



Who framed Margaret of Argyll?

OO TATLER MARCH 2014

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Margaret, Duchess
of Argyll, aged 37,
photographed
by Cecil Beaton at
her house in
Mayfair, 1949

She was one of the 20th century's most notorious aristocrats, enjoying a life of privilege and pleasure until her reputation was ruined by a set of pornographic Polaroids and tales of sexual deviancy. But was it all a plot? Andrew Wilson on the devastating betrayal of the 'dirty duchess'

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he led a life that epitomised elegance and style, but Margaret of Argyll will be forever associated with a set of grainy Polaroids produced in court during her bitter divorce from her second husband Ian Campbell, the 11th Duke of Argyll. In the photographs, she was shown naked, performing fellatio, recognisable by her signature three strands of pearls.

The identity of the 'headless man' – so called because the photographs only showed his naked torso up to his shoulders – remained a mystery until he was recently revealed to have been an American businessman with whom Margaret was in love. After 50 years of speculation – during which it was rumoured that the 'headless man' was the Hollywood actor Douglas Fairbanks Jr or the cabinet minister Duncan Sandys, a former son-in-law of Winston Churchill – the revelation has sparked renewed interest in the extraordinary life of 'Marg of Arg'.

This spring, the Victoria & Albert Museum will display Margaret's Norman Hartnell-designed wedding gown as part of a major exhibition, while Thomas Adès's opera *Powder Her Face* – inspired by the scandalous divorce – is set to be revived by the English National Opera. The 1995 work contains what must be, in the words of its librettist Philip Hensher, the only 'blowjob aria' in the history of the operatic form. 'It begins with humming,' said Hensher. People who were close to Margaret are still appalled by the opera – one very close family source who did not want to be identified told me it

was 'misinformed, cartoonish, semi-pornographic crap' – and they blame it for perpetuating the salacious fiction of the 'Scarlet Duchess', which is, they believe, quite at odds with the facts.

The Duke and Duchess of Argyll's divorce case was the longest running and costliest in British legal history. It scandalised society in 1963, not least because the duke listed 88 of his wife's possible lovers. When Margaret lost the case, the judge, Lord Wheatley, took four hours to deliver his 40,000-word closing statement. During the summing up, he said that the explicit photographs revealed that 'the duchess is a highly sexed woman who had ceased to be satisfied with normal relations and had started to indulge in what I can only describe as disgusting sexual activities to gratify a debased sexual appetite'.

Open season was declared on Margaret and she was labelled a poisonous liar and a nymphomaniac. The press was filled with rumours of her wild behaviour and it was reported that her voracious sex drive could be traced back to nerve damage brought on by suffering a fall down a lift shaft while visiting her chiropractor in Bond Street in 1943. According to the author Jeanette Winterson, writing in the *Times* in 2010, over the years the duchess has been 'the victim of a vicious double-standard that even Puritan England never managed'. In the light of new revelations, it is time for a reassessment of the reputation of Margaret, Duchess of Argyll.



'History has completely misjudged Margaret,' says writer and royal biographer Lady Colin Campbell, who married Lord Colin Campbell, the Duke of Argyll's son by his second wife, Louise, in 1974. 'She used to categorically deny that she was this raver that Ian, her husband, had made her out to be. Certainly, Tony Marreco [the barrister and one-time husband of Lady Ursula Manners, whose brother, the 10th Duke of Rutland, married Margaret's daughter Frances] told me that he didn't know where people got it from that Margaret was a raver. He used to say that she would rather die than get her hair mussed. I never saw her with any man who wasn't gay or very safely married.'

Before her spectacular fall from grace, the duchess had led a gilded existence. Born Margaret Whigham in Scotland in 1912, she was the only daughter of George Hay Whigham, a Scotsman who made a fortune from a type of artificial silk, and Helen Mann Hannay, the daughter of a Scottish cotton magnate. Margaret was brought up in New York and counted Barbara Hutton, the Woolworth's heiress, among her friends. She had her first perm when she was eight years old and lived in a duplex on Park Avenue. 'I spent most of my childhood longing to grow up,' she would later write in her autobiography, *Forget Not*, published in 1975.

