

Elizabeth von Arnim

by Juliane Römhild and Kate Macdonald

Born in Sydney as Mary Annette Beauchamp in 1866, the writer later to be known to her world as 'Elizabeth of the German Garden', and from the late twentieth century as Elizabeth von Arnim, spent her youth in Britain as the youngest daughter of a large merchant family. On a tour through Italy with her father, Mary met the much older Henning von Arnim-Schlagenthin, a member of a family with close ties to the German court. They bonded over their shared love of music: Mary was a trained organist and Henning had been a student of Liszt. During their courtship Henning took her and her mother to Bayreuth and introduced her to the Wagner family.

After their marriage in 1891, the couple settled in Berlin. Although Mary quickly learnt German and grew into her new role as a German countess, she was keen to escape the rigid Prussian etiquette and the stifling atmosphere at court. The family moved to Nassenheide, Henning's remote country estate near the Baltic Sea, where Mary wrote her first diary novel. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* is closely based on her life at Nassenheide. Published anonymously in 1898, it was an instant bestseller and made her a literary star in Britain. The novel and its sequels sent the newspapers reeling: who was this enchanting countess who could write of German country life with such charm and a keen satirical eye? As the wife of Henning von Arnim-Schlagenthin, she could hardly enter the public sphere as a writer – let alone the writer of novels that made fun of the Fatherland. Accordingly, Mary denied all authorship of her books and refused all offers of translating her work into German while Henning was alive.

Henning died in 1910, and Mary moved back to Britain with her five children. She developed a close relationship with H G Wells, and met the eccentric man who she would marry in 1916, Francis, Earl Russell, and elder brother of the philosopher Bertrand Russell. This marriage was a catastrophe, and Mary spent the rest of her life enduring it, escaping it, and regretting that she had ever married him.

Her tumultuous personal life and her need for solitude made it desirable for her to have an escape from Britain, and she built a home in Switzerland called the Chalet Soleil. For the rest of her life she alternated between her homes in London, Switzerland and southern France, living there alone and also enjoying the company of large parties of her children and her friends.

Her spectacular success as an author made these homes and travels possible, and her writing, along with her children and dogs, was the principal occupation of her life. She died in 1941 while visiting her daughter in the United States.

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