

A POMERANIAN COUNTESS

[An extract from *The Countess from Kirribilli* by Joyce Morgan]

She had already begun her next book, *The Solitary Summer*, before her first had even been published. It is a sequel, in which the narrator flags her intention in her opening lines: 'I want to be alone for a whole summer, and get to the very dregs of life. I want to be as idle as I can, so that my soul may have time to grow. Nobody shall be invited to stay with me, and if any one calls they will be told that I am out, or away, or sick.'

In reality, Mary's* efforts at peace and seclusion herself were not so successful. She had many arguments with Henning, and after one as heated as the August day, she locked herself in her writing room to work on her book. When Henning discovered the door was locked, he broke in and threw a pencil at her. Mary was frozen with fury. The pair did not speak to each other for days. She never forgot his intrusion.

Much of *The Solitary Summer* reflects on the narrator's summer reading and how she seeks out the ideal environments in which to devour her favourite authors. Mornings with Thoreau by a pond, afternoons in the garden with Goethe, Keats for forests and evenings with Boswell in her lamplit library. Walt Whitman, Jane Austen, Emily Brontë, Charles Lamb, Thomas Carlyle—the list flags a narrator with an intellectual and poetic disposition. Although the narrator creates the impression she is German, Goethe aside, her reading is largely devoid of German writers.

The book satirises German authority figures, from parsons to military men—'a lieutenant is a bright and beautiful being who admires no one so much as himself'. She also pokes fun at herself and her fickle generosity. Philanthropy seizes her 'like a cold in the head whenever the weather is chilly. On warm days my bump of benevolence melts away.' Despite her real-life tensions with Henning, she dedicated the book to the Man of Wrath—'with some apologies and much love'—who is depicted with greater affection, but is no less opinionated than in the first book. She finished *The Solitary Summer* in early 1899. As she read it through, she had a crisis of confidence. 'Mixed feelings—chiefly disgust. Futility that cannot be uttered. Am after all a poor fool.'

On the eve of its appearance, Mary opened the English literary journal *The Athenaeum* and recoiled in shock. In its literary gossip section, a small item read: 'The author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, who promises a new volume shortly, is said to be Miss May Beauchamp, now Countess von Arnim.' She wanted the genie back in the bottle and asked Macmillan to issue a denial. The retraction appeared in *The Athenaeum's* next issue.

Who leaked her identity is not known. But the article referred to her as May, her family nickname, not Mary. Was someone within the family the source? Dismayed at her exposure, Mary wrote to her mother. But Louey had little sympathy for her daughter's plight

and wrote back 'disgusted with me for being disgusted at *The Athenaeum's* conduct'.

The Solitary Summer was published in May 1899 without a name on the cover; simply as 'by the Author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*'. Why she picked 'Elizabeth' as her literary persona remains a matter of speculation. Her friend, the author Frank Swinnerton, suggested years later that she may have adopted the name of the witty heroine of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennett. Others have suggested she may have Anglicised the name of Bettina von Arnim, her literary ancestor by marriage. There may have been a simpler reason—Elizabeth was the name of her mother and grandmother.

The book proved popular and was reprinted seven times within four months. The *Daily Mail* called the book a 'literary event'. The work was reviewed across the English-speaking world, including in America, India and Australia, where her acerbic wit appealed to The Sydney Morning Herald: 'Our author has a knack of saying the unkindest things in the kindest way.'

The Athenaeum's item about her identity was ignored or overlooked by other British journals and newspapers. Not one of the many reviews of *The Solitary Summer* referred to it. But some reviewers did question the fiction of the German narrator. *The Times* found the pretence 'a little too thin'.

But in far-off Melbourne, the literary journal *The Book Lover* had some intelligence about the identity of 'Elizabeth': 'I hear the anonymous writer of the delightful garden books "Elizabeth" and "[The] Solitary Summer" [. . .] is an Australian native, educated in Germany and married to a German count.' The popular author was related to Sydney's prominent Lassetter family, the article noted. 'Her books cannot be supplied fast enough [. . .] importers have failed to satisfy the demand.'

Despite the glowing reviews, Mary was dismayed to learn that the critic whose opinion she valued most was not impressed with her second book. 'Got a letter from Pa about [*The Solitary Summer*] from which I gather he does not care for it—spent the day in tears consequently, for I had been so sure that just Pa would like it.' She might have been more consoled had she read his journal at that time. In it, he wrote approvingly that her book, 'should help to open the eyes of many to the beauties God so bountifully scatters abroad for all'.

Her creativity was not all that occupied her. Mary was pregnant again. Yet she makes no reference to another pregnancy, which she had been determined to avoid, in writing. The only reference to her fourth pregnancy is in her semi-autobiography *All the Dogs of My Life* written years later in which she breezily links her conception to the death of her dog Ingraban, who was accidentally shot: 'Ingraban's death had shocked me very much, and my husband, seeing this, began comforting me, and one thing led to another in

the way things do, and before I knew where I was I was caught once more in the toils of childbearing.'

And once more, she was determined not to give birth in Germany. Heavily pregnant, she arrived in London in June 1899, where she was joined by Henning. He busied himself buying a herd of swine for his estate and did not stay for the birth. If he had, he probably could not have hidden his disappointment.

Daughter number four, called Felicitas, arrived on 29 July. The baby was 'weighed in balance and found wanting', was Henry's sad comment. Without a male heir, Mary knew the pressure to produce one would continue. On her thirty-third birthday she, 'Wept much without any apparent reason'.

* Although Louey and Henry named their daughter Mary Annette Beauchamp, they never called her that. They dubbed her May. In time, she would be known by another name entirely, Elizabeth von Arnim, but for many years before that she was simply Mary Beauchamp.

The Countess from Kirribilli: The mysterious and free-spirited literary sensation who beguiled the world. (Published by Allen & Unwin, 2021)