

She fell in love ('Often. Too often')

Sybil Bedford wrote only four novels, but they established her reputation as one of the finest writers of the 20th century. Now, at 94, she has written a memoir, and is living proof that it is not necessary to sacrifice life for art

BY MADELINE O'DEA

There's something about the way Sybil Bedford says "sloth," bringing out the full plumminess of the vowel, that tells you how she has savoured this deadly sin. "Sloth and sybaritism," she tells me, is how she has spent too many of her 94 years, the reason for her modest output as a writer. "Yes, yes, yes, yes," she says, shaking her head, but in her voice you hear a tone of pleasure, not regret. For she is living proof that it is not necessary to sacrifice life for art.

Bedford published just four novels, but they established her reputation as one of the finest writers of the 20th century. Her first, *A Legacy*, appeared in 1956, to immense acclaim. "New, cool, witty, elegant," Evelyn Waugh wrote in *The Spectator*. "We salute a new artist." Her last, *Jigsaw*, appeared in 1989 and was shortlisted for the Booker Prize.

Her journalism and travel writing took her around the world, to report on the trials of Jack Ruby and the Auschwitz guards and to Mexico on a picaresque journey which she retold in *A Visit to Don Otavio* (1954), a work that Bruce Chatwin called the best travel book of the century.

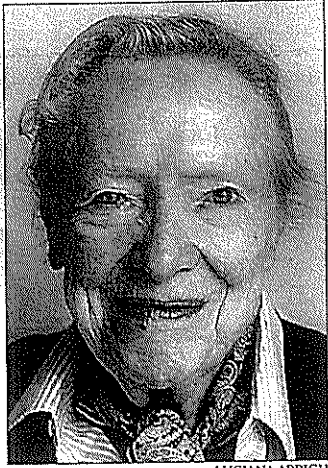
She spent her formative years on the Riviera between the wars amidst artists and writers, including Aldous Huxley, of whom she would later write a renowned biography (1974). This work remains, a critic in *The Spectator* recently wrote, "as forbidding to competitors as Boswell's *Life of Johnson*."

In recent years, Bedford's work has been known only to an enthusiastic few. But with the publication of her memoir, *Quicksands*, that looks set to change. Warm reviews are appearing, all her books are back in print, and there is talk of a film.

Her memoir shows her still struggling to puzzle out her life, considering what it is to survive a century that could have killed her. For Sybil Bedford was born Sybil von Schoenebeck in Germany of Jewish extraction in 1911 and she carries with her, as she put it to me, the sense of being an "escapee of events that came near, but not near enough."

In some ways all her novels are autobiographies too. *A Legacy* and *A Favourite of the Gods* (1963) re-imagine her parents' world. *A Compass Error* (1968) and *Jigsaw* fictionalize her own life. The characters who loom largest are her parents — an eccentric German aristocrat, Maximilian von Schoenebeck, and a part-Jewish English heiress, Elizabeth Bernard.

Their marriage was destined to be a failure. Her father, says Bedford, recognized Elizabeth's beauty,



LUCIANA ARRIGHI

but not her intelligence. Nor did he understand that she was never likely to be faithful.

The year 1919 found the young Sybil living alone with her father and just one servant (her mother's money having departed with her) in a country house in Southern Germany.

Her father pined for the 19th century and loved animals more than people, always tipping his hat to the farm donkey as he passed. A passionate collector of antiques, he was regularly forced to sell one of his treasures to pay the bills. On these occasions, he would console himself by bringing up a good vintage from the cellar and holding a wine-appreciation class for his old German maid and his daughter. Thus began Bedford's lifetime love affair with wine.

As to more conventional education for his daughter, Maximilian showed little interest. When he was persuaded that Sybil, at age 8 or 9, should attend the local school, it was discovered that although she could read fluently, she could not write at all. Humiliating weeks followed in which she learned to form her letters in the childish capitals that she still writes in today. This marked the end of her formal education.

When Sybil was 11, Elizabeth, planning to remarry, summoned her daughter to Italy. Two months later, Maximilian died. More than 80 years on, Bedford tells me, she still dreams of him "constantly."

In Italy, things did not go quite as expected. Her mother had indeed been intending to remarry, but a handsome student, Alessandro had given her pause. She dallied for months, then finally threw over her wealthy suitor and married Alessandro.

