<sup>1</sup>

I can also remember an older man joining us during our brief exchange and asking, with typical provincial gaucherie and envy:

"Who was the fine lady? Who *was* that fine lady—eh? Who *was* she?" He got no change from either of us.

The Austrian Empress would walk from Munich to Feldafing in seven hours non-stop. Colette, in the black of night, rowed *thirty miles* (according to one national newspaper) across the Gulf of Finland at the height of World War II—reaching Sweden alone, at nearly fifty years of age. And controlled violence pursued her to the end; in the form of rhustoxicodendron blood-poisoning, heavy falls, accidents, immobility and near-paralysis, until the last window-smashing incident of her desolate old age, when she had what she called in an article in *The Guardian* newspaper, "A Small Stroke".

Colette O'Niel vilified self-pity as "the most disgusting of vices"; perhaps because she was not immune from it herself, even in her published writing. The Empress frequently sank into black depression, and with good reason; for hers was the most tragic destiny of the Wittelbach 1,000-year dynasty, and she knew it. Death pursued her as a familiar: her brother-in-law Maximilien of Mexico shot; his wife mad; her cousin, Ludwig II of Bavaria half-mad and drowned in a fight with his doctor, whom he strangled; another brother-in-law committing suicide in a Zurich hotel; her brother William killed, like the adored Bay Middleton, by his horse; a niece burnt alive at twenty; her son Rudolf, and his mistress of sixteen, dead by violence at Mayerling; her youngest and dearest sister, Sophie, burned to death in a Paris charity bazaar blaze. Herself assassinated, one year later, by an anarchist *voyou* on the lakeside in Geneva.

How dare one suggest that an atheist and sinner—outcast, by Christian values—could possibly be a saint, secular or other wise? Courage, generosity, a quivering sensibility, intellectual purity, spiritual exaltation, vision and wisdom are marks of the greatest saints, some of whom were among the greatest sinners in youth.

As years passed and her deafness became total, so Colette's isolation increased; and with it her self-discipline, self-sufficiency and will to dominate her lonely destiny: writing, travelling, lecturing, life-enhancing where she could, the theatre a distant dream of art, comradeship and love now in limbo, beauty gone and "the world well lost", not for love or Russell but for the survival of her ship; "Sail thou!", as she proclaimed in *In the North*, in a formidable statement of her faith, reprinted in *Russell* in the issue published after her death in October 1975.

*In the North* was the second and last of her autobiographical writings, apart from newspaper articles, and is ruthless, harsher, more impetuous and less well-written than *After Ten Years*; but it has

<sup>1</sup> Alan Hardaker, O.B.E., first Director-General of the British Football League, died in March 1980.

an icy intellectual penetration, and spiritual intensity, an emotional maturity amid the Nordic descriptive and diarist's small-talk which lift it to the highest level of literary achievement, flawed and episodic though it is. Despite a displeasing frontispiece of herself in Finnish or Norwegian head-dress, badly photographed, with the lower face (they do say the camera cannot lie) distorted, text and content vibrate with a unique magnetism, inner conviction and private wisdom; despite all this, the book has a charisma unique unto herself.

In 1947, when *In the North* was published by Gollancz, I was under contract at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, and ordered a copy. On arrival the book was opened, and a woman colleague beside me noticed the frontispiece. The girl was the daughter of a clergyman, and knew little of Bertrand Russell, but she possessed the intelligence of the heart. This (to me quite ugly) picture of Colette so fascinated her that she said, "May I borrow the book after you?". Sceptical, but not displeased, I agreed. When she returned it, she added that she found it so good that she had sent for a copy herself—which became her favourite bedside book, so I was told. This woman was then humble secretary to a turbulent and erratic female supervisor. But, like the young Hull gentleman who pocketed Colette's rose, she evolved, and when last heard of was head of Personnel with the UN Agency in Rome.

The prose passage *par excellence* which, I believe, establishes beyond doubt Colette's title to secular sainthood first appeared in *After Ten Years* in 1931. In the late 1930s she heard of my opinion of this marvellous achievement, and sent a private message which I treasure.<sup>2</sup> In 1947 she reprinted the particular paragraph, because, she said, it summarized her philosophy of life. And so, from *In the North*—and as quoted in a book of my own of 1972—I cite:

That love is successful or unsuccessful, fruitful or unfruitful, matters not one jot. It is the quality of love that matters: the passion of its striving; the impulsiveness of its giving; the intensity of its will to understand; its sheer humanity; its capacity to forgive. Love may fail to quicken men's spirit, or evoke their response, or alter a single tenet of their philosophy—but if it is self-reliant and generous and free, it will not utterly fail. It will not be less great—it will only be more solitary. To love by the fire and passion of what is gone—and to uphold its memory—is to live fully. Not to go dead. Nor yet to go rotten. To be more alive than ever you were before. To take the risk,

achieve the glory, and (in the fullest sense of the words) accept the defeat—is to know the quality of love; and is not utterly to fail.<sup>3</sup>

That is great writing. It is the voice of a saint or a genius. Nothing in the Bible (except Corinthians II), the Shakespeare sonnets, or the plays, John Donne, T. S. Eliot or even Pascal, surpasses or equals it. And the morality which underpinned it? Cocteau, writing on Rimbaud, says "la morale s'incline devant le génie; car le génie n'est autre que le phénomène qui consiste à sanctifier des fautes écrites ou vécues."

In this essay I have compared Colette to the foredoomed Empress of Austria. In forestalling possible future criticism of the nature of Colette, Lady Constance Malleson, I am moved again to echo Henry Vallotton on the Empress. In his *Elisabeth d'Autriche, l'Impératrice Assassinée* (Paris, 1957), he wrote:

Ces jugements absolus, ces définitions péremptoires pèchent par leur manque de nuances ou leur défaut d'humanité: Elisabeth est un être complexe, souvent contradictoire, infiniment délicat; hypersensible, capable d'affection profonde et d'aversion spontanée, elle a besoin d'être encouragé, aimée; au moindre heurt, elle se claquemure dans le silence, elle ferme à double tour les portes de son âme.

Geneva, Switzerland

<sup>2</sup>"Please tell your friend that that is very perceptive of him."

<sup>3</sup>*When the Heart Sings: Moscow Mirage* (New York: Vantage Press).