

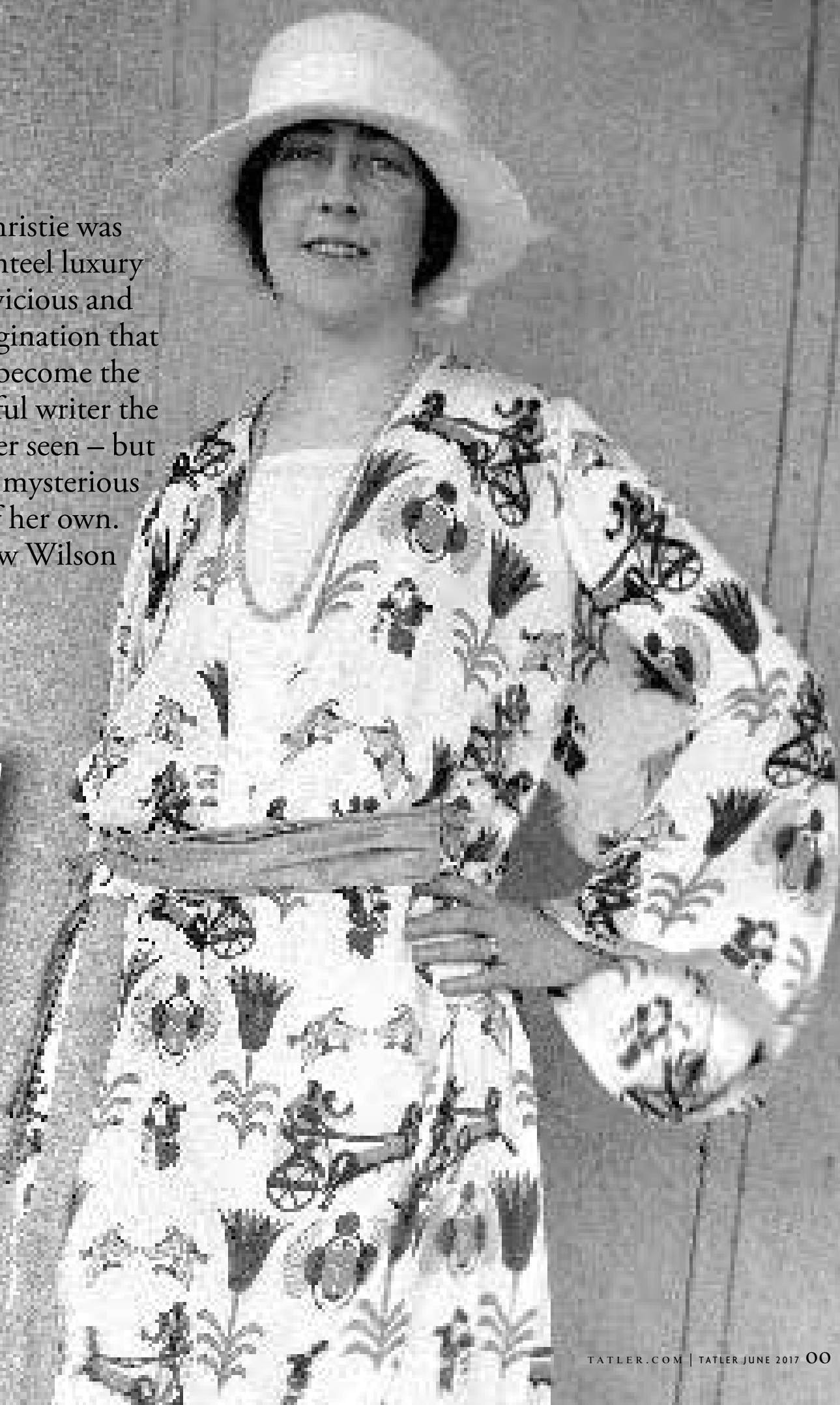
Aidan Turner in the  
BBC production  
of Agatha Christie's  
*And Then There  
Were None* (2015).  
*Opposite page,*  
Christie sets  
off on a publicity  
tour for the  
British Empire  
Exhibition, 1922

# The POSH GIRL with a CRIMINAL MIND

Maggie Smith,  
Roddy McDowall,  
Sylvia Miles and  
James Mason in *Evil  
Under the Sun* (1982)