After returning to Britain in 1926, Margaret and her family lived in Charles Street in Mayfair; she went to Miss Wolff's day school on South Audley Street, where 14 years earlier

PHOTOGRAPH: TECHNOLOGY PORTRAIT AGENCY



Margaret as photographed by society portraitist Madame Yevonde in 1935. Opposite page, on the cover of *Tatler*, June 1969

Lady Elizabeth Bowes-Lyon (later the Queen Mother) had been a pupil. Her parents bought a house in Ascot and she went to Heathfield as a day pupil. Margaret only attended classes until lunchtime, when she would be collected by the family's chauffeur. As they drove off, she would call from the car window: 'I'm off to a matinee in London!'

Margaret had star appeal from the outset. Blessed with wit, charisma, magnolia-pale skin and green eyes, she was named *deed* of the year in 1930. 'Looking back now on the glamour of it all, the first summer season seems like a dream,' she wrote in 1975. 'It belongs to another world – a world of manners and elegance that has now vanished.'

She had romances with suitors who included Prince Aly Khan and Sir Max Aitken, the son of newspaper magnate Lord Beaverbrook. But, in 1932, she broke her

engagement to Charles Greville, 7th Earl of Warwick, to marry stockbroker and amateur golfer Charles Sweeney. Their wedding, at Brompton Oratory, attracted 2,000 onlookers and it is said that the traffic in Knightsbridge had to be stopped for three hours. The marriage produced two children, a daughter, Frances, born in 1937, and, in 1940, a son, Brian. For a few glorious years, Margaret could do no wrong. She was immortalised in the Cole Porter song 'You're the Top', lived in a house in Sussex Place, Regent's Park, and enjoyed a sybaritic, privileged existence. Of staying with Earl and Countess Fitzwilliam at their house Wentworth Woodhouse in Yorkshire, Margaret recalled: 'The corridors were so long that when the footman showed us to our rooms he actually unrolled a ball of string to enable us to find our way back to the reception rooms.'

Margaret's fortunes changed when the divorced Charles Sweeney and married Ian Douglas Campbell, 11th Duke of Argyll. Initially, she found the duke attractive and charming, which perhaps blinded her to his intentions: he was marrying her for her fortune. Just before her wedding, in March 1951, she received a letter from Sweeney that read: 'I only hope that you're not deluding yourself that Campbell is inspired by any great love, because he's not. He couldn't be and you'll be making your crowning mistake if you think anything else. He married his first two wives for money and you're no exception.'

Ian Campbell was, according to many sources, thoroughly degenerate. Norman Mailer, who married the journalist Lady Jeanne Campbell, the duke's daughter from his first marriage, described his father-in-law as 'one of the coldest, nastiest men I have ever known'. On his honeymoon with his first wife, Janet Aitken, the daughter of Lord Beaverbrook, the duke took his bride to watch a couple having sex in a French brothel and stole her diamond tiara so he could settle gambling debts. Reports suggest that the duke managed to race through over £200,000 of his first wife's fortune (around £12m today) before the couple finally divorced in 1934. His next wife was Louise Hollingsworth Morris Clews, known as 'Oui Oui' (although Margaret always referred to her as 'Wee Wee'). Oui Oui had two sons: Ian, later the 12th Duke of Argyll, in 1937, and in 1946 Lord Colin Campbell. Apparently, one day the duke's first and second wives had a conversation about him. 'Did he rob you?' asked Janet. 'He took everything but my trust funds,' replied Oui Oui.

The first debts Margaret had to pay off for the duke were £4,000 to the Paris fashion house Worth for a mink coat he had bought Oui Oui, and £3,000 to the *Bornal News* for the expense of dredging for a mythical hoard of Spanish gold that he believed lay off the Isle of Mull. Margaret's father also



Margaret with her second husband, the 11th Duke of Argyll, in the grounds of his family seat, Inveraray Castle, in western Scotland, 1953. Below: Margaret with her 'adopted' children Jamie and Richard Gardner, 1970



THE DUKE & HIS DOCTOR TRIED TO GET MARGARET CERTIFIED INSANE

agreed to pay £250,000 in death duties so that his daughter and her new husband could save Inveraray Castle in western Scotland, which remains the seat of the Campbell clan today.

