

My great au nt Nancy The cruellest and kindest woman I ever knew

HERE was nobody in my child-hood who was as frightening, as exciting or as powerful as my great aunt Nancy Astor. Although by the time I was born har political career was already

her political career was already over, she still lived at Cliveden, the great

house by the Thames where, with her hus-

band Waldorf Astor, Nancy had conquered

Edwardian society — a rapid rise from her impoverished origins in America.

Nancy was a brilliant and unconven-

tional political hostess in the Twenties and Thirties. She was the first woman to

sit in Parliament and held on to her

Plymouth constituency for 25 years of political turbulence. By the time she stood down she had also become a heroine in

her adopted city of London, rallying its inhabitants while braving the bombs and

flying glass of the Blitz.

The Lady Astor that I knew was a much

older woman. And by then she had

pecome a dangerous loose cannon, her

famously incautious tongue tuned up still further. But the sharp wit that had carried

her through her political career had fallen out of balance, leaving a blunter weapon

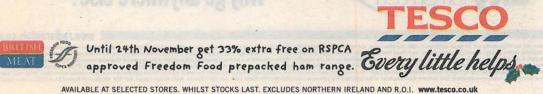
This was manifested in acts of outrageous bullying which were often followed by the most attentive kindness. As a small

oy I remember standing at my father's

33% extra free on Freedom Food ham...



... but hurry, they won't be around forever.



For a child, this was more difficult. There is no doubt that she enjoyed reduc-ing single children to tears as well as driving them, en masse, to a frenzy of hilarity. Entering her bedroom for her Christian Science "lessons" was like joining in some Punch and Judy show.

her own form of communication. She gen-uinely believed she did it from affection.

"And then she'd turn them. They always ended up her slaves. She started by punch-

And yet we all loved her. I always looked forward to opening her illegible letters at school. There was almost always a large



Lady A woman author reveals that dr powerfi

amount of money, by schoolboy s dards, tucked into the envelope, a with confusing admonishments such "Hold on to the Truth"

Divorce and alcohol were two of L

Astor's lifelong denouncements, for sons established in her family history. Her two elder brothers, who spent m time on a spree in the Blue Ri Mountains of Virginia, had died youn a mixture of drink and tuberculosis. Nancy's first marriage to the hard dr ing, philandering millionaire Rol Shaw of Boston had ended in well cove up scandal in 1904. Shaw had com-

side one summer day in the garden of mitted not only multiple adul-Rest Harrow, Lady Astor's house at Sandwich in Kent. She appeared suddenly tery but bigamy, too. The marriage had in golfing clothes and snapped at my father — her nephew — in her chiming Virginia accent: "Go and change those disgustin' red pants. You're not in the Virgin seemed an opportuto escape the Islands now."

My American father had recently America's returned from exile in the British Virgin Islands to comply with his divorce requirements. He was wearing a pair of coral-coloured trousers, perhaps to cheer his low spirits. I kept Nancy's two sentences in my head for many years until I parents. Like her four sisters - Lizzie. understood that she was tactlessly rubbing salt in his wound. and Nora — and However, no one was more generous and thoughtful to my father than Nancy in ers, Nancy Lang-horne was born in the succeeding years when he came to live in Britain She had him to stay, she ordered Danville, into the poverty of post-Civil War Virginia. The cramped bungalow where the family him gifts — including a Savile Row suit to replace the red pants. He ended up her devoted admirer, immune to her tongue.

It was wise to learn quickly that, for Nancy, "poking people up" — as my grandmother, her sister Phyllis, put it — was lived still stands in the town's main street. But things were to change when, some years later, their father Chillie Langhorne made

sudden fortune on the railroads. "If there was a nerve on a tooth she'd find it," said her niece, Nancy Lancaster. HILLIE was a rampaged Southern patriarch, not unl a model for Gerald O'Ha Scarlett's father in Gone W ing you in the stomach and then she'd wheedle you and you'd end up staying the night." The Wind, and his collaborat from 25 years on the breadline. He bou Mirador, a colonnaded, colonial red-br house near Charlottesville, where sisters grew up. Its back porch lool across apple orchards and up a long slo towards the Blue Ridge Mountains. became a place of myth that helped cre the Langhorne sisters' legend.

Phyllis was my grandmother a Nancy's younger and closest sister. S was the person whom, apart from

was Britain's first JAMES FOX. Thite Mischief, conflicting impulses one of the most gures of this century

Y, NOVEMBER 19, 1998

rstborn son Bobbie Shaw, she loved most assionately all her life. Phyllis was beau-iful, like the rest of them, but melancholy v nature. She had also had a disastrous rst marriage to a drunken millionaire

portsman from Newport.

Both sisters — brilliant horsewomen ame to Britain to try their luck again, on

he hunting fields of Leicestershire.
Phyllis married my grandfather Bob
Brand, an economist and banker. Nancy
narried Waldorf Astor, whose father had ettled in Britain and who was in line to e at least the fourth richest man in the world. As a result, Nancy and Phyllis suddenly found them-

Nancy went on to conquer society and the liter-ary world. Then she herself with intellectuals and statesalways the driving force, fuelled by pow-erful, conflicting impulses. There was "Nancy the Good", as she once signed a letter; generous to the point of profligacy, a brilliant hostess, a fairy godmoth-

VANCY er to many obscure people. She was the most compelling entertainer in an entertaining fami-y, with the lack of caution, comic timing and deadly mimicry of a true comedian. I could still see those qualities in rusty

action in her old age.

Her other great quality was utter social earlessness — something very rarely seen. Nancy applied her talents to dominating he huge gatherings at Cliveden or the Astor house in St James's Square, talking lown the table, singling out a guest with some personal or provocative remark.