PHOTOGRAPHS: THE AGATHA CHRISTIE ARCHIVE, LANDMARK MEDIA, REX FEATURES

Agatha Christie was raised in genteel luxury and had a vicious and cunning imagination that helped her become the most successful writer the world has ever seen — but only after a mysterious episode of her own.  
By Andrew Wilson



Who do you think is the bestselling novelist of all time? It's not JK Rowling, whose sales are thought to be at the 450–500m mark. Neither is it the late Barbara Cartland, the prolific writer of romantic fiction who is estimated to have sold between 500m and 1bn copies. Stephen King (300m) and Dan Brown (200m) are also small fry compared to the extraordinary career of Agatha Christie, whose novels, featuring characters like Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, are estimated to have sold up to 4bn copies. In fact, over 40 years after her death, the Queen of Crime continues to sell 3–4m copies each year around the world, and new adaptations of her works are scheduled to appear on both the small and the silver screen. After the success of *And Then There Were None* and *The Witness for the Prosecution*, the BBC has commissioned seven new productions of the author's novels. And later this year sees the release of an all-star, big-screen version of *Murder on the Orient Express* (with Kenneth Branagh, its director, as Poirot), and it's been reported that there are two biopics in the works, one with Alicia Vikander and another with Emma Stone, said to focus on an unsolved mystery with the crime writer at its heart.

One December night in 1926, Christie slipped out of her house in Berkshire, drove her car to a beauty spot in Surrey and vanished. Over the next 10 days, the police undertook a huge operation to find her. Thousands joined in the search, and the story even made the front page of the *New York Times*. The police suspected foul play, the prime suspect being Christie's husband Archie, a former airman who wanted to divorce 36-year-old Agatha and marry his mistress, Nancy Neele.

When it was revealed that Agatha was very much alive and had spent the time at a hotel in Harrogate, there was an outcry. Although she maintained that she had been suffering from amnesia, there were those who believed that it had been a publicity stunt or that she had staged the whole thing to get revenge on her philandering spouse. After all, she had checked in at the hotel in the Yorkshire spa town using the surname Neele. Ninety years after Christie's disappearance, the reasons for her actions remain obscure. 'There's been a lot of nonsense written about it over the years,

but the truth is we don't really know what happened,' says Dr John Curran, author of the recently published *Agatha Christie's Complete Secret Notebooks*.

Last year, while researching *A Talent for Murder*, my novel about Christie and her disappearance, I travelled to the spot where she went missing. We know the bare facts of the case – how she left her car at Newlands Corner and how she was discovered at the Swan Hydropathic hotel in Harrogate – but not much more. After parking at Newlands Corner, on a ridge of the Albury Downs, outside Guildford, I climbed down to the chalk pit where Christie abandoned her car. From there, I walked to the Silent Pool, an eerie spring-fed lake that the police dredged in an attempt to find her body. The writer's spirit seems to haunt the place.

Although Christie loathed the publicity surrounding the scandal, the crisis did have a positive outcome. After the split from Archie – the couple divorced in 1928 – she had to support herself and her daughter Rosalind, born to the couple in 1919. This proved a turning point. 'That was the moment when I changed from an amateur to a professional,' she said. 'I assumed the burden of a profession, which is to write even when you don't want to, don't much like what you are writing and aren't writing particularly well.'

Christie was a natural at dialogue and fascinated by the strange quirks of human psychology. She was fond of the saying, 'Old sins cast long shadows,' and although she is often accused of being 'cosy', her novels are anything but, as her biographer Laura Thompson observes in *Agatha Christie: An English Mystery*: 'For all that she was a product of her background, Agatha was also a creature of her time: she engaged deeply with the middle years of the 20th century.'

She was born Agatha Miller – in Torquay in 1890 – into an upper-middle-class family. Her father, Frederick, an American, led a leisurely existence – his father was independently rich – and he had once enjoyed a flirtation with Jennie Jerome, later Lady Randolph Churchill (mother of Sir Winston). Her mother, Clara, had been brought up by her aunt, Margaret, who was also the stepmother of Frederick (Margaret was known to Agatha as 'Auntie-Grannie').