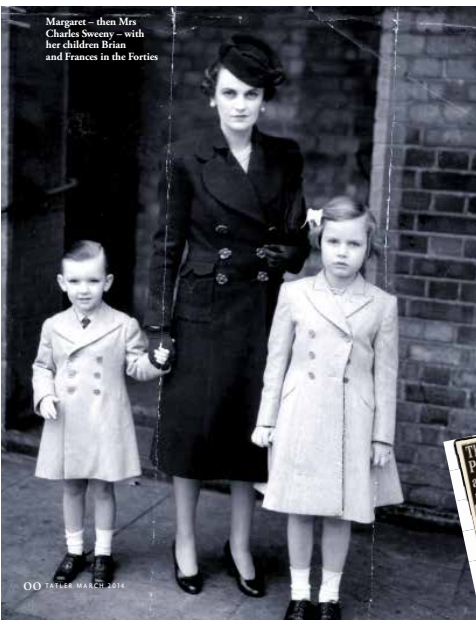
Although it has been reported that the trouble between the duke and duchess started when Margaret cast doubt on the paternity of Ian and Colin, her husband's sons from his second marriage, the truth is more complex. 'What started the whole meleé was that Oui Oui got wind of the fact that her former husband was going around England alleging that Ian and Colin were not his sons,' reveals Lady Colin Campbell. 'Everyone knew that Margaret was also trying to get pregnant and Oui Oui became alert to the danger. If it could be proved that Oui Oui's two sons were not fathered by the duke, it would mean a son borne by Margaret would be in line to inherit the title. So Oui Oui started to sue Ian. At

this point Ian said to Margaret, "If you take the blame for me, I will promise to do something about my drinking," and she did.' In 1959, an injunction was forced on Margaret forbidding her from 'uttering forgeries' about the duke's two sons. 'In my view, once she had done that it sealed her fate. I know this not only from Margaret, but also from my sister-in-law Jeanie [Lady Jeanne Campbell, who died in 2007]. I met my husband, Colin, when I was staying with Jeanie in New York. She was my friend first, and a great deal about what I know comes from her.'

Years of tangled legal complications ensued, and even before her divorce Margaret had run up thousands of pounds in lawyers' bills and legal settlements. By the late Fifties, the marriage between the duke and duchess had broken down. 'They say the one thing you should never do is come between an alcoholic

and his bottle, but that's what Margaret did,' says Lady Colin. 'She started to get at him because of his drinking.' According to Margaret, the duke had also become a regular user of drinamyl, or 'purple hearts', prescribed by his doctor, John Petro, later called the 'junkie's friend' and struck off the medical register. At one point, Campbell, with the help of Petro, tried to get Margaret certified insane. 'If it had been the time of the Borgias, it might have seemed feasible,' said the duchess. 'But this was happening in the "enlightened" Sixties.'

Divorce seemed the only solution, but at that time in Britain fault had to be established. Gentlemen usually let their wives divorce them to protect a woman's reputation. 'Ian approached Margaret and told her he wanted a divorce,' says Lady Colin. 'He said that he would give her a divorce if she paid him a quarter of a million pounds, the equivalent of



Margaret – then Mrs Charles Sweeney – with her children Brian and Frances in the Forties



PHOTOGRAPHS: EVI NUNO/NEWSPHOTO; JAMES; JOHN PROBT/NEWSPHOTOS; POPPER/GETTY IMAGES; NEWSPHOTOS; WINE



'It wasn't me!'
Hollywood
actor Douglas
Fairbanks Jr.
'headless man'
suspect No. 1,
in the Thirties



Margaret with Lady Colin
Campbell in the Seventies



The 'headless man'
himself: Pan Am
executive Bill Lyons



A 1961 portrait
of Margaret



'Nicht ich!' Suspect
No. 2: German
diplomat Sigismund
von Braun



'Me neither!'
No. 3: cabinet
minister Duncan
Sandys

something like £15m today. If he gave him the money, she would be able to divorce him nicely and cleanly,' Margaret refused.

As a result, Ian started divorce proceedings against his wife – whom he now referred to as 'the devil' or as 'S' for Satan – citing multiple co-respondents in the petition.

'What Margaret did not know was that Ian's great-uncle Lord Colin Campbell had done the exact same thing to his wife, Lady Colin Campbell, in the 1880s,' says Lady Colin. 'This was the greatest scandal of the Victorian age, far exceeding the scandal of Oscar Wilde, and Ian used it as a blueprint for his own divorce.'