This is perhaps not surprising in someone as quixotic as Elizabeth. An early memory of her is played out against the background of the workers' revolution at the end of the First World War in Germany. As rich guests cowered in their hotel

lobby avoiding the bullets of rebellious soldiers, Bedford's mother jumped up to watch the fighting and urge the mutineers on.

Bedford confesses that she rarely loved her mother, but credits her with all her talent. At breakfast, Elizabeth expected Sybil to debate Dostoevsky. Late at night, she would demand discussions of history, politics and pacifism.

In the late twenties, Italian fascism became too strident, and Elizabeth, Alessandro and Sybil moved to the French Mediterranean at Sanary-sur-Mer. Between the wars, this region was home to a bohemian band of artists and writers, among them Huxley and his beautiful wife, Maria. These are the people, Bedford says, to whom she owes the most, "who educated me morally, intellectually, whose conduct and many of their beliefs are still a basis of my thoughts and actions (or so I hope)."

When Sybil met the Huxleys, her mother's downfall had already begun. Alessandro had started a casual affair, and Elizabeth, a lifelong femme fatale, sensed her powers failing. She plunged into depression, and a doctor prescribed morphine. The addiction would break Elizabeth's health, destroy her marriage and turn Sybil when she was still a child into a nurse.

The Huxleys funded Elizabeth's care, and were at Sybil's side when she finally sent her mother to the hospital where she would end her days. They accompanied her to Germany in 1932 to try to expatriate the little money she had inherited. When currency restrictions thwarted that plan, Maria Huxley smuggled out what money she could in her shoes.

As war approached, Sybil's Jewish background and German passport placed her in danger. It was the Huxleys who found the solution.

Inspiration came from Thomas Mann's glamorous daughter Erika. On the Mediterranean, the Manns were the stars of a group of literary émigrés from Hitler's Germany. They were a serious bunch: Bedford recalls them at parties in dark suits and starched shirts, extending a single finger to a proffered handshake, standing stiffly as the rest of the gathering circulated in beach pyjamas.

The young Sybil and the two elder Mann children, Erika and Klaus, swore a pact never to return to Germany under the Nazis.

Gorgeous Erika found a way out. An Englishman whose name, she thought, was Ogden, was an admirer of her father's work and, being homosexual, offered her a marriage of convenience. Erika met her fiancé off the boat train at Dover and headed for the registry office. It was only then that she got his identity straight — her new husband was poet W.S. Auden.

The Huxleys thought this might work for Sybil. In due course, they found Terry Bedford, occupation "club attendant." The scheme almost came unstuck: The registry office clerk smelled a rat and reported his suspicions. Deportation to Germany loomed, until Maria literally knelt at the Home Secretary's feet to plead Sybil's case. The marriage went ahead. The English passport was secured. She could now be what she had dreamed — an English writer. But it was not until after the Second World War that she found the subject for her first book in a trip to Mexico. *A Visit to Don Otavio* (1953) was composed entirely from memory rather than notes and reads like a novel. One critic remarked that it was the only travel book that he had ever read that made you cry at the end.

Her method arose from her physical limitations. As handwriting was a struggle, she could never be a diarist. And with her eyesight failing her from her 30s, she abandoned research and note-taking, relying on the power of memory.

Memory, Bedford tells me, made her free as a writer, distilling the essential. When she wrote *A Legacy*, about Germany before the First World War, she created the milieu entirely from what she remembered, "the indiscretions of tutors and servants, the censures of nannies, the dinner-table talk of elderly members of a step-family-in-law, my own father's tales... my mother's talent for presenting private events in the light of literary and historical interpretation." *A Legacy*, although written in English, is considered in Germany to be the great social novel about that period.

It made Bedford's reputation. Evelyn Waugh mused in correspondence to Nancy Mitford about the identity of this brilliant newcomer, whose name, he suspected, was a pseudonym: "I wondered who this brilliant 'Mrs. Bedford' could be, a cosmopolitan military man plainly..." Indeed, Bedford has always been famously private. She once declined even to answer an inquiry as to whether she had ever had a pet — "it's a complicated question," she told the bemused journalist.

