

Elinor Mordaunt was born Evelyn May Clowes on 7 May 1872 at Cotgrave Place, Cotgrave, near Nottingham, to St. John Legh Clowes and Elizabeth Caroline Bingham Clowes. She had five older brothers (Peter, William, George, Frances, and Philip), one younger brother, Denis, and one younger sister, Mabel. The family moved to Charlton Park, Cheltenham, Gloucestershire, when she was five and later lived in Oxfordshire. Mordaunt was allowed a great deal of freedom in her youth and says in her autobiography that 'there was certainly nothing Victorian about my upbringing'. She describes her early education as 'perfectly futile', as the family changed governesses quite often and with each new one her education seemed to start over again. She remembers that Cassell's threepenny book series of classic works was a revelation in her self-education, and she constantly carried one in her pocket. Her mother would read Thomas Hardy's novels aloud to the family, and she would enact Shakespeare plays with her friends. When she was around eighteen, Mordaunt's family sent her to London for a couple of months to study painting, but she was happy to return to the country, riding horses and spending time outdoors.

In her twenties, Mordaunt began a courtship with William Banks Wright, who made his money in South Africa by farming and speculating in gold. He proposed and Mordaunt intended to return to South Africa with him, but the marriage was delayed because of her father's stroke, and Wright returned without her, planning to return in six months. He died suddenly of fever while leading an expedition along the Zambezi River near Bulawayo.

Around 1897, and still mourning the loss of Wright, Mordaunt went to Mauritius with a cousin's family and shortly after married Maurice Wiehe, a sugar planter. The marriage was an unhappy one from the beginning, and Mordaunt states in her autobiography that Wiehe only married her with the idea of obtaining some professional position by connecting himself to her family. At one point, he even offered her 'as a stake' when playing cards. The marriage resulted in two stillborn children, but Mordaunt says, 'One effect it had upon me was that it started me writing'. Suffering from malaria and pregnant once again, Mordaunt left Mauritius — and her husband — two and a half years later. She spent three months at her family's home in England but, still desperate for a change and feeling miserable and depressed, decided to sail for Australia. She recalls, 'One might have thought my life had ended in the mid-twenties. Nothing of the sort, it was beginning again, but upon a completely different plane. I was at last getting hold of it and knew what I wanted'.

Shortly after arriving in Melbourne in 1903, with £30 to her name, Mordaunt gave birth to her son, Godfrey Weston Wiehe. Taking advantage of the gift she had for drawing and painting, she sewed blouses and cushions, painted fabrics, parasols, and advertisements and eventually ran a small embroidery design business. This talent for visual art also served her well in later years and can be credited for the intricate details and beautiful descriptions of people and places one sees in her writing. She says, 'I remember everything by line and colour, the curve of a road, the fine lines of a person's face, the expression etched upon it when this or that was said. [...] I gather it all up and use it in my stories'.

She claims in her autobiography that she never had any money to spare until Heinemann paid her £30 for her novel *A Ship of Solace* (1911), which enabled Mordaunt to open a bank account. She took an editorial post at a woman's monthly magazine at £2 a week, which made it possible for her to move out of her two-room residence in Melbourne and into a small cottage outside the city. She wrote articles on cooking, managed the advice columns, and wrote short stories, but was later fired with only a week's notice because the printers could not read her writing. Luckily, Mordaunt's first book, *The Garden of Contentment* (1902), a series of fictional letters written from England which she started while living on Mauritius, was receiving good reviews, and Charles Bogue Luffman, the principal of Burnley College (a horticultural school in Melbourne) put her in touch with a man who wanted to redesign his garden, agreeing to pay her £200 to complete the project.

She then accepted an offer from Luffman to live with him and supervise the female students at the college. Mordaunt valued his friendship, but he began to be possessive and, with Mordaunt not being interested in a romantic relationship, the two parted. She left the college with five shillings and returned to rented rooms and her painting and home design work. She eventually took commissions for several design projects. Her health was constantly bad, however, and after her fourth trip to the hospital, her friends urged her to travel back to England.

In 1908, Mordaunt returned to England and lived for a short time at her parents' home while making money selling a few short stories to magazines and writing children's stories under the name 'John Heron'. Shortly after her arrival, *Rosemary: That's for Remembrance* (1909) was published in Melbourne and London, and her first travel book *On the Wallaby through Victoria* (1911), written as 'E M Clowes,' was published by William Heinemann. During this time, she also began writing fairy tales, and an illustrated collection of fairy stories for children, *Shoe and Stocking Stories*, was published in 1915. She moved to London after being hired by the weekly paper *Black and White* and worked there until it ceased publication in 1912.

Luckily for Mordaunt, her publishing career was about to take off. *A Ship of Solace* (1911), based on her journey from Britain to Australia, was accepted by William Heinemann, who told Mordaunt upon their first meeting, 'You've got genius'. In her autobiography, she called him 'the most faithful and kind friend I have ever had', and only stopped publishing with the firm because they would not pay enough to allow her to send her son to boarding school. While she was with Heinemann, Mordaunt published her novel *The Cost of It*, which she thought was one of her best books, in 1912. This was followed by *Lu of the Ranges* (1913) and her first short fiction collection *The Island* (1914). She also used this newfound success to reinvent herself, legally changing her name to 'Evelyn May Mordaunt.'