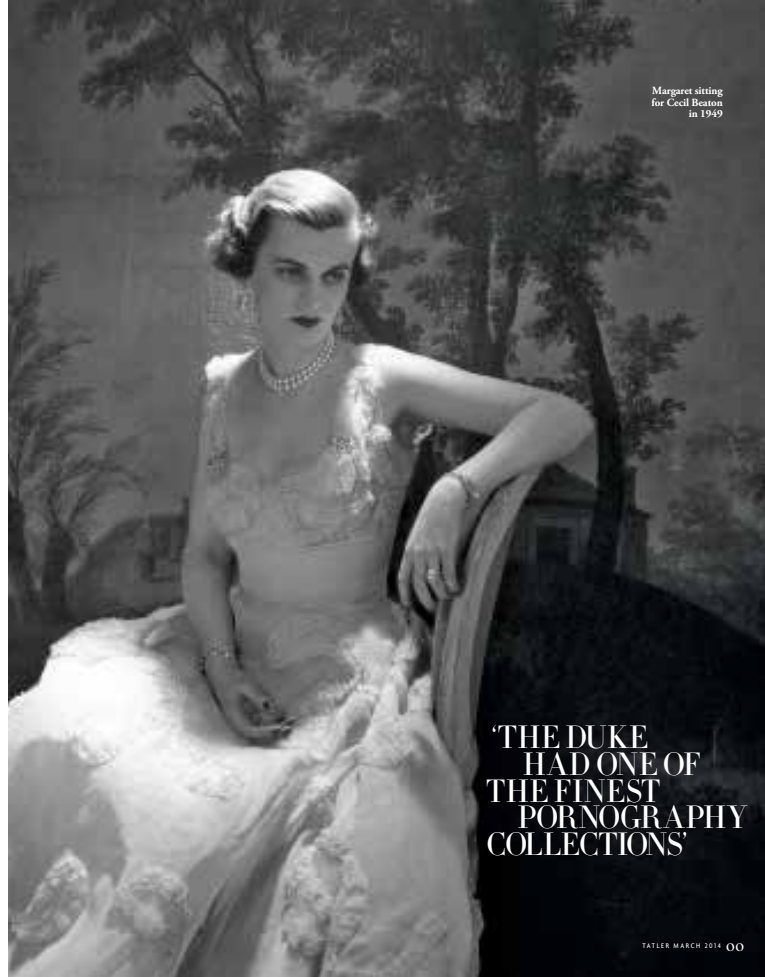
The parallels are striking; both men cited four co-respondents and, in doing so, successfully sabotaged their wives' reputations. 'Ian knew his case would destroy Margaret because the same method had been used before,' says Lady Colin. 'Margaret had never heard of the Golin Campbell divorce case. But she lived in a bubble. She had never seen the portrait of Lady Colin Campbell by Boldini in the National Portrait Gallery – she had never been to the National Portrait Gallery. She would say to me, "Sweetie, the reason why you will prevail and I didn't is that I was a dumb bunny and you're not."

In 1959, in order to collect 'evidence', the duke, accompanied by Lady Jeanne, stole into Margaret's London home while she was asleep and seized a number of compromising items, including her diaries. 'I immediately began dialing 999, but Ian pinioned my arms to prevent this, while Jeanne snatched up my diary,' Margaret later said.

The most damning evidence gathered was the infamous set of Polaroids. Some of the photographs, which showed a headless man masturbating, had been captioned: 'before', 'thinking of you', 'during – oh' and 'finished'. During the case, Lord Denning, who was also leading an inquiry into the Profumo affair, began to compile a report. He called five suspects into his office and asked the men – Douglas Fairbanks Jr, Duncan Sandys, the German diplomat Sigismund von Braun, businessman Jack Colane and Petercombe, a former press officer at the Savoy – to sign the guest book. He then compared the handwriting to the captions and concluded that Fairbanks was the most likely candidate, something the actor always denied.