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Torquay basked in its status as the jewel of the English Riviera, a smart place for the upper classes to winter. Visitors included Disraeli, Emperor Napoleon III of France and Edward VII. Christie recalled Henry James and Rudyard Kipling coming to her house for tea. Christie grew up in a large villa called

Ashfield, set in extensive grounds and staffed by servants who were, as she wrote in the autobiography published after her death, 'mainly happy because they knew they were appreciated – as experts, doing expert work. As such, they had that mysterious thing, prestige; they looked down with scorn on shop assistants and their like.'

Although Christie's eldest sister, Margaret ('Madge' or 'Punkie'), was educated at the school that later became Roedean and her brother, Louis Montant ('Monty'), had been sent to Harrow, Agatha's mother believed that her youngest child should remain at home. The girl, needing stimulation, rejected her mother's idea that she should wait until the age of eight before she learnt to read, and went on to teach herself. She dreamed of one day becoming 'Lady Agatha' but was informed by Nursie, the family's nanny, that such an ambition was useless: 'You have to be the daughter of a duke, a marquis, or an earl. If you marry a duke, you'll be a duchess, but that's because of your husband's title. It's not something you're born with.'

After the death of Christie's 55-year-old father from pneumonia and heart problems in 1901, the family's resources were reduced – 'a lot of good money had been thrown after bad,' Agatha said – and extravagant dinner and lunch parties became a thing of the past. When Agatha was a shy 17-year-old, her mother took her to Cairo, where it was cheap to come out; there, she enjoyed five dances a week and tried to flirt with young English officers. ▷







Princess Anne meets Christie at the world premiere of *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1974. *Right*, Greenway, Christie's Georgian house in Devon



Bloodhounds searching for Christie, 1926



< One dance partner returned Agatha to her mother and said, 'Here's your daughter. She has learnt to dance. In fact, she dances beautifully. You had better try to teach her to talk now.'

In truth, Agatha, always a rather introverted individual, would much rather sit at her desk composing a story than engage in idle conversation. She first had the idea of writing a detective novel after a challenge from her sister, who told her that she did not have the mental dexterity to plot such a complex story. As she wrote in her autobiography: 'At the back of my mind, where the stories of the books I am going to write take their place long before the germination of the seed occurs, the idea had been planted: some day I would write a detective story.'

Agatha started plotting her first crime novel while serving as a volunteer nurse during the First World War – she became fascinated by poisons while working in the dispensary of Torquay Hospital – but it wasn't until 1920 that the book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published. The novel introduced her eggheaded, moustache-twirling retired Belgian policeman, Hercule Poirot, who solves crimes by the application of his

Lord and Lady Clifford of Ugbrooke House, Chudleigh, in Devon, that she would be too plain and dull for the dashing young lieutenant. 'He was a tall, fair young man, with crisp curly hair, a rather interesting nose, turned up not down, and a great deal of careless confidence,' she wrote in her autobiography. Yet Archie – born in India in 1889, the son of a lawyer, and later educated in England – became so smitten with Agatha, then 22, that he took the trouble to find out her address and, a week or so after that first meeting, turned up at Ashfield. The couple married on Christmas Eve 1914 – they enjoyed a one-night honeymoon at the Grand Hotel, Torquay – and on Boxing Day they travelled to London to say their goodbyes. Archie, now with the Royal Flying Corps, was due back at the front and Agatha would not see him again for six months.

After the war, Archie took a job as financial adviser to the British Empire Exhibition, a position that enabled him and Agatha to enjoy a 10-month trip around the world. Photographs from 1922 show Agatha surfing in South Africa and Honolulu and bathing in a hot sulphur pool in Canada. However, by 1926 their relationship had soured: Archie had met Nancy Neele, an attractive brunette 10 years

there on the Orient Express, the train she made famous in her 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. (She had first visited Ur in 1928 and had become good friends with the archaeologist Leonard Woolley and his wife, Katharine, who had invited her back to Iraq.) The age gap between Agatha and Max – she was nearly 14 years older – drew disapproving comments from certain members of her family, including her sister, and the couple lied about their ages on their wedding certificate.

Yet the marriage proved to be a happy one, and Agatha regularly accompanied her husband on his trips to the Near East. They bought a house in Baghdad on the west bank of the Tigris and, while on digs, would always insist on dressing for dinner, despite living in extremely basic conditions. Agatha cleaned ancient ivories with face cream and became an expert at taking photographs of relics. Her travels in Iraq, Jordan and Egypt inspired novels such as *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Appointment with Death* and *Death on the Nile*. In 1946, she published *Come, Tell Me How You Live*, a memoir of her time working on archaeological excavations in Syria and Iraq. (The book will be reissued in August.)