Although in her autobiography Mordaunt repeatedly questions her ability to make good decisions and laments her stubborn and often rash behavior, that stubbornness served her well early in her publishing career. After disputes with William Heinemann, she found better offers with both Cassell and Methuen. The

latter published *The Family* (1915) and *Bellamy* (1914), Mordaunt's novel of working-class factory life for which she spent six months employed in a textile mill in Staffordshire. Cassell brought out five books in quick succession: *The Rose of Youth* (1915), *The Park Wall* (1916), her second collection of short fiction titled *Before Midnight* (1917), *The Processionals* (1918), and *The Pendulum* (1918). She then switched to Hutchinson for her next four short fiction collections, as well as her novels of the 1920s, including *Laura Creighton* (1921), *Reputation* (1923), and *The Dark Fire* (1927), among others, before moving to Martin Secker and Michael Joseph in the 1930s. Her novel *Mrs Van Kleek*, published by Secker in 1933, was later adapted into a play.

With this newfound success and financial stability, Mordaunt experienced a brief period of contentment. She moved to Diamond Terrace, Greenwich, and was happy there, despite the troubles that always seemed to resurface in her life. In her autobiography, she says, 'If there is a heaven and one ever goes to it, how delicious it would be to take the house you've loved best, the person you've loved best, your best cat, your best dog, your garden, and really settle down to grow perennials and not annuals. As life is I've never dared to try perennials, something always happens'. The Greenwich house was repeatedly bombed by German zeppelins and in 1918, both she and her son were stricken with Spanish flu. Around 1920, she bought a house in St John's Wood, living upstairs and letting the ground floor.

Feeling alone after her son finished college and moved to Kenya and dreading another English winter which always wreaked havoc on her health, Mordaunt felt that she needed a change. In 1923 she approached the foreign editor at the *Daily News* with a plan to sail from Marseilles to Tahiti, over the course of a month, on cargo ships and sailing boats. The paper agreed to pay for a series of articles, at £20 each, related to her travels. From Marseilles, she traveled to Martinique, Guadeloupe, through the Panama Canal, and on to Tahiti. She declared, 'I loved the life at Tahiti. I know it is mostly spoilt by dissolute and idle white people, but one can keep clear of them'.

From Tahiti, she sailed to the Samoan Islands and on to Fiji, New Zealand, Brisbane, and then on to Papua New Guinea where she stayed for a few months. There she was proclaimed 'Sinabada', meaning 'Lady King,' and only after departing did she discover an article written in a French paper saying that she 'was the only woman ever known to have reigned as monarch over sixty cannibal islands'. Mordaunt eventually described these travels in *The Venture Book* and *The Further Venture Book*, both published by John Lane in 1926. After returning to Brisbane, she booked passage on a Dutch cargo boat headed to Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies). From there, the trip took her to Bali, Java, Sumatra, Ceylon, Bombay, and then to Kenya to visit her son, who married and settled on a farm there.

As always throughout her life, travel provided a literal and figurative escape from personal troubles. In September 1928, Mordaunt traveled to New York City, the first of many trips to America. In October 1930, she returned to New York for six weeks, then to Cuba, and on to Central America in 1931, staying several months in Guatemala before moving on to El Salvador and embarking on

a solo trek across Honduras. A further travel book, *Purely for Pleasure* (1932), detailed her trips to Central America, Africa, and Southeast Asia, where she witnessed and wrote about child prostitution in Singapore.

In August 1931, Mordaunt returned to New York, made a later trip to New England, and then crossed the country to Hollywood, California, where she stayed for five months. Also in 1931, her novel *Gin and Bitters* came out with Farrar & Rinehart in New York. Published pseudonymously by 'A. Riposte' and carrying the subtitle 'A Novel about a Novelist who writes Novels about other Novelists,' the book was a satirical response to Somerset Maugham's *Cakes and Ale* (1930), which included two main characters who many thought to be unflattering representations of Thomas Hardy and Hugh Walpole. Mordaunt was close friends with Florence Dugdale Hardy and most likely penned the tale out of retaliation for Maugham's portrayal of the recently deceased Hardy. The book caused a scandal in Great Britain when Maugham discovered that the novel was written by Mordaunt and was to be published by Martin Secker under the title *Full Circle*. Maugham sued Mordaunt for libel and Secker was forced to withdraw the book from publication and destroy the remaining stock before the case reached court.

After being separated from her husband for over thirty years, Mordaunt advertised for any information and hearing nothing, presumed he was dead, meaning that she was free to remarry if she chose. In 1933, she married Robert Rawnsley Bowles (1865-1947), and in late 1933 the couple sailed from England to Sydney. Mordaunt devotes only a few lines to this relationship in her autobiography, cryptically saying, 'Later on I did, ridiculously enough, fall really in love and married a man several years older than myself, but it began and ended in tragedy'. On her arrival to New York in September 1928, and later to San Pedro, California, in December 1936, Mordaunt is recorded as a widow on the passenger lists.

During the late 1930s, Mordaunt resided in Chelsea, London, and her final years continued to be a productive time for writing despite lingering health problems. She published her autobiography *Sinabada* in 1937, the title taking inspiration from her time in New Guinea. A year before her death she published *Here Too is Valour* about the suffering and resilience of Londoners during the Blitz, as well as *Blitz Kids*, told from a young girl's perspective. Hutchinson also published two further novels: *Tropic Heat* (1941) and *This Was Our Life* (1942). She died at Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford, on 25 June 1942. A boy's adventure book, *To Sea! To Sea!* appeared posthumously in 1943.

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