

The thorns and petals of Kirribilli's titled rose

THE COUNTESS FROM KIRRIBILLI

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Carmel Bird

Countess who? Mary Annette Beauchamp was born in Kirribilli in 1866. She married a German count, acquiring the name "von Arnim". When she published her first book in 1898, **Elizabeth in her German Garden**, the author was simply "Elizabeth", but these days her 22 books are all attributed to Elizabeth von Arnim. She grew up in England from the age of three, and lived in Europe and America, dying in South Carolina in 1941.

In a letter to a young lover in 1927, she wrote: "Writing is the best fun in the world." She had a great deal of other fun as well, not least a "probable" affair with HG Wells.

Joyce Morgan has mined a wealth of research material in order to bring many of those details into the light. She has produced a comprehensive, enthralling, and at times startling account of Elizabeth, framing events within the timeline of the publication of the books. This is a satisfyingly scholarly biography, presented in spirited prose for the general reader. Elizabeth was a highly successful novelist in her day, attracting serious comparison to Jane Austen and Emily Bronte. Virginia Woolf placed the work alongside that of Charles Dickens.

"Elizabeth wanted as little known about her-

self as possible. Perhaps the recent example of the clouded identity of Elena Ferrante offers something of a parallel. Both writers depend to a degree on mystery to enhance the popularity of the books. Who knows what is the motive for a writer's secrecy? This aspect of Elizabeth's work is a compelling theme throughout the new biography.

Into the books in her library Elizabeth pasted her own bookplate, which read, in French: "I will sing my own song." There is a confidence and also a defiance in her personality that sometimes appeal and sometimes repel. Her cousin, short story writer Katherine Mansfield, wrote a story, *A Cup of Tea*, in which she satirised Elizabeth's arrogance and unkindness. There was a bright originality in much that she did; she kept a prayer book expressly for the purpose of squashing wasps.

One of her principal qualities was her wit. *The New York Times* described her last novel,



Mr Skeffington (1940), as beginning like a "cream puff" and ending as a "bomb". Part of her general disguise relied on her ethereal beauty and charm. British writer Beverley Nichols described her as "Dresden china, with her tiny voice, tiny hands, tiny manners. And then suddenly, with a shock, you realise that the Dresden china is hollow, and is filled with gunpowder". The husband in *Elizabeth in her German Garden*, a despot and a bully, is known as "The Man of Wrath", a title she had already given to her first husband, who died in 1910. Her second husband, Frank Russell, brother of Bertrand, was even worse than the Count, and they permanently separated in 1919. When he died in 1930 she wrote in her diary that his death was a "blessed release from a wicked cruel man".

Elizabeth wrote up to 30 letters a day, and towards the end of her life she realised that mail in her possession was a dangerous historical resource. So she burnt thousands of old

letters. She also avoided being photographed as much as possible. She even experimented with disguise, one time taking a position as a kind of housekeeper named Miss Armitage to the family of a professor. When the professor's son proposed marriage, she fled.

Yes, Elizabeth had a lot of fun, but there was also a measure of darkness and tragedy. In 1916, immediately following the death of a beloved nephew in warfare, one of her five children, Felicitas, died at the age of 16. Elizabeth and Felicitas were at the time estranged, and it is clear Elizabeth never really recovered. The lead-up to the Second World War was also a time of great stress and turbulence for her.

In 1930 Elizabeth bought a pink house near Cannes. She called it Mas des Roses. It had a separate writing room in the garden. She described herself there as being "embedded in jasmine", and she wrote a novel, **The Jasmine Farm**, in 1934. She surrounded herself with adored dogs. Then in 1936 she published a "disarmingly witty" semi-autobiography, **All the Dogs of My Life**. It's no surprise to learn that

this book "conceals as much as it reveals". She watched with growing horror as Nazism took over in Germany. The secret mobilisation of remote French houses brought dozens of soldiers with guns and ammunition to the Mas des Roses. Elizabeth tried to live (and write) as this was happening but in 1938 she left, setting sail for America, where she would spend the rest of her life with daughter Eva and her family.

The joy of this biography is that the subject comes to vivid life before the reader's eyes – the irony being that Elizabeth would almost certainly have been furious. She would have been astonished by the tantalising title, since she never identified with her place of birth. "I cannot claim to be an Australian," she wrote. "From" is in fact the key word in the title. Her "German garden" was in Pomerania, now part of Poland, and in Buk there's a statue of her in a full-length gown, carrying a bouquet of roses. I wonder what she would have thought of that.

Carmel Bird's most recent novel is *Field of Poppies*.