Outside her writing, Christie's twin passions were houses and dogs. As she noted in her

## WHEN ARCHIE SAID HE WANTED A DIVORCE, AGATHA SUFFERED A BREAKDOWN

little grey cells. The detective features in 33 books and more than 50 short stories, and has been portrayed by actors such as Charles Laughton, Orson Welles, Albert Finney, Peter Ustinov and David Suchet. Christie's other most famous creation is Miss Jane Marple, who makes an appearance in 12 novels and a number of short stories. Actors including Margaret Rutherford, Angela Lansbury, Helen Hayes, Joan Hickson, Geraldine McEwan and Julia McKenzie all played the elderly spinster with the innocent, china-blue eyes and, to quote Christie, a 'mind like a sink', who has a knack for solving particularly tricky crimes.

'In addition to this, Christie remains the only female dramatist to have had three works playing simultaneously in the West End,' says John Curran, 'while *The Mousetrap*, which opened in 1952, holds the record for the longest-running play in the world. Her productivity was astounding. If one looks back at her career, one sees that the turning point came after the breakdown of her first marriage, to Archie Christie – before the split, he was very much the breadwinner.'

Agatha had assumed, when she first met Archie in October 1912 at a dance given by

younger than Agatha. When Archie confessed his love for Nancy and said he wanted a divorce – the revelation came only a few months after the death of Agatha's mother – it seems as though she suffered some kind of breakdown. 'There is no need to dwell on it,' Agatha wrote in her autobiography. 'I stood out for a year, hoping that he would change. But he did not. So ended my first married life.'

Christie met her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan, on a dig at Ur, in southern Iraq, in 1930 – she travelled out

autobiography, 'there was indeed a moment in my life, not long before the outbreak of the Second World War, when I was the proud owner of eight houses.' In 1934, she bought a large detached house at 58 Sheffield Terrace, Kensington – now marked by an English Heritage blue plaque – and that same year she also purchased a Queen Anne house on the Thames in Wallingford, Oxfordshire. Four years later, she fell in love with Greenway, in Devon, which she bought as a holiday home.

A magnificent Georgian house on the banks of the Dart, it sits in 33 acres and is run today by the National Trust. Here, in the fernery, you can visit the graveyard dedicated to her pet dogs or OFDs (Order of the Faithful Dogs). People that she liked she referred to as the Order of Faithful Friends – which included the historian and Egyptologist Stephen Glanville and the impresario Sir Peter Saunders (who produced many of her hit plays); those she did not care for belonged to the Order of the Rats.

Christie loved entertaining her family and spending money on them – she paid for her daughter to go to Roedean and her grandson, Mathew, to attend Eton. Her favourite foods







Dame Sybil Thorndike and Agatha Christie, 1962.  
Left, Douglas Booth in the BBC's *And Then There Were None*



were lobster, roast beef, blackberries and cream. She never touched alcohol, and her favourite drink was half a pint of cream mixed with milk. But although she sold extremely well throughout her life, 'her financial situation was complicated by a series of long-winded court investigations into the tax affairs of internationally bestselling writers', says Curran. 'It was ironic that the big money came only after her death in 1976, at the age of 85.'

A year later, Christie's publishers released an autobiography that the author had written between 1950 and 1965. Fans were desperate to learn the truth about what had really happened back in 1926, but the 550-page memoir makes no mention of the disappearance other than to say: 'So, after illness, came sorrow, despair and heartbreak.' The incident has been covered in several biographies and non-fiction accounts, but no one has yet successfully explained the novelist's behaviour during that traumatic time.

As a result, the secret of those 11 missing days remains as tantalising to her fans as the complex plots of her greatest mysteries. 'If Agatha had been a housewife or worked in a bank, no one would be talking about it,' says Curran. 'The fact she was a mystery writer and that she never discussed it gives the story an incredible resonance that still continues to fascinate us today.' □

*Andrew Wilson's A Talent For Murder is published by Simon & Schuster on 18 May at £14.99.*



The Old Cataract hotel in Aswan, Egypt, where Christie wrote *Death on the Nile*