

CLARE SHERIDAN



Clare Sheridan's papers are held at the Keep at Falmer, and an excellent summary appears at <http://www.thekeep.info/clare-sheridan-a-woman-ahead-of-her-time/>. The purpose of the material below is to expand on that summary with additional information and illustrations.

Clare Sheridan (1885-1970), born Clare Consuelo Frewen at Brede Place, was a remarkable sculptress whose career has led to all kinds of so far unsubstantiated stories of her personal life. The popular press of the twentieth century revelled in such lubricious speculation, as it does today, particularly where the subject was so obviously attractive and well connected.



Her father Moreton Frewen (1853-1924), was a financial failure but was personally highly regarded and a friend of literary and political figures; her mother was Clara Jerome, sister of the mother of Winston Churchill, and not short of money. Clare was introduced when young to a large number of such people. She had a conventional education for her class, being sent to France and Germany, but already a rebellious streak was evident.

In due course, in 1910 and at least initially against the wishes of her parents, she married a stockbroker, Wilfred Frederick Tempest Sheridan (who preferred to call himself William). In the marriage ceremony she

by Emil Fuchs, 1907

declined to 'obey' in her vows. The couple had three children, the last of them born only a few days before Wilfred, then a Captain in the Rifle Brigade, was killed in action on 25 September 1915 at the disastrously unproductive battle of Loos on the Western Front.

By then one child, Elizabeth, had already died; the son Richard, born in 1915, was to die at the age of 21 (in Algeria where he and Clare were then living); her surviving daughter Margaret (1912-80) married a French count and colonial officer and wrote books under the name of Mary Motley. This had been the name of her grandmother (Wilfred's mother); the past also called to Richard, who as Richard Brinsley Sheridan shared his name with his four-great grandfather the playwright.

After her husband's death Clare was wooed by a nobleman and clearly fell for him. Oswald Frewen, her brother, wrote in his diary:

The fiancé is evidently of generous and lovable disposition. That Puss (Clare) should marry him, an Earl with £90,000 a year aged 20 cannot fail to look bad, and indeed the material benefits accruing thereto are so great for the entire Frewen family indirectly that I have the utmost circumspection in admitting a desire for it even to myself - I don't like the idea of her marrying again when the first union was perfect - but she is not the sort to go cold-bloodedly after

money & a coronet is certainly nothing to her. He is very much in love with her (his heart is weak and he requires humouring), she is obviously fond of him, old Wilfred expressly told her that if he were killed he hoped she would marry again.

The man in question was not in fact an earl but a younger son of the marquess of Bath and he was Conservative MP for Bath: Lord Alexander Thynne. They were engaged in 1917 but he was to be killed near Béthune a few weeks before the war ended. Clare never married again, though from time to time the newspapers reported on the possibility.

By then she had developed a strong interest in sculpture. Her daughter Elizabeth had died in 1914, and

in her efforts to make a weeping angel for the small grave she had discovered her own talent as a sculptress. Within four years she was holding exhibitions, and orders for portrait busts poured in from many countries.

One report says that she did not discover sculpting entirely by chance: her efforts at the graveside were assisted by the widow of the painter G F Watts. presumably Mary Fraser-Tytler, an artist, potter and sculptor. Clare was sufficiently motivated to study the art and practice of sculpture, learning from Jacob Epstein among others, and very shortly become well-known. By 1917 her specialism – busts of well-known people – was attracting public attention, leading to much work.



By the end of the war the October Revolution had taken place in Russia and the world was becoming a very different place. The first Soviet trade delegation arrived in the UK in 1920, led by Lev Kamenev, and if it was understandable that the Bolsheviks too would want their leaders commemorated in sculptures this may have been due to him. Clare appears to have had an affair with Kamenev, a prominent Bolshevik who like so many of his comrades was to end up being shot on Stalin's orders.

Winston Churchill, bust by Clare Sheridan in 1942

Oswald wrote:

Puss (Clare) is trying to go to Moscow with Kamenev to sculpt Lenin and Leon Trotsky.... I rather she didn't go but she has got Bolshevism badly - she always reflects the views of the last man she's met - and I think it may cure her to go and see it. She is her own mistress and if I thwarted her by telling Winston, she'd never confide in me again.... I went to the Bolshevik Legation in Bond

Street with her and waited while she saw Kamenev. Several typical Bolshies there - degenerate lot.

Sheridan made a bust of Kamenev and went on holiday with him to the Isle of Wight. He took her to Russia in September 1920 where she worked at her sculpture, producing busts of twelve people including Dzherzhinsky, Lenin, Trotsky and Zinoviev and living for two months in the Kremlin at Moscow.

More rumours of affairs abounded, including one with Trotsky. When she arrived in Russia the British were ensconced in the far north of Russia in an ultimately unpursued campaign to

unseat the Bolsheviks, and cousin Churchill happened to be Secretary of State for War. He among others was hardly amused at his cousin's closeness to his enemies. It did not help that although not herself a Communist she was known then, as Oswald points out, to harbour strong sympathies with the Soviet régime.