It was alarming for the victim, a proto-ype of Dame Edna Everage's audience strikes. Some guests were, at their first encounter, rendered "speechless with ndignation, reduced to stunned and respectful silence"— as one regular Cliveden guest remembered — by what seemed to them her sudden "outrageous

everything they held sacred". But it was these qualities that endeared her to the electors of Plymouth and this courage that enabled her to stand up to a hostille House of Commons, where she quickly learned that for a woman not to be absorbed by the males, she had to continually break the rules of engagement, with cheek and directness.

"Mind your manners," started one exchange. "I won't," Nancy replied. "The noble Lady ought to withdraw," said the Speaker. "He asked for it," she countered. Nancy felt that these guerrilla tactics were what was expected of a Virginian —

But there was the other side of the coin. As one of her nephews put it: "She was by instincts a gangster who was always trying to be good." Nancy confessed in later life to a clergyman friend: "Every day I pray that I shall be really spiritual and that I'll be able to raise the dead, then I go out and all I do is raise hell."

Nancy's real exercise of power lay with in the extended Langhorne family that was bound together with passionate family feeling. Michael Astor, her son, remembered Nancy as a "lively, dancing, sparkling figure" in his childhood before their bitter battles for independence took over. Her inability to show affection was matched by her powerful desire to be first in the affections of her family and her overbearing possessiveness towards her children was disguised as a justified crusade to keep them on the narrow way.

ANCY believed that family affection was a given fact, like blood or tribal loyalty. It didn't need affirming or demonstrating — just, from time to time "poking up". "Conceived with-out pleasure, born without pain," Nancy would say proudly to her children. Her youngest son Jakie once replied: "Is that

why we're all so odd?"

When her younger sons were in their teens and one of the playful-but-rough verbal battles was taking place — with Nancy ahead, as always, on points — she said: "I suppose you all think you're misunderstood." Her eldest son Bobbie replied: 'There's no question of being understood We've given up hoping for that long ago. All we want is a bit of civility."

But Nancy knew that she could always disarm her children by making them laugh. It was her last weapon against them. When her second Astor son, David — later editor of The Observer — finally walked out of the door, she called after him: "If you see your mother, give her my regards. I hear she's a very charming woman."

By the mid-Fifties she would be at war with most of her family, blaming and quarrelling, reducing them to a loveless state, fractured by her personality.

Nancy's decline began before the war was over. Unwilling to see her being further knocked about in Parliament, where her performance had often become rambling and her rudeness objectionable. Waldorf prevented her from standing again in the 1945 election. She saw it as a





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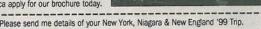
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It seemed that she had presided over a Greek tragedy

reating him with cruel hostility until he died in 1952.

But it was the Cliveden smear that really damaged Nancy's popularity — although she never realised it, partly because she knew there was no truth in it. The story, at the time of the Munich crisis and before, that Cliveden was the centre of a conspiracy of pro-German appeasers, has been disproved by historians but a scapegoat was needed after the shock of the Prague invasion. The Astors were good targets.

There was always a whiff of xenophobia about the accusations. One look at the Cliveden visitors book shows that regular guests included the conspicuous nandful of anti-appeasers who had urged rearmament, warning that Hitler was bent on military conquest: Winston Churchill, Duff Cooper, Anthony Eden, Lord Cranbourne and Harold Macmillan all stayed there. But the mud stuck and it still sticks today.

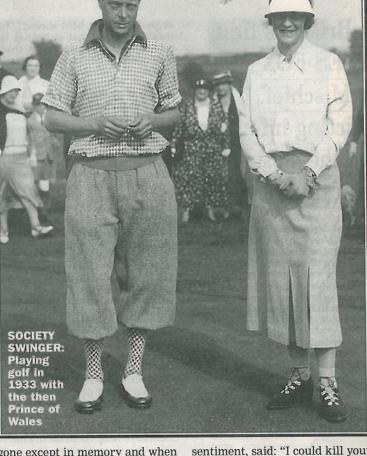
Y GRANDFATHER, Bob Brand and Nancy were the last survivors of that generation. They had both presided over what seemed, to Bob at least, the workings of a Greek tragedy. The failed first marriages of Nancy and Phyllis came back to haunt them, as much as they wanted to excise them from history. The three sons from those two marriages all eventually committed suicide. One of these was Phyllis's second son and this triggered Phyllis's own premature death, from which my grand-father never recovered. To compound the tragedy his only son was killed in the last week of the war in his tank on the Rhine, aged 21.

A few weeks after this event, Bob wrote to Nancy. The letter describes, elegiacally, their van-ished words.

On a trip from Washington to stay near Mirador, Bob walked over to the house — now shuttered and empty — and sat in the garden to write the letter:

"Not a soul here. The house shut... I have never felt such a ghost. When I think of two generations of gainty laughter healty.

ations of gaiety, laughter, beauty here and now silence. This morning early the dove was softly mourning. This is a sound that, whenever I hear it, brings back to me hot mornings at Mirador when I first was in love with Phyl and when there was warmth and love and ease and happiness before me, and the smell of honey-suckle, an indescribable mixture that marks this time out from any other in my life and when Virginia became, as it remains, the truly romantic spot in the whole world. Everything passes, everything changes and God knows what we are or why we are here. Some moments have made life worth living. But they are all



gone except in memory and when I think of the names in the Mirador visiting book, I wonder

why I am still alive."

Nancy outlasted them all.

Attending Bob's funeral, a year
before her own death in 1964, she turned to my mother — Bob's daughter — and, never one for W3 6EE or call 0181-324 5544.

sentiment, said: "I could kill your

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'Nancy's