For 50 years, the story has been reported without the authenticity of the so-called 'evidence' being questioned. In fact, the photographs showing a masturbating man have nothing to do with the duchess or any of her lovers. 'Ian had one of the finest collections of pornography, and he picked up these pictures when he was on a trip to either Los Angeles or San Francisco,' says Lady **CONTINUED ON PAGE 233**

PHOTOGRAPHS: REIKO FAIRBANKS; LADY COLIN CAMPBELL: ARGENTINA IMAGES; REIKO COLEMAN FOR BROWN/STODOLSKA; NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY; LONDON, JACK GARDNER/CORBIS OUTLINE; COURTESY OF THE CECIL BEATON ARCHIVE AT SOTHBYS



Margaret sitting
for Cecil Beaton
in 1949

'THE DUKE
HAD ONE OF
THE FINEST
PORNOGRAPHY
COLLECTIONS'



Colin. 'The only ones that are real are the ones that show Margaret with her pearls.'

At the end of last year, Lady Colin Campbell finally revealed the name of the 'headless man' as Bill Lyons, the London-based sales director of Pan American Airlines. How did the photographs come to be taken? 'Innocence,' she says. 'They were two people in love speaking of getting married when they were free of their respective spouses. What could be more innocent than that? And the affair started after the marriage with Ian was over. How did she know that Ian was going to steal the photos? After all, these pictures were locked away, she didn't give them to him. It was just clean fun. Of course, Lord Wheatley [the judge] didn't think of it like that, but he was a ridiculous man. He couldn't imagine that a duke could be a shit or could lie.'

Bill Lyons was an American who lived in Kensington and had a Portuguese-born wife. 'He was a very, very nice executive-type man who didn't have much to say for himself,' the late Moira Lister, a friend of Margaret's, told Charles Castle, who published a biography of Margaret, *The Duchess Who Dared*, in 1995. 'But I think she hung on to him because he was a very real person. He wasn't one of the blades-about-town. I don't remember him saying very much or having much sense of humour or being very bright. But he was very solid. A nice, good-looking man, and I think that probably because he was different from the others, he gave her a sort of solidity, which she was looking for, without having to settle for it totally... He was very attentive, very sweet, awfully nice, but colourless. Perhaps that is what she liked – a man who wouldn't steal her limelight.'

Lyons supported Margaret throughout the divorce case and their relationship lasted six years until, in 1968, he finally went back to his wife after she threatened to commit suicide. 'Jeanie told me all about it and she was always racked with guilt over her part in the divorce case,' says Lady Colin. 'She felt that without those diaries and photographs Ian wouldn't have won. She had been instrumental in destroying Margaret's

life, she knew that, but then Jeanie went to great lengths and pains to make it up to Margaret and, to Margaret's credit, she allowed her to.'

A year after the divorce, the duke, still desperate to use Margaret as a source of income, tried to sell a series of defamatory articles about her to the *Sunday People*, some of which the duchess succeeded in stopping. However, his behaviour was considered so ungentlemanly that he was forced to resign from his club, White's, and Margaret would often refer to him as a 'fiend and a sadist'. Although she tried to set out a partial version of the truth in her memoirs, she was conscious that she could not tell the whole story because she needed to protect Bill Lyons – she talks of her lover, 'Bill', but does not reveal his identity. 'I do not forget,' she wrote. 'Neither the good years, in which I laughed and danced and lived upon a cloud of happiness, nor the bad years of near despair when I learned what life and people and friendship really were... I am still the same gullible, impulsive, over-optimistic "dumb bunny" and I have given up hope of any improvement.'

Margaret was unjustly vilified, and underlying the unfair judgement of her in the courtroom and among the wider public was a pervasive misogyny. She was censured for having the audacity to engage in oral sex with a man she loved, but to whom she was not married.

Margaret spent her last decades estranged from her daughter Frances, the Duchess of Rutland, and in 1970 she came under attack for 'adopting' two boys, James and Richard Gardner, the sons of a sales manager from Worcestershire. 'It's all too like popping into Harrods and choosing a couple of ornaments that'll look good either side of your Adam fireplace,' sneered columnist Jean Rook. At the end of the Seventies, she wrote a gossip column for *Tatler*, 'Stepping Out with Margaret Argyll'.

After a number of unfortunate financial decisions, she was forced to sell her 13-bedroom Queen Anne house in Upper Grosvenor Street, which she had opened to the paying public, and then desert her suite at the Grosvenor House Hotel. She died in penury in 1993 at St George's Nursing Home, Pimlico, age 80.

'At the end she said to me, "I should have died last year – this is a humiliation too far,"' remembers Lady Colin Campbell. 'It was a very sad end to what in many ways had been a glorious life.' □