Trotsky invited her to go with him to the front but winter approached and she wanted to return to see her children. She left Moscow late in 1920. On her arrival in England she was reported as saying:

I was given comfortable quarters in a requisitioned house. Both Lenin and Trotsky are excellent sitters. I had eight hours with Lenin and 20 with Trotsky. Trotsky talked pictures, art and literature. He had the head of a Mephisto. He had a wonderful personality and is full of fire. He has read the best English literature, and once said to me that if England had never done anything but produce Shakespeare she would have justified her existence.

Of Lenin she said:

From the art point of view I think he is the most interesting man in the world. His eyes are most extraordinary. I modelled him in his room at the War Office while he was at work at his desk. His calmness in all circumstances is extraordinary. No matter how excited others get he always preserves his impassiveness.

She brought back the model busts for casting in bronze; Russia had the copyright and she would send the final versions there. Her talks with the Bolshevik leaders were the basis of a series of articles she wrote for The Times.



Clare Sheridan (left) in her London studio with the busts of (from left) Zinoviev, Trotsky, Lenin and Dzerzhinsky (from The Times, 25 November 1920). The bust behind her does not appear to be part of the Soviet group. Lenin died in 1924; Dzerzhinsky founded the Soviet secret police and died, apparently from natural causes, in 1926; Zinoviev was executed on the same day as Kamenev in 1936; Trotsky was exiled, then murdered in Mexico on Stalin's orders in 1940.

Very soon she became a journalist for a north American publication and travelled around Europe covering various matters such as the Irish civil war (being one of the last to interview Michael Collins, who apologised to her for his men having burned down Innishannon, the family house in County Cork, where Clare had occasionally lived) and the Turco-Greek war

including the appalling evacuation from Smyrna in September 1922. She interviewed several notable people such as Kemal Atatürk, the tsar of Bulgaria and Benito Mussolini. The last was not an occasion when she made a conquest, though it would be hard to accept that he did not attempt one. He threatened to send his fascist police after her if she published anything; a foolish threat because without punishment she soon wrote:

Mussolini is a striking example of force and feebleness. He can be completely controlled by those around him, and, unfortunately, his entourage contains no-one of any intellectual or moral value.

She also went to the USA and had to deny rumours that she had married Charlie Chaplin. But she did create a bust of him.

She then came back as a journalist to mainland Europe. An early report was of a meeting addressed by Hitler and as she travelled around others were of interviews with Maxim Gorky and with Primo de Rivera, who had carried out a coup d'état in Spain. She reported on the conditions in Germany during the currency crisis of 1923, and went on to Poland then Turkey and Romania. In Russia she no longer carried weight. It was clear by then that she was no communist and that her close ties with Churchill were hardly likely to endear her to the authorities. They refused her any contacts. Back in England she wrote about the Soviet Union in hostile terms, but there remains a suspicion that she was in fact a Soviet spy.



Given her public approach it was very fair that the Soviet representative in London offered to let her go to Ukraine to see how much better things were than when she had last been in the country. She and Oswald climbed on to a motorbike with a sidecar and drove off across Europe, leaving in July 1924. They named the vehicle *Satanella*. Oswald claimed that the only way she obtained a visa was because "Rakovsky's fallen for her. They all do. And in the end

Oswald and Clare leave on Satanella

she'll be shot." They both survived, and Clare obtained sufficient material for a later book.

It is perhaps superfluous by now to suggest that Clare was not one for sitting still. She next went back to north America where she learned to carve wood. As one might expect she made friends with the famous. Her carvings appear in English churches, including one to her son in Brede church (see end).

She came home when war started again, living initially at Brede Place Cottage – Brede Place itself was occupied by a local solicitor – but living in County Galway in 1947-54, at Oranmore and then at the Spanish arch in Galway city. Returning, she lived at Belmont House on the slope of the East Hill at Hastings. There she wrote a further book of reminiscences. In 1960 she became a Franciscan nun. It was at Parham House near Beaminster in Dorset that she died in 1970.



Belmont House, Hastings

Her last exhibition had been in 1951. A list of her sculptures has not been compiled but it included many subjects other than those mentioned above, including Gandhi and Asquith (now in the Imperial War Museum) and the dancer Serge Lifar.



*Clare's memorial to her son Richard, in Brede church, January 2019
(Madonna and child)*

She wrote several books, most of them highly praised:

- Russian portraits
- In many places
- Stella defiant: a modern woman's adventures
- My American diary
- Nuda veritas (an early autobiography)
- Across Europe with Satanella
- A Turkish kaleidoscope
- Arabian interlude
- Green amber
- Mayfair to Moscow
- Redskin interlude
- Without end
- My crowded sanctuary
- The four winds (a late autobiography)

Sources

The Daily Herald, various dates

The Daily Mail, various dates

The Times, various dates

<https://chiswickauctions.co.uk/this-wild-cousin-of-mine-clare-sheridan-a-portrait/>

<https://sheelanagigcomedienne.wordpress.com/category/clare-sheridan-author-sculptor-and-notable-galway-woman/>

Peter Murray, summer 2017 edition <https://www.irishartsreview.com/restless-spirit/>

See also

Collectanea O1.4 Brede Place, its history and families