

Biography

KATHLEEN RILEY

Robert Wainwright

SHEILA

The Australian ingenue who bewitched
 British society

424pp. Allen and Unwin. £14.99.

978 1 74331 682 5

Published: 28 May 2014

Sheila Chisholm's trajectory from a grazing property named "Wollogorang", in the hills beyond Goulburn in New South Wales, to the centre of London society in the years following the First World War is an enticing basis for a biography. Sheila had three husbands: the tragically dissolute Lord Loughborough, son of the "Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo"; the "Boxing Baronet", Sir John Milbanke; and Prince Dmitri Alexandrovich, nephew of Russia's last tsar. Her many suitors included Rudolph Valentino; the American philanthropist Vincent Astor; and the future George VI, with whom she formed one half of a quartet that styled itself the "4 Dos", the other half comprising Freda Dudley Ward and the

Prince of Wales. As well as beauty, charisma and resilience, Sheila had a capacity for forging and maintaining friendships, a reputation for good works (she was chairman of the annual Derby Ball in aid of the Royal Northern Hospital), and some business acumen (she once assumed the management of the nightclub *Ciro's* for a bet and later established her own successful travel agency). And like other quintessentially 1920s personalities, such as her friend Noël Coward, she had a talent for reinvention. Yet, despite these attributes, she was still bound by the conventions of her class and time and not quite the pioneering Australian free spirit and even proto-feminist Robert Wainwright claims.

Wainwright has conscientiously mined the available sources, but *Sheila* is something of a missed opportunity. It could have been a fascinating social history with Sheila as its dazzling conduit. Instead, it often reads like an extended article in the *Tatler*. Wainwright is too reliant on the gossip columns of the day and on superficial first-hand observations. We spend too long immersed in the minutiae of one fashionable gathering after another or in the wearisome company of childish princes, petite Lady Bountifuls and the irredeemably damaged progeny of scapegrace parents. He gives us the facts, but fails to furnish what Virginia Woolf calls "the creative fact; the fertile fact; the fact that suggests and engenders". Sheila herself remains elusive, though Wainwright quotes extensively from her unpublished memoir "Waltzing Matilda". Only in his closing vignette of a vanishing world do we sense something of Sheila's bewitching presence: in her hospital ward surrounded by "ageing friends and compatriots from the early days all laughing and making merry".