Bedford's journalism dealt with justice and the law, and also the good life of food, wine and travel. But from her memoir, it is clear that love has been the great occupation of her life. She writes: "Chance, often choice had led me to spend the squandered years in beautiful or interesting places: to learn, to see, to travel, to walk in nocturnal streets, swim in warm seas, make friends and keep them, eat on terraced terraces, drink wine under summer leaves, to hear the song of tree-frog and cicada, to fall in love... (Often. Too often.)"

For most of the last 30 years, Bed-

ford has lived in London, in a small flat that she keeps dark against the natural light her eyes can no longer stand.

She is an arresting figure in shades of blue, dressed in shirt and tailored trousers and a beautiful cashmere shawl ("a gift," she smiles). Despite her arthritis and her poor eyesight, there is an intensity about her, in her marvellous blue eyes and in her dogged way of propelling herself with the aid of a stick through the door of a restaurant and closing in on her favourite table. Her infirmity frustrates her — she can no longer cook or take the long walks that once fuelled her writing — and she says her age "surprises and appalls" her. She still mourns the Mediterranean, too bright for her eyes.

Her flat is simply furnished and there are few souvenirs of her life. The most obvious are 10 empty wine bottles lined up on a side table. These, she says, are the 10 best wines she has ever drunk. For years, the collection (always 10) changed constantly, as a new wine claimed a place and an old one had to go. She has not made a substitution in a long time, she tells me wistfully. She still loves wine, but the friends with whom she used to savour the great vintages, her "brothers in wine," have all died.

'You know, there have been times in my life when I have been so depressed I haven't been able to drink at all.'

For Bedford, drinking has never been about getting drunk or drowning sorrows, it has always been for the pure pleasure of it, in a spirit of joy. Looking at the dusty bottles, she says to me: "You know, there have been times in my life when I have been so depressed I haven't been able to drink at all." She shakes her head, remembering, then adds, "Apart from the glass or two with food as a digestive, of course."

We talk about her years spent in love, and she jokes about her many liaisons. She pleads her "great age" and the fact that "she started early" as some excuse. And, she says, many of her loves were of long standing: One with the renowned editor Allanah Harper lasted 50 years. Many also evolved from friendship into romantic love and gently back again. Today, she tells me, "it's hard to separate which were the love affairs and which were the friendships."

Quicksands tells us that Bedford's key relationships were with women, but while in her fiction she has written poignantly and passionately

about such affairs, in the memoir she remains restrained. She devotes just two pages to her 20-year relationship with the writer Eda Lord and a few cryptic sentences to a multi-layered drama (actors unspecified) that consumed her passions for nearly two years. She hints that she has loved men in her life, but does not write about them. *Quicksands*, she tells me, does not comprise all that was important in her life.

When I ask her if she is in love now, she actually blushes, then confirms that she is. "One begins to learn how to love when it's almost too late," she tells me. And then, sadly: "One puts oneself in the shoes of the other person and one becomes more afraid of the effect of one's death on that person than on yourself."

Talk of love brings me back to the Huxleys. Some have claimed that both Aldous and Maria were her lovers. Was she in love with them? No, she says, it was not that kind of love, but yes, they were the most important people in her life.

What is true is that her devotion to them prompted her to take on a task that she never sought — Aldous Huxley's biography, an acclaimed two-volume work published in 1974. She calls it a "labour of love" and it almost ruined her as a writer. She had to do all the things that she was least physically able to do, research, read, take notes. By the time she finished after six years of work, her eyes could no longer stand the light of her Mediterranean home, and it would be 15 years before she published another book.

That book was her last novel, *Jigsaw* (1989). She subtitled it "an autobiographical novel" and it tells the story of her childhood in Germany and her youth on the Mediterranean, painting vivid portraits of her father, the Huxleys, her first loves and her mother's disintegration.

In *Quicksands*, she has returned to many of the same people and scenes, now without the pretense of fiction. It is as if she could not resist having one more try at recreating the important figures in her life. Bedford may say she regrets that she did not write more, and as readers we can regret that too, but everything she has written reminds us that from living well has come writing well.

At the end of *Quicksands*, she presents a small scene from life, sitting on its own, as if it is an epigram: "Have another glass of wine?" they say.

I don't think so.
'Why not? You might as well.'
Perhaps I will."

That is how Sybil Bedford has lived, saying "I will" to life, happy for art to wait its turn.

Special to *The Globe and Mail*

30 July 2005